

Review

The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and Secular in China and India, by Peter van der Veer. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014. xi + 282 pp. £52.00. ISBN 978-0-691-12814-6 (hardback). £16.95. ISBN 978-0-691-12815-3 (paperback).

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The Modern Spirit of Asia argues that Indian and Chinese notions of nationalism and self-identity are based upon a transformation of these cultures' ancient traditions in unique and distinctive ways. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and lays the theoretical, methodological and historical foundation for the book. It expresses one of the book's main concerns, which is to illuminate the differences between nationalist understandings of religion in India and in China. Both nationalisms share common ideas about progress, rationality, equality and anti-imperialism, but whereas religion is considered a valued aspect of Indian nationalism, it is considered an obstacle in Chinese nationalism. Chapter 2 argues that in the nineteenth century the category of spirituality received a global and modern meaning; as such, in India and China indigenous forms of spirituality were invoked as alternatives to Western imperialism and materialism, and spiritual superiority became part of Pan-Asianism in the writings of Indian and Chinese intellectuals. Along with that, state-centred religious ideologies as well as nation-centred ideologies focused on spirituality as part of national character. Chapter 3 explores the emerging field of oriental studies and comparative religion, and especially the works of Friedrich Max Müller and James Legge. It looks into the extent to which these products of Western scholarship and imagination have produced forms of religious categorization that have had an actual impact on religious belief and practice in India and China. In Chapter 4 conversion to Christianity and the impact of missionary movements in India and China are discussed. Apparently, reform movements as well as popular resistance movements derive much of their discourse from Christianity.

Chapter 5 engages the question of 'popular religion' and the relationship between religion and magic in India and China. The author argues that these

categories of popular belief, superstition and magic have been used by modernizers in India and China to intervene in people's religious practices for the purpose of a total transformation of their communities. Chapter 6 expands the discussion of anti-superstition movements to a broader discussion of secularism as a political project with its own utopian elements. This chapter points to the differences between India and China in articulating their understanding regarding the relations of secularism and religion. Chapter 7 looks into spiritual and health movements involving yoga, *taiji* (tai chi) and *qi gong* and argues that these have strong political and social implications and as such play a central role in the articulation of nationalism. As such, this chapter discusses the Falun Gong and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar movements among others. Chapter 8 is engaged with minority-majority relations in terms of ethnicity, religion and culture. In regards to India the relations between the Hindu majority versus the Muslim, Christian and Sikh minorities are discussed, and in regards to China the relations between the Han majority and a variety of ethnic minorities, of whom the Hui Muslims are the major group, are discussed. Chapter 9 serves as an epilogue and concludes by recapitulating some of the themes woven throughout the book, thus placing them in the context of Indian and Chinese societies.

The book is no doubt timely, offers a solid and convincing thesis and is comprehensive; moreover, the discussion concerning the differences between nationalist understandings of religion in India and in China is no doubt well argued. The book takes into consideration numerous relevant details such as ideas about progress, rationality, equality and anti-imperialism, the impact of missionary movements in both countries on the reform movements, popular religion as a secular project, and then questions of majorities versus minorities; however, the question arises regarding the potential of spirituality as a contemporary major driving force in continuing to develop future notions of Indian and Chinese nationalism. The author does refer to the attempt to consider Confucian social ethics as the 'spirit of the nation' (p. 56) and to Gandhi and Tagore's spirituality, and raises the question whether spirituality is still a vibrant force in the articulation of Indian and Chinese nationalism in the twenty-first century. As such, the author describes how in the first part of the twentieth century there was a strong sense that China was a society not so much endowed with a spiritual heritage but afflicted with a spiritual disease, and how there were important currents of thought in China that attempted to recuperate some of the spiritual resources of the past and especially those of Buddhism and Confucianism. The author describes how some Chinese intellectuals tried to develop a modern understanding of Confucian social ethics by referring to it as the 'spirit of the nation'. The author considers that this form of neo-Confucianism as a kind of spiritual nationalism ultimately failed to take root in China, since it turned out to be too difficult to unmoor Confucianism from the now defunct imperial system and turn it into the civil religion of the modern nation state (p. 56), as opposed to the extent that the

circles around Gandhi and Tagore were able to dominate nationalism in India (pp. 56–57). Arguably, Classical Chinese thought may well be undergoing a revival, and may aspire to occupy a more central place in the national ethos in the future. Also, Classical Indian thought may well be undergoing a revival too, perhaps centred around the ideas of the Bhagavad Gita and contemporary interpretations to Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore's ideas, to whom the author devotes sections in Chapter 2 (pp. 49–54). In a similar fashion, it may aspire to occupy a more central place in the national ethos in the future as well. At any rate, this discussion may open the door for a future study and in summary the book is highly recommended.