
Van der Veer, Peter (2014). *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India*.

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In his extensive and thought-provoking field study, Utrecht University professor and author Peter Van der Veer carefully looks at and compares the recent spiritual and sociological histories of two of the oldest societies on earth – China and India. In examining and contrasting their modern legacies, Van der Veer attempts to see how each country has been shaped in distinctive and similar ways by Western colonial and societal influence. For Van der Veer, comparing and contrasting the 19th and 20th century interactions of these two countries with the West is important because “these are large-scale neighboring societies with deep cultural histories that have had far-reaching influence on all the societies around them, but also because they share a number of similar and comparable features” (4).

Van der Veer, who is also director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study Religious and Ethnic Diversity, uses comparative cultural studies theories championed by German sociologist Max Weber, as well as French philosopher Michel Foucault’s discourse analysis in his study. He eloquently uses these sociological and anthropological theories to make modern historical insights about each of these countries that are connected to one another and collected into distinctive patterns that make up the respective histories of each of these countries. Since both China and India have been influenced by the West, the modern spiritual and cultural legacies that we now see respectively in both China and India share striking similarities as well as not so surprising differences. By comparing and contrasting the relationship between the histories of these two Far East cultures, Van der Veer further explores and attempts to bring out more insights and patterns into the modern histories of these two countries.

Van der Veer frankly admits that “the complexities of Indian and Chinese societies and their modern transformation are vast, and our knowledge of them has increased greatly since Weber compiled his studies” (1). However, he goes on to say that there is still much to find out from both societies and their transformations by the West and this “can be highlighted and understood through comparison” because there has been “a long, continuous history of interaction between the two civilizations up to today” (2). According to Van der Veer, “Indian and Chinese modernities are produced by interactions with imperial formations that can be compared to further our general understanding of the cultural history of modernity” (4).

In his study, Van der Veer cleverly uses the complementary Western concepts of “magic” and “religion” on the one hand, and “secularity” and “spirituality” on the other, to bring out comparisons between how modern Western influence has affected both countries. For Van der Veer, these two sets of concepts are interrelated and each set of concepts is constantly shifting back and forth on a scale of power – one scale shifting between magic and religion, and the other between secularity and spirituality.

He wants to emphasize the multi-faceted nature of this comparative analysis to wisely avoid the usual problem with modern interpretations of globalization that favor primarily using secular concepts such as economics and politics. For Van der Veer, concepts such as religion and spirituality are also just as important to consider when talking about world history and sociology. As he states in his introduction, “What I present here is an interactional history that emphasizes relations between Euro-America (also known as “the West”) on the one hand and India and China on the other, with an emphasis on what I call a “syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality” (9).

The body of the book itself includes nine chapters with a range of topics addressing how modern Western influence has affected these two countries. While Chapter 1 nicely introduces the book's theme and its concepts, Chapter 2 goes on to specifically address spirituality as a modern topic by effectively contrasting it with secularity. It also points out that spirituality's importance as a term shifted from West to East in the 19th century and it became a much more important concept in the West to describe what was happening in regards to religion in China, India, and other places in the region. Spirituality was seen by various 19th century Western academic circles such as the American Transcendentalists and the German Idealists as a superior alternative to the Western materialism, imperialism, and organized religion that was so prevalent in Europe and in the Americas at the time. Further proof of this was shown by the abundance of Western followers of Eastern thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Tagore. As Van der Veer states in Chapter 2, “perhaps the most important element in the emergence of spirituality was that it offered an alternative to organized religion” (38).

In Chapter 3, Van der Veer expands in complete fashion on the popular idea that religion has been a name and concept given to traditions like Confucianism, Hinduism, and Daoism by Western scholars since the 19th century. These traditions have been many times interpreted as religions in a Western and Christian framework and since then, this of course has met with some resistance at various times from intellectuals from both India and China. Although individuals like Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi decided on co-opting those terms and making them all their own as he excellently points out in the chapter: “the crucial difference remains that India was colonized and that therefore religious reform was a crucial part of anti-colonial proto-nationalism” (64).

Chapter 4 effectively goes into how “Indians and Chinese were quite literally converted to modernity by the efforts of missionary Christianity, especially in its nineteenth century Protestant incarnation” (91). This does not necessarily mean that they were converted to Christianity, although a small amount were, but many people in both countries were influenced by missionary projects that brought institutional education, health-care, and other similar modern ideas and

techniques. This was to have both positive and negative effects and because of its colonization, India felt these effects in a much more intense manner.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss “magic” and “secularity” respectively and how they were related and viewed in India and China by Western thinkers. As Van der Veer perceptively notes in Chapter 5, “the opposition between religion and magic is used in Western understandings of India and China and is mapped onto older indigenous distinctions between “higher” and “lower” religious practices” (116). So in essence, the “higher” proper religious belief was useful as a moral compass and it had to be separated from “lower” folkloric magic and superstition since magic and superstition was supposed to be contrary to both proper religious belief and scientific and secular knowledge according to Western perspective. Religion and magic were both common in India and China but had to be separated and this was of course supposed to happen with the benefits of Western education.

In Chapter 6, the conversation continues from Chapter 5 about the Western opposition to magic and superstition in India and China. The chapter goes more in depth into how this caused a move to secularity to some extent in these countries. Van der Veer states that the move to secularity comes as a way to get away from religious authority in some instances as well. However the degrees to which secularity takes place in India and China and the directions it takes vary greatly and are also quite mixed in both countries. As Van der Veer nicely points out at the beginning of the chapter, “In India one finds a secular separation of religion and state, but at the same time politics is full of religion. In China one finds a communist regime that is bent on removing religion from the political arena, but is now faced with revival of religion at all levels of society” (141).

Chapter 7 cleverly refutes the idea that Eastern spirituality from places like India and China, unlike Western spirituality, does not have political implications. As Van der Veer notes in the chapter, “Eastern spirituality is often perceived to transcend secular reality as well as the problems of institutionalized religion”, which he points out again as being known in many academic circles as an alternative to Western materialism. In contrast to this earlier claim, he goes on to say that he, “will discuss a few Indian and Chinese instances of spirituality that are clearly political” (168). He then uses the examples of Eastern spiritual practices such as yoga from India and qi gong from China and others to effectively illustrate how spirituality is at once part of national and spiritual identity. More importantly, he wants to emphasize in these examples that spirituality – in one form or another – is in some instances deeply engrained in the political and economic histories of these countries as well.

While Chapter 9 serves as a conclusion to nicely wrap up and tie all points together into context with present history, Chapter 8 provides a good examination of the ethnic minority groups in each of these countries – primarily the striking differences in terms of the situation of Muslims in each respective country. As Van der Veer states in the chapter, “Not only is the specific history of Muslims in India very different from that of Muslims in China, it is also precisely the relation to national Indian or Chinese civilization that has little to do with Islamic civilization, but much to do with the creation of national majorities and minorities” (193). What follows is a thoughtful and intriguing examination to uncover and untangle the subtle histories of this minorities in these countries and to argue,

as Van der Veer so efficiently puts it, “that the conceptualization and political treatment of a minority sheds light on the construction of the national majority” (194). In other words, where do minorities like Muslims and Islam in general lie in the national identity of these countries?

All in all, this study is quite fruitful and thought-provoking in its examination although it is not without its shortcomings, mainly those having to do with the effectiveness of its depth and scope. While much of the information presented here will be of great interest to students and scholars alike in these fields, some specialists might be left wanting more at times because Van der Veer only scratches the surface of some of the points he wants to make. The study’s aims are quite lofty in terms of the ground it wants to cover but it is limited because more time and space is required at times to cover everything it wants to say. Van der Veer’s use of comparative cultural studies and discourse analysis however is quite effective in getting this huge mass of material presented in a concise and coherent way. One could argue that this is ground that has been treaded once too often in regards to the material examined and theories used, but I would say that his use of his chosen theoretical approaches is successful and the presentation of the material is fresh and brings forth this massive amount of information in an original and fulfilling manner. Its scholarly yet accessible manner of writing and presentation of material will be enjoyed by academics and laypeople alike.