

Title—Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India

Author—Peter Gottschalk

Year—2013

Categories: Colonialism, Knowledge-Production, Religion, Islam, India

Place: British India

Time: 1750-1990

Argument Synopsis:

Gottschalk's book is concerned with the intersection of religion, science, and empire in regard to Anglo-Indian forms of knowledge during the colonial period. A common British approach to differentiating Indians was by distinguishing between Hindu and Muslim. He argues that religion and science are intimately intertwined and understanding this relationship is central to understanding the twenty-first century notions of science and religion. He identifies the development of **scientism** during this period—a popular ideology that invested symbols and products of European science with epistemic authority, directly undermining religious authorities and leading to the perceived irreconcilable difference between religion and science. Gottschalk argues that the scientific attributes ascribed to Britons in the colonial period made them authoritative reporters on Indian religions because audiences viewed their faithfulness to science as central to their ability to classify and compare the Indians whom they encountered. In order to demonstrate how these dynamically integrated notions of religion and science shaped British representations of Indians and themselves, Gottschalk focuses on how Britons came to know and portray a specific village—Chainpur. His study aims to portray some of the on-the-ground engagements of British information orders with rural Indians. Gottschalk seeks to build on previous scholarship on the impact of British imperialism on the religious landscape of South Asia by illustrating how religion featured as the primary category of interpretation for most British knowledge projects. Although he analyzes a wide variety of knowledge production from the period, he notes that he is not attempting to map the full spectrum of state knowledge; he is focused only on published, publicly disseminated sources which excludes things like police reports or court documents.

Gottschalk chooses to limit his analysis to representations of a specific village in Bihar, Chainpur, for a variety of reasons: Bihar was an especially important province in British India, Chainpur was not visited by scholars specializing in the empirical study of religion, there is a constancy of visits to Chainpur throughout the colonial period providing a sizable record, and there is a broad range of representational methods used to describe Chainpur such as reports, paintings, floor plans, and photographs. In terms of organization, each chapter is focused on a specific form of knowledge and traces its crystallization into an intellectual discipline. In particular, Gottschalk covers mapping, travel writing, early ethnography, rise of statistics and its tie to systematic quantification, archaeology, and the development of anthropology. The increasing involvement of Indians in each subsequent chapter offers testimony to their expanding appropriation, adaptation, and advancement of forms of knowledge whose crystallization occurred in imperial contexts. Through this study of forms of knowledge, Gottschalk argues that the primary meta-category of differentiation for the British in colonial India was religion.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The authority of scientific disciplines served to repeatedly re-emphasize the centrality of religion in South Asian societies among British and Indian audiences
- Hindu and Muslim are not essentially defined terms but identities that demonstrate change, conflict and collusion
- Modern notions of religion and science cannot be understood without an understanding of their imbricated histories