



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

Peter Gottschalk

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Peter Gottschalk offers a compelling study of how, through the British implementation of scientific taxonomy in the subcontinent, Britons and Indians identified an inherent divide between mutually antagonistic religious communities.

England's ascent to power coincided with the rise of empirical science as an authoritative way of knowing not only the natural world, but the human one as well. The British scientific passion for classification, combined with the Christian impulse to differentiate people according to religion, led to a designation of Indians as either Hindu or Muslim according to rigidly defined criteria that paralleled classification in botanical and zoological taxonomies.

Through an historical and ethnographic study of the north Indian village of Chainpur, Gottschalk shows that the Britons' presumed categories did not necessarily reflect the Indians' concepts of their own identities, though many Indians came to embrace this scientism and gradually accepted the categories the British instituted through projects like the Census of India, the Archaeological Survey of India, and the India Museum. Today's propogators of Hindu-Muslim violence often cite scientific formulations of difference that descend directly from the categories introduced by imperial Britain.

Religion, Science, and Empire will be a valuable resource to anyone interested in the colonial and postcolonial history of religion in India.

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