

## Introduction: Negotiating Religion in South Asian-European Entanglements

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This special issue explores religion's contribution to South Asian global histories and developments around 1900, focusing on intellectual, political, and other societal levels. Studies of exclusively Indian authors and debates appear alongside those from Europe, especially Britain and Germany, to show the breadth of debates influenced by Indian religious themes. Recent scholarly debates have highlighted the need for considerations concerning the genealogy of 'religion' and related terms. The articles therefore develop their arguments on a meta-level and challenge notions of a supra-temporal category of religion. In this process, authors from India and Germany and different disciplinary backgrounds—including Political Science, Political Theory, Indian Intellectual History, Religious Studies, and Philology—have worked together. They have chosen a range of methodological approaches to show the historical growth and contingency of understandings of religion as interwoven with ideological backgrounds and other layers of power. The 'religious' is not to be considered as a *sui generis* category but embedded in the dynamics that have shaped this concept in the examined period between the 1880s and the beginning of World War I (cf. Bergunder 2014; idem 2020). The concept of 'Indian religion'

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is not limited to the regions of the subcontinent but has a history in European contexts, which are integrated into this perspective.

One of the most contested ideas of the early 20th century was undoubtedly the 'secular' as opposed to the 'religious' as a construct to establish a social order based on non-religious principles. Sebastian Conrad (2018) repeatedly emphasises from a global historical perspective that the 'secular' and the 'religious' are mutually dependent concepts. Concerning the situation in Britain, these complex developments resulted 'in a shift of political loyalty from religious identity to national identity' (van der Veer 2001: 22).

Similarly, historiography in Germany understood interactions of the nation-state and the religious communities according to the Westphalian model, which posited a direct connection between secularisation and modernisation as an irreversible process, otherwise known as the 'secularisation thesis'. The idea of a declining importance of the 'religious' in modern history dominated sociohistorical research in German academia, resulting in a 'religious amnesia' of historians (Habermas 2019: 5). Recently, the 'secularisation thesis' in its Weberian articulation has been subject to considerable criticism in the field of sociology of religion. For example, Hans Joas (2017) challenges the historical image of the irreversible progress of disenchantment, adding to this the tension between re-sacralisation and its involvement in power-building structures (for further discussion, cf. Yelle & Trein 2020). New approaches have been exploring the 'endeavour to historicise the secular-religious binary beyond its linguistic representation in modern contexts' (Wohlrab-Sahr & Kleine 2021: 288). Shifting focus to the agency of subjects in processes of religio-secularisation and the specific places where the religious and the secular are produced, demarcated, and distinguished (cf. Dreßler & Mandair 2011) prevents essentialising conclusions. Recently, a related approach has been applied to 'global religious history' (Maltese & Strube 2021: 232) and 'how exactly religion was negotiated by historical actors within globally entangled contexts' (ibid.). The contributions of this collection make similar studies of Indian, German, and British material at the micro and meso levels in order to facilitate comparative and inclusive approaches.

**Vanya Vaidehi Bhargav's** article 'From Theology to Culture: Secularisation in Lajpat Rai's "Hindu Nationalism", the 1880s–1915' focuses on the nationalist thought of Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928), a prominent actor-thinker often

considered an ideological ancestor of Savarkarite Hindutva. Bhargav draws on Sudipta Kaviraj's distinction between thick and thin religion (Kaviraj 2010) and takes one sense of secularisation to consist of a decline in religious beliefs (Casanova 2006). With this theoretical framework, she argues that the 'thinning' of religion was not just part of 'religionisation' but also 'secularisation'. Illuminating a progressive decline in emphasis on detailed and complex theology in Rai's thought, Bhargav highlights the intellectual process of 'secularisation as thinning' in one strand of Hindu thinking during the early twentieth century. Through further analysis of Rai's thought, she also develops the concept of 'secularisation through culturalisation'. The culturalisation of Hindu religion and its re-fashioning as 'Hindu culture' eventually formed the basis of Lajpat Rai's imagined 'Hindu nation'. This culturalisation and secularisation served to include various religious groups within the 'Hindu nation' but simultaneously excluded India's Muslims and Christians. Yet, Bhargav argues that while Rai's 'Hindu nationalism' and Savarkarite Hindutva are products of these same processes, they remain significantly distinct.

From this perspective, speaking about religion is not an act whose purpose is self-evident. In thinking and writing about religion, historical figures reflect purposes approximate to their contexts, which, in turn, may be characterised by global, imperial, and colonial entanglements. But the reflections of such figures may also be analysed for their contributions to the constitution of social imaginaries.

**Rinku Lamba**, in her article 'Engaging Bhakti as/in Translation', highlights the different layers of meaning that can be gleaned from an essay titled 'The Saints and Prophets of Maharashtra', first published in 1895 by the Indian thinker Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842–1901). In her analysis, Ranade's reflections about bhakti, and a comparison of it with the Protestant Reformation in Europe, are sites not only for comprehending Indian nationalist imaginations but also for discerning translations and shifts from premodern to modern conceptions of moral order on the subcontinent. Translation is no doubt an important methodological device for observing how Ranade, through a comparison of the phenomenon of bhakti and the Protestant Reformation, can advance 'the notion of civil liberty as accessible, and even intimate, to lifeworlds resonant with bhakti'. More specifically, however, it permits recording of points of interruption in an otherwise seamlessly

convergent (translatable) comparison of distinct historical phenomena. Lamba draws attention to one such point of interruption in the translations, which is present in Ranade's engagements with bhakti and the Protestant Reformation, whereby Ranade highlights an important older inclusive approach to religious diversity in the subcontinent. Lamba argues that attention to such interruptions in processes of translation draws attention to the way older understandings of diversity mutate into the social imaginaries that constitute Indian modernity.

Meanwhile, in the German Empire, support for modern and secular aspirations was not to be understood as increasing disenchantment and the decline of a religious worldview but as an integral part of, and only within, the confessional debates, and therefore more as narratives than as timeless theory (Habermas 2019: 4). In her contribution 'Enlightened Religion? On Buddhism in Karl Gjellerup's novel *Die Weltwanderer* (The Wanderers of the World, 1910)', **Isabella Schwaderer** explores to what extent secularisation was negotiated in Imperial Germany. Starting from a novel and other writings by the German Dane writer Karl Gjellerup, she deals with the literary popularisation of Indological research in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. Here she elaborates on contemporary strands of the debate concerning secularity and religion that were influenced by Schopenhauer's understanding of India and the 'modernisation' of Christianity.

In Schwaderer's article, the actors in Germany were primarily concerned with a reorientation of 'religion' as a reunion of religion and (idealistic) philosophy under national auspices. **Ulrich Harlass**, on the other hand, in his article 'The Theosophical Reception of Buddhism', examines the encounter of Buddhist traditions and Theosophical teachings through analysing how the 'meaning of Buddhism—and this holds true for Theosophy as well—was constantly negotiated before the backdrop of the global context'. He traces the intricate development towards what was later understood as esotericism/theosophy, which proceeded through the confrontation with and in opposition to competing strands of discourse concerning Buddhism. Thus, he abandons both the concept of Western vs Eastern esotericism, which has been common in previous research, and at the same time the central position of Helena Blavatsky as the driving force and prominent shaper of an 'oriental shift' in the history of the Theosophical Society. From the 1800s to the

beginning of the First World War, in the German as well as the British contexts, various debates demarcated concepts such as Buddhism, Theosophy and Christianity them with new meanings. Interestingly, those disputes emerged precisely in semi-academic and non-academic publications. Harlass's text develops a particular aspect of the history of religious entanglement between Europe and the subcontinent, examining what was deemed Buddhism in Europe. He thus amplifies Sebastian Conrad's consideration of Theosophy and Buddhism as 'prime examples of the global entanglement of religion, where global and local developments are mutually imbricated' (Conrad 2018: 582–660). From the diverse source texts from different parts of Asia, which gradually became known and eagerly translated in Europe in a textual 'nostalgia for origins' (King 1999: 118, see also: 62–72; cf. Masuzawa 2005: 121–145), Buddhism was soon constructed in Europe as a religion that was even named after its alleged founding figure, which followed the Christian model. Accordingly, Thurner argues, 'the establishment of the categories "Hinduism", "Buddhism" and "Islam" must be understood as the result of global discourses on religion, which, although marked by asymmetrical power relations, nevertheless occurred constitutively in a reciprocal relationship between "Western" and "colonial" expressions' (2021: 2).

Individual actors or debates and more complex entities such as public space are integrative components of a transnational approach to the construction of the religious. In his study of public space and religious controversies, **Mohinder Singh** explores the interplay between reason and affect in his article 'Religious Criticism, Public Reason and Affect in the Reformist Age. Early Arya Samaj and the Religious Controversies'. Singh opens the panorama by examining the global interactions and entanglements of ideas in the history of reason, science, religion, forms of civilisation, and the public spheres. Drawing on approaches by Pernau (Pernau et al. 2015; Pernau 2019), the author integrates the essential aspects of the study of emotions and what role they played during religious and social reforms and in religious controversies, communal conflicts and the anti-colonial movement. Equally important are questions about continuities and ruptures with the pre-colonial past regarding the emotional management of the private and public self. In two significant ways, Singh distinguishes the 'public sphere of religious controversies' from the 'modern public sphere' in Habermas' sense (1990). Firstly—and this

connects to the common thread of global interactions—the article shows that the dominant conception of reason articulated in these debates is neither transcendental nor secular in a Kantian or Habermasian sense. Rather, what emerges is a concept of reason grounded in the actors' respective religious traditions yet reworked in the modern global context of religious controversies. Secondly, following Judith Butler, Singh emphasises the constitutive role of affective elements in the formation of this public sphere without discounting the role of reason in it. Altogether, one objective is to offer a corrective to the hyper-rational image of the classic conceptualization of the public sphere in Habermas.

In a joint effort to highlight various facets of Indian and European debates about religion on the threshold of modern, secular societies, the contributions to this volume reveal complex phenomena that, despite geographical and even ideological distance, prove to have a common ground of mutual inspiration in the assimilation of ideas and social projects. Thus, they succeed in showing the interaction in this epoch as a tense coexistence and interdependence of actors who meet in the question of the relationship of religious-theological in contrast to secular world models ordered according to scientific points of view. Thus, one can state (*mutatis mutandis*) with Kondylis that in the 'logical character of the [...] posed questions [it] is appropriate to assess the unity of the thinking effort of that time in the diversity of ways of thinking. Indeed, the unity is not based on the answers but on the question' (Kondylis 1986: 20)—which allows for a more differentiated view of the debates about religion at that time.

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