

Book Review: *Religion in India*

Religious historian Fred Clothey begins his popular 2007 textbook *Religion in India: A Historical Introduction*¹ with a discussion of the interpretive lenses that have been applied to the study of Indian religion, and he makes the realistic statement that these lenses are often projections of the interpreter. Thus, “what one sees...is often a product of how one sees.” (p.1)

Clothey moves through the pejorative attitudes about religion and contrasts them with selective romanticism from the Greek period, including the work of Herodotus who wrote in the 5th century BCE. The author includes Nietzsche’s interpretation of the *Laws of Manu* as verification of his Aryan eugenics, (p.4) and lists Swami Vivekananda’s visit to the US in the late 1800s as part of an Indian romantic and nationalistic movement. Clothey defines dharma as “a total orientation, a way of being in the world.” (p.11) and asserts that the *sanatana dharma* of the Hindu nationalists presumes an original source in the ancient “proto-Vedic” past, claiming the existence of an oral tradition dating back through unknown millennia.

Clothey draws lucid comparisons between the experiences of Arjuna, the hero of the Bhagavad Gita, and Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Martin Luther. (p.10) He quotes Clifford Geertz to say, “religion is a symbol system that is created by human beings in such a way that it is modeled *from* the social reality and becomes a model *for* the social reality.” (p.11)

Clothey moves with great detail through ancient Indian history with the hunting and agricultural communities of the Indus Valley, and the Dravidian culture of the south. He discusses the role of women from the Vedic period, the varnas (caste system), and informs the reader of the importance of ritual in all traditions in India, which was already sophisticated and complex by the 10th c. BCE. (p.23) Clothey discusses the creation myth of Prajapati (the lord of

beings) or Purusa who immolated himself to create the social order of his own body (varnas). (p.24) For Clothey, this indicates that “the entire universe came from a single source, and the sacrificial act replicated the creative process.” (p.25) The Vedas are described in some detail, including the samhitas: the Rg, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva Vedas. (p.26) The later Upanishads “connect” the teachings and help interpret them for practical use. Clothey provides brief introductions to the complex Indian concepts of dharma, karma, moksha, and samsara. The avaidika or so-called “heterodoxies” are discussed, with Jainism being a prime example. Records of the tradition arose in the 6th century BCE but the Jains assert that their founder, Mahavira, was already the 24th in a long line of *tirthankaras*. (p.37) Clothey dives further into Jainism’s beliefs, equating the “jiva” with the soul or “life-monads” which rise upward through the planes as opposed to the “ajivas” who were heavy with karma and thus remained forever tied to the wheel of samsara. (p.39)

Clothey next addresses Buddhism in significant detail, from Gautama’s origin and life story, through his teachings, known as the dharma (Sanskrit) or dhamma (Pali). Of course, the Four Noble Truths are expounded upon, as is the Noble Eight-Fold Path, yet Clothey manages to bring fresh insight to the Buddhist doctrine of anatta, or anatman, which directly contradicted the Upanisadic sages.

The urban period is referred to as India’s “golden age” and Clothey describes the various schools of Buddhism, including scholarly detail on when, where, and how they were transmitted throughout the world. History lessons on Chandragupta and Asoka’s Mauryan empire are offered for contextual understanding, as are further discussions of caste, the role of women, the symbolism of food, religious architecture, and the significance of yoga. Indian epic literature is

also introduced, with a focus on the major epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Significant attention is paid to the rise of the Bhakti movement of devotional literature in Tamil vernacular around the 7th century CE. (p.90)

Philosophical developments arose around the turn of the 1st millennium CE, with the Saivists who sought to “become attached to the lord through the grace of god,” which most often occurred during darshan meditations. (p.103) Saivism was contrasted with the rise of Vedanta (end of the Vedas) from which the concept of Advaita (non-dualism) arose and eventually led to tantrism, which mixed vaidika and folk traditions. During this time, the various goddesses were raised to the status of “high deity.” (p.112) Clothey informs the reader that Islam spread through India within the first few decades of its advent, and he describes the religion from its conception, its five pillars, and even weighs in on the differences between the Sunni and Shi’a groups, and provides a short introduction to Sufism.

Clothey provides insight into the developments of the late medieval period through the modern era, discussing diverse topics like religious appropriation and syncretism, Sikhism, and eventually arrives at a chapter devoted to religious minorities. These include Cochin and Bene Israel Jews, Syrian “Jacobite” Christians founded by the apostle Thomas, and Zoroastrians.

Clothey offers detailed information about Indian pilgrimage sites, festivals, shrines, temples, and many diverse rituals. He writes about the proliferation of gurus and the movements spawned by the more successful teachers. The author includes a chapter on “India’s Global Reach,” which begins with a discussion of how Indian religion moved into neighboring regions and contact with the West through Darius and Alexander. Clothey even suggests that Pythagoras and Plato may have had access to Indian wisdom traditions, before he covers India’s colonial period through its

independence. Clothey ends the book with a discussion of India's modern era, including commentary on names that have become well-known to Western readers: Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Swami Vivekananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and Paramahansa Yogananda.

1. Clothey, Fred W. *Religion in India*. Routledge, 24 Jan. 2007.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/0415940249>.

2. Link to this essay on GoogleDocs:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EVTXYUI4lfMWDHOqQiSJUn4w1TERbJYO1wMF4qzau_k/edit?usp=sharing.