

Reviews

Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism. By Banu Subramaniam. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. 312 pages. \$30.00. (Paperback).

In the past decades, there has been a growing production of scholarly literature devoted to understanding the rise of the Hindu nationalist movement in India, particularly emphasizing its invocation of a monolithic past to consolidate the idea of India as a Hindu nation. Banu Subramaniam, a leading researcher in the field of feminist science studies and professor in the Department of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies at University of Massachusetts Amherst, makes an intervention with her book to retell the story of Hindu nationalism rather uniquely, placing it at the intersection of postcolonial, feminist, and science and technology studies. Moving away from characterizing the contours of modernity in India as scientific/secular or traditional/religious, Subramaniam recognizes the multiplicity that marks India's modernity with its embrace of science, technology, and developmentalism as well as the resurgence of a politico-religious hypernationalism.

Most crucial in this book is the concept of "archaic modernity," essentially meaning the reconfiguration of tradition within the milieu of a modern, scientific nation-state, a vision that is crucial to contemporary India. Using the concept of archaic modernity in outlining five illustrations, she highlights that which makes Hindu nationalism distinctive: it no longer merely invokes the ancient and the traditional. Science and religion in India no longer stand in opposition to one another, and it is in this light that she professes to analyze the multivocal entanglements of science and religion, to recognize them as "tools, allies, synergies, partners, symbionts, challengers, colluders, or syncretic collaborators" (p. 42) coming together to consolidate an immensely robust brand of political nationalism. She identifies certain vital elements that they share for the purpose of her argument: both share a vibrant plurality of cosmologies and ways of knowing the world. Both have been instrumentally imbued in oppressive politics, histories, and practices.

There is existing literature that points to the institutionalized violence of the Western scientific model and its alliance with the developmental vision of post-Independent India. Subramaniam takes a further step and argues that the epistemic authority of modern science does not merely impose its supremacy upon its colonies; instead, the tyrannical character of science finds new allies, new modes of realization in a Hindu nationalist India. The deeply heterogeneous narratives of mythology in India provide a corpus of stories of transmutation of humans, human-animal hybridization, imaginary creatures that defy distinctions between human and nonhuman, nature and culture, and ancient and modern. Emergent claims are keen on harnessing these stories to demonstrate that science and technology have been intrinsic and indigenous to Hinduism, for instance, the belief that anthropomorphic gods such as Lord Ganesha (the elephant-headed deity)

are a testimony to the fact that ancient Hindu civilization was privy to medical knowledge of cosmetic surgery.

Subramaniam provides an array of fascinating illustrations of archaic modernity, but a particularly exciting one is discussed in her section on genetic nationalism. The cultivation of “origin stories” of Hindu identity draws legitimacy from scientific and genetic evidence, be it in the form of state-funded genomic projects the sequencing of genomes in the Indian population to uncover susceptibility to disease, reports of genetic evidence for the origin of the caste system and linkages of upper-caste DNA with European haplogroups, the incorporation of indigenous medical knowledge such as Ayurveda into genetics (Ayurgenomics), all of which espouse for the standardization of human biology of the Indian population, and consequently interlinking genetic and national identity.

Biology has come to be the core of political Hindu nationalism in establishing Hinduism as a modern, scientific religion. Claims to a homogenous group identity, endogamy, purity, and pollution are rooted in nativist scientific and biological discourses around the purity of Hindu blood and the commonality of DNA. Subramaniam calls this “bionationalism” to describe the transition of a traditional ethnic nationalism into one in which its core ideas are scientized using biopolitical claims. On the one hand, it allows for the claim of the long-term existence of scientific thought in ancient India and, simultaneously, retention of gender and caste hierarchies in its embrace of a new modernity. She draws from the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics but reframes it in the context of her analysis of the postcolonial world. Postcolonial biopolitics, she argues, has to account for not only Western practices of governmentality during the colonial rule but also the biopolitical practices that emerged through the anticolonial struggle. Postcolonial biopolitics, thus, has to be characterized by competing claims that have come to shape “bionationalism.” This heterogeneity is best understood in the case illustration of the legacy of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in which the category of “unnatural sex” was not only produced by colonial Christian and medical imaginaries of sexual hierarchy. It was also remade by the anticolonial elite who reified categories of home, family, and sexuality with an upper-caste morality while constructing the non-Hindu, lower-caste, and Muslim as a sexual “other,” positing them as uncivilized and promiscuous.

The book persuasively makes some important contributions in the disciplinary domains of STS and postcolonial studies. Building on the critique of the religious-secular binary, she disrupts the idea of a nonreligious science by revealing that what is understood as Western science not “secular” but is fundamentally built upon Christian ideology. STS needs to seriously account for the mutual constitution of the religious and secular instead of reifying science as a separate and secular domain and the wide-ranging cosmologies of religious beliefs and practices in the postcolonial world. She also seeks to disrupt the understanding of the supremacy of Western science on the postcolonial world by bringing into light the complex and hybrid contestations in the interaction of Western and indigenous systems of knowledge that simultaneously contradict and harmonize with each other.

Subramaniam’s writing style is particularly fascinating as she begins her chapter-wise illustrations with short stories of science fiction, stories that mean to display her larger argument about the creativity of storytelling and the

“naturecultural possibilities” that it enables. In highlighting the animated practice of storytelling in Hindu mythology, she writes the hegemonic, unilinear conception of Hinduism that has been cast to promote an idea of the Hindu nation obscuring an array of diverse, plural, polytheistic, flexible imaginative worlds, their defiance of the binarism of nature and culture, human and nonhuman, scientific and spiritual, which provide tools that can be reclaimed as a site of radical politics. The eschewal of these possibilities to construct singular narratives in history, she claims, reminds us that “nothing is inevitable, and other lives and other futures were and are always possible” (p. xiii). Since the mythological stories associated with Hinduism are burdened with oppressive meanings of caste and gender in the current era, one is skeptical about the extent to which an emancipatory reclamation and retelling is possible. However, this book proves to be enriching in systematically bringing back the enchanting prospects that underlie science and religion and in showing that the stories that end up being told are the ones that are produced by networks of power hierarchies that deploy the hybridization of science and religion to facilitate oppressive, totalizing claims of truth.

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In Search of the Soul: A Philosophical Essay. By John Cottingham. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. xii + 174 pages. \$16.95. (Paperback).

John Cottingham, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Reading, has taken to producing short challenging books for a wider audience, in addition to his more scholarly works. This is an excellent practice, given his flair for lucid and vigorous writing. His new book, *In Search of the Soul*, is an engaging, rational essay that aims to make a positive case for theism.

The author advances two of the lesser-known arguments for the existence of God: the existence of the human soul and the existence of objective morality. The first argument holds that we can infer God’s existence from the fact that we experience ourselves as conscious beings with a unified sense of self—in other words, as possessing a soul. While we do not apprehend the existence of the soul through direct revelation, we can nonetheless infer that we have one by contemplating the sort of creatures we are—conscious, intelligent, and rational beings—and the universe we inhabit, which appears to reflect a mind vastly superior to our own. The existence of God becomes plausible once we acknowledge that we possess a soul.

For Cottingham, this connection between theism and the notion of the self is clear. The conviction that human beings are created *imago Dei* is integral to theism, and this is seen as particularly true given our conscious minds, intellects, and wills. Cottingham suggests that theism can make sense of consciousness as being at the very center of reality by positing “a source ... of all being that is somehow *mind-like*” (p. 83).

It follows, according to Cottingham, that the “separatist” Platonic or Cartesian soul-body conception is intellectually untenable. He sides with the “many scientifically oriented philosophers of mind” who insist that, rather than seeking metaphysical explanations for the soul, we should always try to find “naturalistic alternatives” (p. 49). He thus rejects mind-body dualism and embraces a type of physicalism, which argues that the soul is the “form of the body” (following Aristotle’s philosophy of nature). Though it is perhaps understandable that Cottingham wishes to gain the approval of modern materialistically-minded scientists and philosophers, his flat denial of dualism causes a number of problems for both his theism and his idea of the self/soul. The Hebrew Bible is unequivocal that God has no body: God is spirit. So, if a nonphysical God created the physical universe, all theists (including Christians like Cottingham) have to be dualists of some kind. There is also the question of the way in which this dualism applies—if at all—to humans made in God’s image. It seems clear, however, that monism (even dual-aspect monism) cannot, strictly speaking, be true. The general philosophical definition of physicalism as the thesis that “everything is physical” must therefore be repudiated.

Another problem for Cottingham is that, by rejecting the idea that human beings possess any nonphysical “essence” in the form of a soul that is separate from the ever-changing physical body, it becomes harder for him to sustain his central claim that an essential or core element of the human self persists through time. His key aim here is to rebut David Hume’s proposition that the self is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions ... in a perpetual flux and movement” (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, I, IV, §VI). But if dualism is false, as Cottingham claims, and the self is not an essential or autonomous entity but merely a cluster of sensations, then his theistic argument is flawed.

A further difficulty is that Cottingham fails to engage with arguments that lend support to Hume’s denial of an essential autonomous self/soul. He makes no mention, for instance, of non-Western traditions that reject the idea of the soul. The fundamental Buddhist concept of *anatman* holds that humans do not possess a continuing identity and that selfhood is a fiction. Buddhist and Humean perspectives have much in common: the seemingly “stable” self is a product of the incredibly rapid speed with which one sense impression, thought, or feeling succeeds another. An important aim of Buddhist meditation is to curtail all this mental activity, thus enabling the illusion of selfhood to disappear.

What of Cottingham’s second argument for theism—that the existence of objective morality necessitates the existence of God? He is surely correct in maintaining that, without a transcendent source of goodness beyond the physical world, it is hard to see how objective values exist. For the theist, God is the “transcendent primordial and personal subject” (p. 99), the source of being and goodness. Cottingham is skeptical of philosophers such as Derek Parfit who assert that it is possible for moral truths to exist without God or some mind-independent metaphysical realm. However, his further claim that we can actually see clear signs of “strong normativity”—the objective reality of the “values and beauties and duties” to which we have access as conscious beings (p. 92)—throughout human history and culture is ethnocentric and fails to withstand serious anthropological or historical scrutiny.

Such a claim can be sustained only if one shares Cottingham's tendency to confirmation bias and ignores the huge diversity of moral values across time and place. There is little or no evidence, for example, that slavery or the oppression of women were seen as intrinsically wrong among the ancient Greeks. And our modern disgust at the gladiatorial contests so popular in Roman antiquity does not spring from an innate revulsion at the thought of extreme cruelty and merciless killing. The abhorrence we have for such things is very much a legacy of Judeo-Christian precepts about the sanctity of human life. What many liberal literati assume to be absolute and immutable values tend on the whole to be artifacts of specific religious and cultural systems. It thus seems difficult to uphold the idea that human values are objective, given their manifest contingency and variability.

Cottingham's anthropocentric claim that moral values are uniquely human is also highly questionable. Charles Darwin suggested that our moral sense has evolutionary antecedents and is shared with other species. Cottingham, by contrast, seems unwilling to admit that human notions of morality may well be rooted in the social instincts found in other animals, where cooperation and altruistic practices are vital for the survival of the group.

While Cottingham's arguments for theism may have philosophical potential, this book lacks intellectual rigor in that it fails to answer the many objections to those arguments. That said, *In Search of the Soul* is a good read, composed in the author's clear and interesting style, employing a discriminating use of cliché. It also succeeds in Cottingham's aim of embracing a more humane approach to scholarship.

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