

Title—Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain

Author—Peter Van der Veer

Year—2001

Categories: Colonialism, Religion, Nationalism, Modernity

Place: India and Britain

Time: 1750-1910

Argument Synopsis:

Van der Veer's book is focused on the nineteenth century in Britain and India, specifically on the ways that their colonial interaction and their experiences with religion shaped their respective national cultures. The nineteenth century saw both the expansion of British power globally and the creation of a national culture in Britain, yet these processes are often seen as either unconnected or only connected in insignificant ways. This same period also coincided with the gradual British colonization of India and the development of an anticolonial nationalism within India. Van der Veer criticizes the way that historians have failed to acknowledge the effect India had on British culture. He seeks to challenge these notions by examining issues of race, gender, and language (what he deems the foci of national identity) in the historical interaction of Britain and India. His argument utilizes Said's argument in *Culture and Imperialism*—the historical experience of empire is a common one among both the colonizers and the colonized. Van der Veer argues that notions of religion and secularity are crucial in imagining the modern nation in both India and Britain and that the national culture in both countries developed in relation to their shared colonial experience. Overall, he seeks to problematize the dichotomies of modern and traditional; secular and religious; and progressive and reactionary in order to demonstrate how things often assumed to be opposite are in fact deeply entangled.

Van der Veer uses the interactional perspective for his methodology in approaching this topic. He claims that mainstream historians do not often consider the relation with the colonies, an example being how nineteenth century Indian history is often focused on the role of British in India, but nineteenth century British history does not consider the ways that the colonies were affecting the metropole. Van der Veer highlights how comparisons with colonized societies were crucial elements in defining Britain's modernity. He argues that interactional history is different from global history, and proceeds to criticize global history for its tendency to be either Marxian (overly materialist) or Weberian (overly culturalist). His book aims to disturb the complacency of national histories and of imperial history centered on the primary and priority of Western history.

He begins by examining the ways secularity and religion presuppose each other in nineteenth century India and Britain, arguing that the rise of voluntary religious movements in both countries shaped the understanding of the secularity of the state and the nature of religious belief. Modern notions of religion, language, race and gender are constructed in the process of forming a nation-state, and this is true of both metropole and colony. He also explores the role of Christianity in constructing the masculine Englishman and the role of Hinduism in constructing the masculine Hindu. The modernization and nationalization of Hinduism and Christianity allows the use of the universal category of 'religion' for both, as they underwent similar transformations in different societal locations. The expansion of colonial power universalized the conditions under which concepts like liberty, secularity, and religion received their meaning. He aims to expand the argument that nineteenth century Britain defined itself as a nation in reaction to the Other beyond their shores, the Other usually referring to French and Catholic; Van der Veer argues that the Other should also be seen as Indian and Hindu.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- National culture in both India and Britain developed in relation to a shared colonial experience, and religion was crucial in this development of a national identity
- Rejects the assumption that the metropole is the center of cultural production, while the periphery only develops derivative, imitative culture
- Interpretive framework commonly used to approach modernity, religion, secularity, and nation has to be problematized by looking at colonial interactions