

---

## Rezensionen – Comptes rendus – Reviews

# Recent textbooks on religions in South Asia

DOI 10.1515/asia-2014-0059

1. **Mittal, Sushil / Thursby, Gene (eds.):** *Religions of South Asia: An Introduction*. London/New York: Routledge, 2006, 259 pp., ISBN 978-0-41544-851-2.
2. **Clothey, Fred W:** *Religion in India: A Historical Introduction*. London / New York: Routledge, 2007, 282 pp., ISBN 978-0-41594-023-8.
3. **Suthren Hirst, Jacqueline / Zavos, John:** *Religious Traditions in Modern South Asia*. London/New York: Routledge, 2011, 319 pp., ISBN 978-0-41544-787-4.
4. **Pechilis, Karen / Raj, Selva J.:** *South Asian Religions: Tradition and Today*. London/New York: Routledge, 2013, 259 pp., ISBN 978-0-41544-851-2.

In the span of seven years, Routledge has provided us with four introductory guides to the study of South Asian religions with very similar sounding titles, all addressing an undergraduate audience. A few reasons can explain the multiplication of such textbooks: (1) on a commercial level, it signals a niche of particular interest for the publishing house: the audience is both academic and not too specialized, and it is hoped that university libraries will systematically acquire the books and instructors require them as compulsory readings; (2) on the level of content, there is a need in updating decades of scholarship that come out of a critique of “Orientalist” approaches in the study of religions in South Asia. In this light, older textbooks appear antiquated and methodologically problematic in a number of their assumptions and choices – such as their focus on “Hindu” traditions, an elitist bias privileging brahmanical sources, or a devaluation of the “medieval” period in relation to the “ancient” or “classical” world etc.; (3) on a pedagogical and institutional level, the renewed interest in South Asian religions relates to institutional changes and the reshaping of programs in American and European universities: specialists in South Asian studies are now often teaching classes that cover a broad spectrum of South Asian religions in both ancient and contemporary periods, and this requires textbooks that are concurrently specialized enough and adapted to this wide audience.

---

**Philippe Bornet:** Section de langues et civilisations slaves et de l'Asie du Sud, Université de Lausanne, Anthropole, 1015 Lausanne-Dorigny, Switzerland. E-mail: philippe.bornet@unil.ch

Keeping those elements in mind, I will deal with the four titles in chronological order of their publication and will devote slightly more attention to *Religious Traditions in Modern South Asia (RTMSA)*, because it is certainly the most original among the four. The first, *Religions of South India (RSA)*, is a collective work edited by Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby. A cultural anthropologist, Mittal teaches at the James Madison University (Virginia) and has authored (among others): *The Hindu World* (with G. Thursby), 2004. Thursby is working at the University of Florida and has published works on Sikhism (*The Sikhs*, 1992). *RSA* is divided into two parts (religions indigenous to India and imported religions) and nine chapters, corresponding to as many religions. The organization of the book according to discrete religions has advantages and disadvantages: it allows an in-depth coverage of different religions by contributors who are themselves often profiled as specialists of one religion, and it gives an immediate sense of diversity. Concurrently, it presents the inconvenience of relying on categories in “-isms” (Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism ...) that do not find straightforward correspondents in various South Asian idioms. As such, it could give the artificial impression that those religions are well defined by specific texts, beliefs and practices, and do not overlap with each other. Similarly, one could wonder what counts as “religion”: why for example to deal with Sikhism and not with Ādivāsi or Sant “religion”? The editors are aware of those issues, but choose not to engage them directly, in what is probably a pragmatic way to connect with the conceptual framework of intended readers. Similarly, the editors use interchangeably the terms of “religion” and “faith”, showing that the need to problematize those loaded categories (part of academic routine in the study of religion since Talal Asad and Jonathan Z. Smith) is not felt particularly acutely in this context.

The essays are structured along roughly similar lines: a historical summary followed by a survey of texts, practices, social issues, modern expressions and transmission outside of India. In a way that is perhaps revelatory, certain contributions deal selectively with those points (e.g. the contribution on Buddhism, which has no section on rituals). The chapters are well informed, and the impression that religions developed independently is somewhat counterbalanced by an attention to the relations with other religions. The pedagogical apparatus is, though, kept to a bare minimum: the chapters provide a short list of additional references, but there is neither a glossary nor questions for class discussion. The book addresses methodological issues with an *ad hoc* chapter on postcolonial theory by Carol Olson (himself the author of yet another Routledge guide for undergraduates, *Religious Studies: Key Concepts*, 2011). The chapter unfortunately remains quite disconnected from previous ones, and a few more recent references, as well as a more precise rendering of some of the authors' thoughts, would have been helpful (e.g. J. Z. Smith who allegedly would like to “limit the use of

comparison to cultural items that are spatially and temporally contiguous”, p. 273).

The book by Fred Clothey, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, *Religion in India (RI)* is organized entirely chronologically. It opens on the “sources of Indian religion” and continues on to contemporary times, with chapters that are not organized around one or several religions but around periods: “the urban period”, “the post-classical period”, “the coming of Islam”, etc. A short introductory chapter addresses the question of perspectives and historiographical models, and reflects on the concept of religion – in a quite basic way (C. Geertz and R. Otto are introduced as prominent “Western theorists” of religion). While even under 300 pages, the book manages a detailed and diverse picture of the history of South Asian religions (dealing with both Northern and Southern traditions, Sanskrit and vernacular sources, elitist and popular worldviews, male and female practices etc.). With concepts and practices historicized rigorously, the reader gets a good impression of the traditions’ dynamism and complexity, with an attention to processes of reinterpretation, multiple uses of similar material, etc. (seen, for example, in the presentation of devotional currents or Indian “responses” to “streams from the West”). A caveat to this approach is, of course, that some elements are excessively difficult to date and that periodization and genealogies are always open to debate. One could also ask about the specificity of the religious issues in this historical narrative, especially if contrasted with more general historical accounts of India, such as H. Kulke and D. Rothermund’s *A History of India* (1986). However, even if not too theoretically minded, the book does an excellent job of presenting a clear yet not oversimplified picture that also conveys a comprehensive understanding of its topic. It preserves, as much as possible, concepts in their original language (with diacritics) and each chapter provides the students with a long list of well-chosen references, along with a large number of maps, timelines, and a detailed glossary.

Authored by Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and John Zavos, *Religious Traditions in Modern South Asia* is the most innovative in its structure and content. Hirst teaches at the University of Manchester and has authored, among others, works on Vedānta (*Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta: a Way of Teaching* (2005)) and pedagogical issues in the teaching of South Asian religions. Zavos teaches at the same university and is an historian specializing in nationalist movements in India (author of *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India* (2000)). *RTMSA* challenges textbooks that are informed by what they call a “world religions model”, explicitly naming *RSA* as such an example. While the editors of *RSA* think that students should first be acquainted with “prototypical” conceptions of religion in South Asia before developing their own criticism (p. xii), the authors of *RTMSA* would like to introduce immediately students to those issues. The title shows

some discomfort with the use of “religion”, replacing it by “traditions” – probably not a much less problematic category, but at least less directly marked by the “world religions model”. The originality of the book is immediately seen in its structure: key issues, not religions serve as chapter titles.

In the first part of the book, the main goal is to emphasize the diversity of religious practices in South Asian contexts, and in particular the inability of a normative concept of religion (marked by its Christian heritage) to account for actual cases. Thus, a chapter on deity opens on a text by Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) in which three Chinese converts discuss with a missionary: the first says that he understood that there were three gods, the second two, and the third, no god at all. The story is used to fuel a critique of the opposition between monotheism and polytheism as a heuristic tool. Dealing then with the issue of texts, the authors invite the student to compare photographs of a traditional Vedic school and an English translation of an Upanishadic verse engraved on the Birla temple (New Delhi). This leads to a discussion of different uses and contexts of texts, and criticism of the view that religious texts would belong to one specific religion – an idea traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The chapter on “myth” surprises its reader by opening on the TV series *Ramayan* by Ramanand Sagar. Borrowing the definition of Bruce Lincoln (myth as ideology in narrative form), the authors insist that a single narrative (such as the *Rāmkaṭhā*) can be used in various socio-religious settings. For addressing the topics of ritual and worship, the authors propose a case study of Shah Nur’s (d. 1692) ‘*urs*’ celebration in Aurangabad, stressing that in this case and others, “people from ‘different’ religions frequently participate in the rituals of others” (p. 94). The issue of “caste” is handled in a specific chapter located across the two parts of the book, analyzed under the double lens of the diversity of practices and genealogies of its modern understandings. After distinguishing carefully categories such as *casta*, *varṇa* or *jāti*, the authors explore the modern evolution of the notion and its relation with issues of religion in the colonial period – roughly following the approach of N. Dirks (*Castes of Mind*). In the chapter dealing with “encounters with the West”, the authors introduce Said’s reflections on orientalism, resisting a perspective in which Indian elites would only “react” to Western impulses and emphasizing processes of interaction and creativity. As a sidenote, we might note here that – in large part due to his reliance on Foucault – Said might not be ideal for analyzing this type of process and other historiographical models could have been more helpful. The remaining chapters go however beyond a purely Saidian approach and examine the construction of religious boundaries and the conceptualization of private and public religious spaces, largely following H. Oberoi in his analysis of the construction of Sikhism as a religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (*The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 2001).

The goal is to explore the effect of the “world religions model” on the “real” social world, with the last case study being Ayodhya and the Babri Masjid.

The book manages to introduce students to sophisticated topics and debates, conveying its message in relatively easy terms. For doing so, it uses an arsenal of pedagogical techniques: it addresses the reader in a “personal tone”, recommending attention to this or that issue while reading further; it multiplies examples and case studies; it provides occasionally “boxes” that explain key terms, questions for class discussion, tasks for the reader (e.g. reflecting and answering questions about a text), as well as rich lists of additional readings. This unorthodox way to deal with the topic, however, also has limits. An immediate issue is that it is not a comprehensive account of religions in South Asia – and by this standard, many elements would be missing (e.g. sacrificial traditions, classical texts, South Asian regions outside of India etc.). Moreover, one may wonder in which measure the textbook presupposes a certain acquaintance with debates in the field, since it opposes a number of conceptions that may go much beyond what the preconceptions of the intended readers will likely be.

The most recent textbook, *South Asian Religions (SAR)*, seeks to give an equal treatment to most religions of India, and the subtitle of the book, *Tradition and Today* (also the subtitle of all chapters) witnesses a concern with connecting socio-anthropological and historical perspectives for a better understanding. The editors are Selva Raj (1952–2008) and Karen Pechilis, both specialists of South India. Author of *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saint of India* (2011), Pechilis teaches comparative religion at Drew University. The book brings together authors who are specialists of different religious traditions in South Asia and deals with them in chronological order of emergence. As in *RSA*, the division by religions brings both heuristic advantages and disadvantages. As Pechilis notes, such an approach encourages comparative thinking between different traditions. It also invites the reader to consider South Asian religions in a broader context of entangled or connected histories, by following the trajectories of religions – be it from the Middle East to India, or from India to China. At the same time, the same questions raised about *RSA* equally apply in this case. In her introduction, Pechilis is very aware of these issues and stresses that the goal is to depart from an elitist perception of religions, to focus on practice rather than texts or beliefs, and to account for the “cross-fertilization of multiple traditions” in India (p. 2). She further argues, along lines similar to *RTMSA*, “religions of South Asia [...] wrote a different script than the one with which students of European or Middle Eastern religions are familiar.” (p. 4). She adds “religions of South Asia might most fruitfully be studied as a pluralistic grouping in a geographical location, rather than as singular religions”. Whereas one could ask whether the division of the book along religions could not run against

this agenda, most contributions are as sensitive to the issue as the editors. The chapters are well informed and generally insist on the extreme diversity of a “tradition” (e.g. the variety of “Judaisms”) and the dimension of practice. The book finally includes questions for discussion, key concepts with their definition and a rich list of additional resources.

To conclude: *SAR* and *RSA* can be considered as standalone textbooks that provide comprehensive accounts of South Asian religions, accessible to an audience with no previous knowledge of the topic. Their chapters underline the aspect of diversity and acknowledge the major methodological issues of this study (more so *SAR* on this matter). *RTMSA* is conceived in a different way: it is based on the model of problem-based learning and directly engages the critical issues that characterize the study of (South Asian) religions. As such, it can hardly completely replace more classical textbooks, since it does not give (and does not want to give) the feeling of a comprehensive overview. It is, though, an excellent introduction to methodological issues in the study of South Asian religions – and even, I would say, in the study of religions in general for which much can be learned from the South Asian contexts. In the end, the choice also depends on the institutional setting: In a department where chairs are organized by competences in religions, then using both *RTMSA* and *RI* could be particularly appropriate, to encourage the students to think about their topics in an integrated and problematized way, while providing them with a rich historical picture of the subject. In a department where the focus is more on the history of South Asia, then a combination of *RTMSA* with *SAR* would help the students to think critically, while still discerning similar processes in different contexts and thus providing keys to comparison.