REVIEWS / CRITIQUES

Renny Thomas, *Science and Religion in India: Beyond Disenchantment*,

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The book *Science and Religion in India: Beyond Disenchantment* by Renny Thomas is a result of his unravelling of the connection between material and spiritual culture in India. Through numerous interviews with Indian scientists in the laboratories, as well as through personal reflections, the author juxtaposes the concept of science and its progress with the fundamental dispositions of the Indian tradition and spirituality.

Thomas departs from the traditional conflict or the complementarity within the ever more prominent development of science and its position through spirituality and religion. He goes beyond the notion of such a binary model imposed by European modernism and observes the "inside" of Indian laboratories, which are not exempt from numerous representations of deities, and ponders the lives of pious and irreligious scientists. Throughout the book, which has a total of 214 pages, the author discusses the issue of the caste system, as well as religious affiliation within scientific laboratories, through systematic research conducted over eleven months at an Institute in Bangalore, Karnataka.

The book comprises the List of figures, Acknowledgments, Introduction, and five major chapters: *Science, rationality, and scientific temper in postcolonial India (1), Beyond disenchantment: Scientists, laboratories, and religion (2), The making of scientists–believers (3), Being atheistic, being scientific: Scientists as atheists (4), Caste, religion and the laboratory life (5);* the Conclusion, Bibliography and Index.

The author starts off by giving an insight into the perspective within which science and scientific thinking are summarized in post–colonial India and the ways in which the concept of science has shaped modern India through the example of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who tried to provide a sort of "antidote" to all things backward and primitive arising out of popular devotion by creating a new credo, "I too have worshiped at the shrine of science." According to the author, he tried to unify India through science, thereby endangering what had already unified India before,

namely the exceptional complexity of spiritual practice and folk belief. However, he goes on to explain how Nehru advocated respect for ancient knowledge as long as science was given priority in research.

The second chapter deals with religious scientists who try to reconcile their religious beliefs with a scientific worldview. As the author points out, they are the subject of public debate, as in the case of ISRO (Indian Space Research Organization) scientists who pray to a deity before starting a mission. The issue of science as objective knowledge that is in conflict with religion as subjective knowledge tears apart the integrity of the scientist's rational being. Although separating science from religion is possible in theory — Thomas has shown that many scientists express strong spiritual views, which calls into question the final and absolute secularization.

The third chapter explores the views of irreligious scientists who have integrated religion into the workplace without becoming religious themselves. The author compares the Western understanding of the relationship between science and religion with the Indian understanding of the same. He points out that the former is not applicable to non–Western countries, and that the definition of irreligious persons and atheists cannot be universalized with the Western understanding of atheism precisely because of the different interpretation of religion and science in India.

The fourth chapter goes on to discuss the consequences of Eurocentric thinking that has shaped the "good scientist" who should not believe in God or have any religious inclinations. Yet scientists who identify as atheists or agnostics still continue to do scientific work while living the traditional way of life. Their connection with culture and following cultural laws stems from sentimentality and love for cultural heritage, and it is expressed in observing religious laws and participating in religious festivities. On the other hand, they believe that scientists who believe in God lack critical thinking and scientific rationality. The author has noted that such scientists tend to follow the Sāṃkhya philosophy, which does not state that there is no God, but that there is no evidence that there is one. This attitude arises from the ethos that pervades the entire Hindu as well as the Brahmanical world.

The fifth and the final chapter does not beat around the bush when it comes to pointing out the problem in the laboratories regarding caste–based discrimination. According to the Hindu tradition, the dominant caste within scientific circles is precisely the Brahmin caste that is perceived as the bearer of knowledge. As the dominant caste, it is responsible for preserving the knowledge of the traditions of dance, music and dietary practices. This type of knowledge distinguishes both types of scientists, both atheists and believers. They do not try to hide the influence of culture on their own education or shy away from it. Belonging to the Brahmin caste comes with great advantages in terms of integration and reputation in the workplace, regardless of whether one is a believer or a non–believer, and few are left out of such a division. In this part of the book, the author considers the extent to which objectivity of science is possible if the scientists themselves are "incapable" of rationalizing such a

division and dispelling the illusion of the position of Brahmins and higher castes in relation to the lower ones. However, some interviewees claim that caste does not play a significant role and that everyone is welcome because it is science that equalizes people and gives them the opportunity for integration — under the auspices of science, everyone is equal and there is no room for religious sentimentality, but only for strict and rigid rationality.

The Conclusion itself is the epitome of the author's reflection on his own research; he states that it is almost impossible to reconcile the distinction between religion and science in India with the Western definitions of the same. After a year of working with scientists and taking numerous trips with them, he has come to the conclusion that further ethnographic research should be conducted in order to study this issue. He believes that this type of research would contribute to a deeper understanding of the connection between science and religion in India, disregarding the previously fixed paradigms and dialogues about their complementarity or the lack thereof. The very thesis of separation and fusion originates from Western culture and is limited in relation to the Indian understanding of the problem. Thomas points out that this is a study of the relationship between religion and science in India and that it is by no means a global phenomenon. He emphasizes the need for such research in non–Western countries in order to gain insight into the broader spectrum of this issue, as well as comprehend what science means and what it ultimately represents to the scientists themselves, both believers and non–believers.

The book can be recommended to scientists — both those who deal with natural sciences and those who deal with humanities — but also to anyone else who wants to find out more about the relationship between science and religion. Through a multitude of interviews and personal reflections which do not shy away from revealing the scientists' innermost thoughts and shed light on the inner conflict between the respect for one's cultural heritage on the one hand and the rational and demonstrable on the other, we gain insight into the complexity of being a scientist of the Indian Academy of Sciences.

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