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Peter van der Veer: Imperial Encounters

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Introduction

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY witnessed both the expansion of British power over the world and the creation of a national culture in Britain. These two processes are commonly understood to be either unconnected or only connected in insignificant ways. The nineteenth century is also the period in which a gradual colonization of India took place and an anticolonial nationalism emerged. While these two processes were obviously related, their interaction is often perceived as having left British culture untouched. The present book challenges these views. It examines issues of religion, race, gender, and language, all of which are foci of national identity, in the historical interaction of Britain and India. It is inspired by Edward Said's claim, in *Culture and Imperialism*, that the historical experience of empire is a common one among both the colonizers and the colonized.¹

This book argues that (1) national culture in both India and Britain is developed in relation to a shared colonial experience; (2) notions of religion and secularity are crucial in imagining the modern nation both in India and Britain; and (3) these notions are developed in relation to gender, race, language, and science. I thus reject the common assumption—sometimes hidden, sometimes explicit—that the metropole is the center of cultural production, while the periphery only develops derivative, imitative culture. The book aims at problematizing oppositions between modern and traditional, secular and religious, progressive and reactionary, on which nationalist discourse depends and which the historiography of Britain and India adopts. It can only do so in an essayistic fashion by attempting to show that what is often assumed to be opposite is in fact deeply entangled, and that what is seen as unconnected is in fact the product of close encounters. The issues chosen for analysis are strategic ones, but they are by no means thought to be exhaustive. The approach combines historical anthropology and comparative religion. The book offers a reflection on the history of Britain and India informed by anthropological theories of the nation-state and religion. What it tries to show is that religion has been crucial in the formation of national identity not only in India but also in supposedly secular and modern Britain. It argues that the interpretive framework that is commonly used to approach modernity,

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religion, secularity, and nation has to be problematized by looking at colonial interactions.

India is often imagined to be the land of eternal religion, and Britain the land of modern secularity. In such an imagination India appears to exist outside history, whereas Britain is understood as the agent of history. Another and more subtle way of presenting the opposition between India and Britain can be found in Louis Dumont's work on Indian sociology. Dumont argues that India's history cannot be grasped with the historiographical concepts developed in the West, because secular history (as significant development) is religiously devalued in India.² India is different and needs a historical approach that appreciates a cultural difference which, in Dumont's view, is primarily located in the religiously sanctioned caste system. Dumont's major work on the Hindu caste system, *Homo Hierarchicus*, argues that traditional India had a holistic system of group religion (*dharma*) that regulated all spheres of life according to the hierarchical interdependence of castes (*jati*). The modern nation, according to Dumont, is based not on group religion but on separate values for separate spheres of life as well as on the ideology of the individual.³ If one looks for historical development in Hindu cultural terms one can find it, according to Dumont. But if one looks at India with Western concepts, as both Hegel and Marx did, the conclusion is, inevitably, that India's development stagnated long before the nineteenth century. For Hegel, Hindu religion denied the possibility of individual rationality and freedom and thus the unfolding of Rationality in the State.⁴ For Marx, India's economy was still in the phase of primitive communism in the village, since the caste system prevented the development of individuality, private property, and the state.⁵

Britain, on the contrary, is clearly the land of history. The Industrial Revolution, individual property, individual freedom, class conflict, the rise of the nation-state, the victory of science, the decline of religion are all clear markers of history. Indeed, history is the sign of the nation-state, of modernity, as much as the denial of history is the sign of the colony, of tradition.⁶ This is exemplified by the extraordinary interest taken in historical arguments by British politicians and philosophers alike during the transition to the modern nation-state between 1750 and 1850.⁷ Modernity is at issue here and it can only be defined in relation to antimodernity, and, historically, to an antecedent state of affairs. John Pocock has asserted that British arguments about modernity in this period identified three antecedents: ancient, medieval, and preindustrial.⁸

However, not only antecedents in Britain's history, narrowly conceived, but also comparisons with societies that were colonized by Britain were crucial elements in identifying one's modernity. In eighteenth-century Britain there is, in fact, a rapidly growing readership for books about exotic people. A particularly interesting example is George Psalmanazar's *A Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, an Island Subject to the Emperor of Japan*, published in 1704.⁹ This book was highly successful till it was discovered that Psalmanazar was a forger and impostor who had never been to Formosa. Forgeries, however, sometimes lay bare what are the tropes of writing in a given period. The main trope in Psalmanazar's forgery is his conceptualization of the difference between Formosa and Britain in terms of "false" religion—that is, priestly superstition—against "true" religion—that is, Anglican Protestantism. This trope connects anti-Catholicism with aversion to religions encountered in the period of British expansion. It is also found in perhaps the most influential history of a non-European society, James Mill's *History of British India*, written a century later by a writer who was not a forger or impostor like Psalmanazar but who, like Psalmanazar, had never been to the place he wrote about. The difference between the two is that Mill (1773–1836) argued that his authenticity derived precisely from his lack of direct acquaintance with India. Mill claimed to possess a judgment that was untainted by unmediated contact with India and its civilization, unlike his opponents, the Orientalists, who had "gone native."

James Mill finished the three-volume *History of British India* at the end of 1817, and the book brought him employment by the East India Company a few months later. Mill, one of the great products of the Scottish Enlightenment and a close associate and follower of Jeremy Bentham, wrote his *History* as a frontal attack on both Indian traditional institutions and the British Orientalists whom he accused of defending a degraded and degrading society. Like Psalmanazar, Mill was against the rule of priests who, in his view, had greater authority in India than in any other part of the world (except Rome, perhaps). Mill's description of the authoritarian irrationality of India's religion closely resembles Psalmanazar's Formosan fantasy:

Everything in Hindustan was transacted by the Deity. The laws were promulgated, the people were classified, the government established, by the Divine Being. The astonishing exploits of the Divinity were endless in that sacred land. For every stage of life from the cradle to the grave; for every hour of the day; for every function of nature; for every social transaction, God prescribed a number of religious observances.¹⁰

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Besides having a backward religion, India was, in Mill's eyes, an example of immoral feudalism that had to be destroyed both there and in Britain. There was no doubt that India occupied a much lower stage in the evolution of "utility" than Britain, but, still, in Britain a battle also had to be waged against antimodern political forces. It is worth noting that Mill was simultaneously criticizing Indian society and British society, and connected the Orientalists, who wanted to maintain the ancien régime in India, with "the establishment" that had the same desire for Britain. *A History of British India* is definitely not Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721), in which oriental despotism is depicted to criticize absolutism in France, but its mode of comparison is perhaps even more interesting. It connects India and Britain in a general treatise of utility, morality, and progress. Mill is the first major thinker who identifies the need to push India into modernity as one of the main objectives of the East India Company (which was gradually transforming from a trading company to a branch of the British state during the first half of the nineteenth century). This thought, much later in the century and in a very different political context, was endorsed by no other than Karl Marx himself.

Mill's view that the Company had the task to civilize the Indians, "push them into history," was most eloquently put into practice in Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), which argued not only that "a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" but also claimed that the proposed educational system would produce "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect."¹¹ The belief of Utilitarians like Mill and Macaulay was that the English educational system would annihilate Hinduism and wake the Hindus from their oriental slumber. In this belief they were supported by their contemporaries, the evangelicals. Zachary Macaulay, Thomas B. Macaulay's father, was one of the Clapham evangelicals who had successfully lobbied for the opening up of India as a mission field, which happened in 1813. Education had become religion's primary instrument for conversion and expansion, and its growing importance in the nineteenth century only enhanced its status. While the evangelicals reached out to the lower classes in Sunday Schools, missionary schools targeted the Indian elites. The great challenge for the Company, however, was to promote education while at the same time establishing its policy of religious neutrality which was deemed necessary to prevent unrest among the natives. Colonial policy made the teaching of the Bible impossible in secular education in India but was then faced with the difficulty of how to impart British civiliza-

tional values. According to Gauri Viswanathan, the solution was found in the teaching of English literature as a way to impart Christian morality. She shows brilliantly how English literary study was introduced in British India at a time when the classical curriculum was still well established for the higher classes in Britain.¹² The study of English literature, in the Arnoldian sense, taught the way to moral improvement, and was in that sense similar to religion. As such, not only literary study but also secular literature as a means to moral improvement was first tried out not in Britain but in India.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century Utilitarians were trying to define modernity in terms of utility and rationality, while evangelicals were trying to define it in terms of Christian morality. Both groups developed their concepts in constant reference to India and communicated them not only to audiences in Britain but also to Indian audiences. Indians were not passive recipients of these concepts but were actively involved in shaping them. For instance, in Bengal, Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) studied Christianity and felt great affinity with the rational critique of religious orthodoxy, launched in Britain by Unitarians like Channing. He wrote two major works on the ethical teachings of Jesus and became a Unitarian leader.¹³ In 1827 he founded the British Indian Unitarian Association.¹⁴ At the same time, however, Rammohan also studied the Vedas and Upanishads. This led him to explore the limits of Unitarian universalism, which continued to be based on Christianity. In 1828 he decided that a universal, rational religion had to be based on the Vedas and Upanishads, and he created the Brahmo Samaj. What Indian intellectuals like Rammohan did was to explore the universality of modernity and point out its limits and contradictions.

In this way, Indians and British develop in the nineteenth century a shared imaginary of modernity. This puts Dumont's problematic, with which we began this introduction, into another perspective. The conceptual difficulties of defining modernity in relation to the "ancient" or "feudal" antecedents of modernity in Europe also apply to defining modernity in relation to "coeval" India. Such a definition cannot be based on an irreducible cultural difference between India and Europe. A comparative approach of "civilizations," like that of Louis Dumont, makes India into a holistic universe, signifying antimodernity, and Britain into another, signifying modernity. However, modern India and modern Britain are products of a shared colonial experience. Key concepts of modernity, like secularity, liberty, and equality are created and re-created in the interaction between colony and metropole. No doubt, this is a history of power and

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knowledge, but not simply one of the impositions of British knowledge on Indian barbarism, as Macaulay liked to think. Both colonizer and colonized were intimately connected and transformed through a shared process of colonization.

The challenge this book has taken up, therefore, is to write from an interactional perspective about the location of religion and secularity in nineteenth-century India and Britain. This entails an engagement with notions of science, language, gender, and race. Before proceeding, let me first elaborate what I mean by *interactional perspective*. When reading the historiography of nineteenth-century English history, it is striking how “little Englishish” it is. The relation with the colonies is left to imperial/colonial historians who specialize in such things, while mainstream history is not affected by these histories from the margins. Inversely, in Indian nineteenth-century history one reads much about the role of the British in India, but it is often cast in a nationalist theater of “foreign power” against “native” resistance. The parallel to “little Englandism” is “big Indianism,” namely, the idea that India simply absorbs all foreign influences without changing fundamentally. Moreover, Indian historiography is too fascinated by India to be interested in the impact of the colony on the metropole. The difficulties in challenging this situation are obvious. Besides problems of a conceptual nature, there are problems of scale, focus, and methods of inquiry. If one engages in a form of interactional history, how can one contain the narrative and how can one avoid a further simplification of what are already simplified summaries of immensely complex local, regional, and national histories? Nevertheless, an escape from the essentialisms of British modernity versus Indian antimodernity is perhaps possible by attempting to lay out fields of historical interaction and encounter, however fragmentary. In fact, the fragmentary nature of the enterprise is a blessing in disguise, because it works against the grain of national history, which is written to put fragments into a whole, signifying the nation, or else put them to oblivion. Interactional history is precisely an attempt to go beyond the national story and get at some of the fragments without losing coherence in the telling of the tale.

Interactional history is different from global history. Attempts to use comparative frameworks that go beyond the nation-state and amount to global history generally stand in the tradition of two nineteenth-century classics of the social sciences, Marx and Weber. Sociology only becomes the science of the new industrial society as an isolated entity between 1920 and 1950 in the new metropole: the United States.¹⁵ Before the Great War “it was the structure of empire as a *whole* that provided the basis of

sociological knowledge. Sociology's comparative method embodied the imperial gaze on the world."¹⁶ It is certainly true that evolutionism, race science, and the notion of progress dominated these comparisons. They showed a common understanding of the modernity of the nation-state in terms of a theory of global difference. What they ignored is the extent to which these differences were not cultural essences but rather were produced by the power relations of empire.

Marx obviously wanted to write a global history of the evolution of labor and value, and his example has been followed by materialist historians of the world system, including Braudel, Wallerstein, and Frank. According to these authors, peripheral societies are subjugated by the core societies of capitalist development, and they either suffer this development or become, in turn, agents of it. They are part of history only when they have agency in the unfolding of this global history, as the anthropologist Eric Wolf implicitly argues.¹⁷ Since European societies are the core societies it is hardly feasible to write a history of peoples without Europe. Neo-Marxist historians have made two major modifications to this general perspective: first, that significant developments in the direction of capitalism have come about in these peripheral societies without European intervention; and, second, that the development of capitalism in the core societies depended more on imperialism than was previously assumed. So capitalism in India, for example, developed without Britain, but capitalism in Britain could not develop without India. An extreme example of the shifts that have taken place in economic history is the turn from replacing Europe by Asia as the center of world history in the latest writings of Andre Gunder Frank.¹⁸

According to Frank, China and India, till 1800, were much more central to the world economy than Europe was, because of their productivity in manufacturing by which they created an export surplus. The history of European dominance is therefore very short and explainable in terms of Kondratieff cycles and the availability of cheap energy (coal). In Frank's view, European dominance is again being replaced today by that of Asia. Frank severely criticizes the work of Braudel and Wallerstein and his own earlier work for its Eurocentrism and argues for a complete "*re-orientation*" of historiography. The centering of Asia and the de-centering of Europe is occurring entirely in terms of the global economic system. The telos of history remains world capitalism, whether capitalism comes from outside or inside.

The problem with the global history of imperialism from the Marxist perspective, both in its past and current incarnations, the latter being

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less dogmatic about modes of production, is that it primarily remains a material and economic history, and, as such, engages in a particular homogenizing style of writing history as if the economy is the determining principle “in the last instance.” The colony in the end creates the wealth of the metropole and is shaped in accordance with metropolitan interests. Whatever the subtleties in the analysis of economic and material interaction, the model remains that of a system of economic determination that has a center and a periphery and, crucially, is the cause of the center’s development and of the periphery’s stagnation. The colony is shaped by the metropole in this process, while the metropole profits and makes progress thanks to its peculiar relation with the colony. However, cultural imperialism as an evolving political practice that simultaneously shapes both metropole and colony cannot be accounted for in this materialist view. A history of power that extends beyond economic relations seems to escape materialist historians despite the fact that it is not economical power but political power (including military force) that, even in Frank’s view, ultimately explains Britain’s ascendancy and India’s decline. As Gauri Viswanathan has convincingly shown, it is even true for a Marxist student of politics and culture, such as Raymond Williams, that his work curiously fails to apply its own theory of culture to British imperialism and its effects on English culture. For Williams, imperialism is only understandable in terms of a system of economic determination that escapes cultural analysis; therefore he chooses to ignore it for his analysis of English society and culture.¹⁹

Marxism, however, is only one example of nineteenth-century attempts to understand the modern world as a stage in global development, although it is still one of the most influential explanations today. The modernization theories of the twentieth century have inherited this nineteenth-century tradition. When they depend more on Weber than on Marx, as they often do for political reasons, they place higher value on a scale of civilization than on the evolution of material conditions, yet they remain teleological and evolutionist. Unlike Marx, Weber did not assume that there was an ultimately determining element in history, but, in his analysis of Protestantism’s unique contribution to the development of capitalism, he saw rationalization as an evolutionary process. Weber was a comparativist, but he compared civilizational essences and not networks of historical interaction. He wanted to explore the reasons why modern capitalism emerged in the West and nowhere else. He argued that disenchantment, as brought about by Protestantism, was of singular importance in the emergence of capitalism and that this dominant feature of modernity was

lacking in other world religions he examined, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. It escaped him that nineteenth-century Protestantism, which had shaped his understanding of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestantism, had been formed precisely during that transformation of the modern world in which colonial interactions had been crucial. The location of religion shifts dramatically in nineteenth-century Europe and India, and this affects Weber's understanding of religion and rationality in ways that are impossible for him to historicize.²⁰

My critique of both the Weberian culturalist approach and the Marxist materialist approach makes it clear that in order to describe the history of global modernity from 1800 one must focus not only on historical interactions and the field of power in which they play themselves out but also on the categories with which one studies them. Also apparent is that there is not a world-systemic teleology that connects imperialism of the past with globalization in the postcolonial world today. Indeed, the story of increasing integration and unification obscures the coexisting tale of increasing disintegration and disunity along ethnic and religious lines that we find everywhere. If imperialism is not only an economic practice but also a political and cultural one—and one requiring a holistic approach in the anthropological sense—historical interactions must be studied across the globe, with special attention paid to the conceptual frameworks that develop in these interactions and become the unquestioned categories of historiography.

The aim of this book is to disturb both the complacency of national histories and that of an imperial history centered on the primacy and priority of Western history. It seeks to problematize our understanding of modernity but does not claim to provide a totalizing, global theory. The objective is not to show, in a kind of *quid pro quo* evenhandedness, that everything in Britain was preceded in the colony or that everything is connected; rather, the more modest intention is to discern significant connections while avoiding the pitfalls of both nationalism and evolutionism more than a century after their early conceptualizations. Such an exercise is a necessary condition for a critical understanding of modernity.

This book, then, is about national religion and empire. The first chapter examines the ways secularity and religion presuppose each other in nineteenth-century India and Britain. It argues that the rise of voluntary, religious movements which come to dominate the emergent public sphere in India and Britain shapes the understanding of the secularity of the state and the nature of religious belief. These movements are part of the imperial landscape and interact with each other in a number of ways. Both

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British Christianity, signifying the British nation and the imperial state, and Indian Hinduism, signifying the beliefs and practices of “the majority” of the Indian nation, are products of this interactional history.

The second chapter goes on to explore the moral nature of the nation-state. It argues that modern notions of religion, language, race, and gender are constructed in the process of forming a nation-state. This is true both for the metropole and the colony. Religion becomes a defining feature of the nation and for that purpose is nationalized. It becomes one of the fields of disciplinary practice in which the modern civil subject is formed. The moral mission of the nation-state is to organize the education, health, and social welfare of its subjects; to do so, it must acquire knowledge about the targeted populations. Such projects of documentation in themselves have the effect, at least partly, of producing the realities they purport to describe. This spirit of scientific exploration, so often seen as the hallmark of modern secularity, produces modern ideas of body and mind, of spirituality and materiality, of language and culture, of race, and of gender and character. In all these ideas, religion as the site of the nation is crucial.

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between spiritualism and anti-imperialist radicalism. However irrational spiritualism may seem, scientific empiricism and rational explanation are crucial to it. It is a site from which the superiority of elite Christianity could be contested and the spirituality of the East (especially India) could be claimed. The Spirit of the Age was nationalism, and the battle fought by the spiritualists concerned who was allowed to participate in the public sphere.

Chapter 4 explores the role of Christianity in constructing the masculine Englishman and the role of Hinduism in constructing the masculine Hindu. A connection between physicality and morality, between effeminacy and sexuality, is made in response to anxieties about national degeneration in the context of empire. Sports in public schools, Boy Scouts, religious martiality are all developed in the service of a moral nation felt to be under threat.

Chapter 5 looks at Scripture as the basis of civilization and at the practice of comparative philology in order to discover civilization. While in Britain philology became marginalized when it was replaced by race science as an instrument of colonial rule, in India it became an authoritative science for the transformation and translation of Hindu traditions. This chapter also examines the career of the leading Orientalist of the second half of the nineteenth century, (Friedrich) Max Müller, the founder of comparative religion and, in India, the recognized authority on Hinduism.

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Chapter 6 deals with the rise of race science in Victorian Britain in the context of empire and its appropriation and use by Hindu nationalists in India. Race comes to replace religion as the defining characteristic of the British nation and its right to imperial rule. The Mutiny of 1857 creates an anxiety about the immutable barbaric nature of the Indian race and a pessimism about “real” conversion. Religion, however, continues to address the problem of the criminalized poor, both in Britain and India, and thus becomes a field of social practice in which populations are targeted for “moral uplift.”

The book makes no pretension to be an alternative history; instead, it offers alternative ways to look at familiar problems and material. It is not a full account but a collection of essays that lays out a problematic. Its goal is to challenge social scientists—anthropologists, sociologists, historians, political scientists, and students of comparative religion—to explore beyond the received narratives of colonialism, nationalism, and secularism.