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## REFERENCES

Thomas, Renny. 2022. Science and Religion in India. Beyond Disenchantment. OLondon, New York: Routledge. 203 Seiten, hardback, 120€, ISBN 978-1-032-07319-4.

- 1 *Science and Religion in India: Beyond Disenchantment* contextualises the complex interplays between science and religion in the context of India. The work powerfully challenges the historiography of studying religion and science by deconstructing the heretofore prevalent frameworks solely based on conflict or complementarity. The author argues that these frameworks originated against the historical narrative of European modernity and are inadequate to explore other societies as they collapse cultural specificities and their unique experiences. Renny Thomas breaks new ground in illuminating the multifaceted nuances of this relationship in the context of India through a comprehensive analysis of in-depth ethnographical fieldwork undertaken as a participant observer in a science laboratory. The author definitively elucidates that the space of a laboratory is not only a site for science but also religion. This becomes evident through the normalisation and/or perpetuation of specific cultures and the exclusion and/or silencing of others, determined by the practices associated with the dominant beliefs held by its members.
- 2 Whilst the primary method of analysis employed in the book is fieldwork, it also incorporates an analysis of biographical, autobiographical, and historical sources, which comprise a crucial basis of the contextualisation of the theme throughout the book, especially in chapters one and two. The author dedicated almost a year (from February to December 2012) to his fieldwork, enrolled as a member at a research laboratory in Bangalore (now Bengaluru), Karnataka. During this period, the author

resided in a student hostel of the institute, actively participated in campus organisations and discussion groups, and conducted extensive interviews with scientists from diverse backgrounds, encompassing different religions, regions, genders, castes, as well as disciplines. The author offers a transparent account of his personal journey and the development of the fieldwork in the introduction to the book, addressing the challenges of gaining access to the lab and the necessary adjustments made to his approach to obtaining comprehensive insights into the everyday lives of scientists. Such accounts are seldom presented by scholars and will certainly be of value for students and beginners of ethnographical fieldwork.

- 3 The book is structured into five chapters, with the first chapter providing a historical context for the relationship between science and religion in India. It situates the discourse of science, rationality, and scientific temper at the dawn of its independence. The chapter specifically highlights the role of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, in adopting science and technology as a paradigm for modernity and his vision of 'scientific temper' as a means to solve India's sociocultural problems. The chapter outlines the discourse of modernity and rationality against this framework, arguing that the Nehruvian Era often presented science and religion as opposing forces. This, according to the author, reinforced the perception of the West as scientific and therefore modern, while India was seen as religious and thus primitive. On this basis, the chapter recounts Nehru's emphasis on problem-oriented research and the institutionalisation of science and technology, often at the expense of indigenous knowledge systems, as efforts undertaken by newly independent India to be at par with the Western world.
- 4 Chapter two examines the intricate relationship between science and religion in contemporary India, powerfully challenging the perception of an inherent conflict between the two as a product of Western discourse. The chapter underscores that this association is neither universal nor homogenous and argues for a deeper exploration within specific historical and cultural contexts. The chapter elucidates the diversity of beliefs and practices among scientists in India through autobiographies authored by prominent scientists. Such sources demonstrate the harmonious intersections between scientific rationality and religious beliefs in their private lives, including worshipping deities before launching space missions or embarking on religious pilgrimage. This is complemented by ethnographic research which explores the unproblematic coexistence of religious beliefs in the personal lives of scientists, as well as the various ways in which they integrate their religious convictions within their scientific works and their overall worldview.
- 5 Chapter three presents the intriguing concept of 'scientist-believers' as a distinct category of believers, elucidating how scientists distinguish themselves from the masses in terms of their beliefs and religious practices. The author explores how scientists justify their religiosity by rooting it in rationality and spirituality, setting it apart from the ritualistic, dogmatic, and superstitious religiosity attributed to the general public. This distinct religious identity is articulated as superior and negotiated to reinforce their own beliefs and spirituality, justifying its association with ancient Indian culture and its scientific traditions. The chapter presents a diverse range of perspectives, showcasing how different scientists articulate and validate their own beliefs and practices. Whilst some express a deep sense of pride and valorisation of India's ancient knowledge, others appear sceptical, questioning cultural nationalism

and right-wing propaganda. Additionally, the chapter sheds light on the differentiation between practices deemed cultural and those considered religious and offers intriguing anecdotes that illustrate how certain practices acquire the status of 'authentic' Indian traditions.

- 6 Chapter four addresses a significant gap in scholarship by investigating the cultures of unbelief prevalent among scientists in India who identify as atheists, agnostics, or materialists. The chapter elucidates the diversity of cultures of unbelief in India and the varied ways they negotiate with religion. This encompasses atheists who vehemently question the compatibility of religion and science, as well as atheists who, despite their self-identification, do not wholly dismiss religious practices. These findings open interesting liminal spaces within atheism in the Indian context, which goes beyond Western frameworks of atheism and cultures of unbelief. The chapter demonstrates how atheist scientists navigate the intersections of science and religion by emphasising cultural practices, identifying with certain cultural markers, and even participating in associated rituals without seeing such practices as inherently conflicting or contradictory. The chapter presents nuanced intersections between religion and unbelief, which exhibit flexible realms of personal interpretation in the Indian milieu.
- 7 The last chapter (Chapter five) offers novel insights into the intersections of religion and caste in scientific practices in India, arguing that understanding caste inequalities in sciences is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of science and religion. The chapter highlights how scientific institutions have traditionally been dominated by Brahmins and upper castes, which has led to the perpetuation of the idea of science as a Brahmanical domain. It demonstrates how upper-caste scientists have used the notion of objectivity to oppose the entry of scientists from lower castes, reinforcing a sense of caste superiority within scientific institutions. Additionally, the chapter illustrates that despite claims of liberalism and castelessness, cultural expressions and practices within the scientific institutions, such as, preferences for classical music, the construction of illustrious genealogies, separate food spaces, and distinct dietary habits, have served to uphold Brahmanism. It emphasises that the experience of caste operates differently for upper and lower castes, with the former considering it a form of cultural capital, while the latter often view it as a burden to conceal in public. This adds more complexity to the interplay of religion and science in the Indian context, and further strengthens the critique of the notion of disenchantment. The chapter underscores the connection between power dynamics and knowledge construction in India, emphasising the importance of addressing structural inequalities to foster inclusivity within scientific institutions.
- 8 The book has received positive reviews from eminent scholars and critics, such as Simon Schaffer, Robert M. Geraci, Banu Subramaniam, and Susan Visvanathan, amongst others.<sup>1</sup> All of them have acknowledged the significant contribution of the work in expanding the discourse on science, religion, and their interplay in the Indian milieu. While there are some minor criticisms, they do not detract from the overall favourable reception of the work. One specific concern which merits attention was raised by Eric Moses Gurevitch from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Gurevitch suggests that although the author, Thomas, aims to deconstruct binaries, he sometimes presents 'the West' as a monolithic entity (Gurevitch 2022, 56). This observation carries weight, as the author occasionally simplifies complex and enduring

debates by referring to them solely as “the western understanding”, “the western tradition”, or “the western narrative”. This tends to overlook the intricacies present within Western academic traditions and contributes to an oversimplified East-versus-West narrative.

- 9 An example of this can be seen in one of the central threads of the book, evident in its very title, which critiques the concept of ‘disenchantment’ originally proposed by Max Weber in his influential work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and subsequently developed in his lecture series *Science as a Vocation* (1917) and *Politics as a Vocation* (1919). The concept refers to the process by which scientific rationality and the pursuit of knowledge based on empirical evidence and objective reasoning lead to the erosion of religious beliefs and, thereby, their role in the modern world. Thomas’s work aligns with the criticism voiced by post-colonial writers like Talal Asad and Dipesh Chakrabarty, who argue against the applicability of disenchantment in non-western contexts and its limitations in exploring the complex interplay of religion, modernity, and colonialism in such societies.
- 10 Whilst Thomas’s critique along the same vein is welcome, it is essential not to collapse this discourse into an East-versus-West binary. The concept of ‘disenchantment’ has faced significant criticism within Western societies as well. Some of the prominent voices include Jürgen Habermas’s *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), and Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007), amongst others. Although all of them have distinct perspectives and approaches to their criticism of disenchantment, they resonate in their collective rejection of Weber’s essentialist dichotomy between reason and faith, the idea of a linear and irreversible process of disenchantment, and the influence of cultural norms in social contexts. Rather, they emphasise the need to consider the plurality and coexistence of multiple worldviews.
- 11 Thomas’s work, therefore, builds upon decades of observations made by various scholars who have contributed to this discourse, which the East-versus-West narrative tends to oversimplify. The discussion of the disenchantment discourse within Western academic traditions is summarised by Thomas in less than two pages (pp. 50–51), which does not capture the intricacies and diversity of the discourse adequately.
- 12 Although the author is, without doubt, an excellent ethnographic researcher, it is worth examining the framing and presentation of science and scientific temper in Chapter one, as based on historical research. While the author’s contextualisation of the historical background is valuable, it should be noted that it relies heavily on secondary sources. There is a tendency to overemphasise the role of Jawaharlal Nehru, often attributing arguments to him that are actually observations made by other scholars. It is crucial to remember that Nehru’s literary career spanned approximately five decades, from the 1920s until his death in 1964, and his perspectives on science, scientific temper, and religion are much more nuanced than what is portrayed in the book. For instance, Thomas claims,
- 13 “Nehru was guided by scientism, and this scientism did not allow him to explore different trajectories of modernity. His overt emphasis on science and the uncritical acceptance of scientific rationality made him oblivious to the destructive aspect of science and technology” (p. 37).
- 14 Scientism typically refers to an excessive belief in the authority and methods of science, often at the expense of other forms of knowledge and inquiry. Whilst it is true

that Nehru emphasised the significance of scientific temper and believed in the transformative power of science and rational thinking for the progress of society, it would be a gross oversimplification to state that Nehru was guided by scientism. This is because he equally recognised the value of philosophy, ethics, and arts, and demonstrated a deep sense of pride in India's cultural heritage. Nehru, in fact, criticised sciences for often looking at facts alone without a sense of any higher purpose. For instance, he writes,

- 15 “Science ignored the ultimate purposes and looked at fact alone. It made the world jump forward with a leap, built up a glittering civilization [...] yet when this sorry scheme of things entirely seemed to be in his grasp, to mould it nearer to the heart's desire, there was some essential lack and some vital element was missing. There was no knowledge of ultimate purposes and not even an understanding of the immediate purpose, for science had told us nothing about any purpose in life” (Nehru 2010 [1946], 569–570).
- 16 Nehru advocated for an integrative approach where scientific temper was intrinsically allied to philosophy to achieve inner satisfaction and peace. An aspect he believed India would not struggle with, since it was already an “essential basis of Indian thought for ages” (*ibid*, 572–573). Such nuances of Nehru's outlooks are not captured accurately in Thomas's interpretations of Nehru's convictions, largely drawn from secondary sources. For example, the assertion attributed to Nehru that tradition was considered to be a burden, seems not only premature but also quite misleading (pp. 19–20).
- 17 Another issue in the book is the interpretation of ‘sciences’ as exclusively laboratory sciences. This is noteworthy because the entire discourse on ‘disenchantment’ originates from Weber, who, in original German, used the term *Wissenschaft* for science, which encompasses the entire spectrum of academic and scholarly disciplines, including both Natural Sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and Humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*). This understanding is also relevant to Nehru's concept of ‘scientific temper’, discussed in the book. While Nehru emphasised the promotion of technological advancements, he believed in the application of rational thinking, critical inquiry, and evidence-based decision-making, which cuts across various fields of academic disciplines beyond Natural Sciences. Therefore, whilst Thomas's comprehensive ethnographic research in a laboratory setting is certainly valuable, a contextualisation of this decision would have been better appreciated.
- 18 Despite the aforementioned reservations, *Science and Religion in India* provides ground-breaking insights into our understanding of the relationship between science and religion through this erudite ethnographical survey which showcases the complexity and nuances of the same in the Indian context. One notable contribution of the work is its methodological approach to exploring the interplay between science and religion. Previous studies on this topic within the realm of South Asian religions have been limited,<sup>2</sup> as they primarily focused on religions as worldviews and often neglected the lived experiences and unique cultural traditions associated with them. Thomas's ethnographic work, on the other hand, delves into the diverse beliefs and practices experienced by individuals in specific cultures, offering a more relatable perspective that goes beyond treating religions as static monoliths. Particularly, Chapters three, four, and five, present novel research which have heretofore received negligible scholarly attention. The chapters are well-structured and written in lucid English, with extensive excerpts of intriguing interviews, making it, overall, an enjoyable read.

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## NOTES

1. For detailed reviews of the book, see publisher's site. Routledge. 2022. "Science and Religion in India". Accessed: June 23rd, 2023. <https://www.routledge.com/Science-and-Religion-in-India-Beyond-Disenchantment/Thomas/p/book/9781032073194#>
2. For instance, see, Brooke, John and Ronald Numbers, eds. 2011. *Science and Religion Around the World*. New York: Oxford University Press; Lopez, Donald. 2008. *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; De Cruz, Helen. 2022. "Religion and Science", in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall Edition). Accessed: June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/religion-science>

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