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**Ian Copland, Ian Mabbett, Asim Roy, Kate Brittlebank, and Adam Bowles. A History of State and Religion. New York: Routledge, 2012.**

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**Ian Copland, Ian Mabbett, Asim Roy, Kate Brittlebank, and Adam Bowles. *A History of State and Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2012.**

In their ambitious new monograph, *A History of State and Religion*, Ian Copland, Ian Mabbett, Asim Roy, Kate Brittlebank, and Adam Bowles trace the evolving relationship between Indian states and religious communities, and the origins and development of communal violence in India. Framing their work as a response to post-modernist critiques of the nation-state and Indian “secularism,” the authors illustrate—on the whole, persuasively—that while communal violence did accelerate markedly during the colonial and post-independence eras, its origins predate the creation of the modern state. More importantly, they posit a fundamental continuity in the ways Indian states have engaged with religion, characterizing the disjuncture between pre-modern and modern states as one of degree rather than kind.

This complex discussion unfolds over the course of eleven chronologically arranged chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion). Eschewing the Harappan civilization of the Indus valley for lack of decipherable textual sources, the authors begin with the Aryan society of the Vedic period (1500 BCE-500 BCE), in which they maintain that contrary to notions of the totalizing power of sacral authority in Indian society, Aryan kings remained dominant in their partnership with Brahman priests (Chapter 2). During a subsequent period of regional and imperial consolidation between 500 BCE and 200 CE, the authors describe how the power of the kings was further enhanced by the emergence of wandering *sramana* ascetics, who helped incorporate newly conquered territories into a burgeoning Indo-Aryan civilization (Chapter 3). The kings’ patronage of the sramanas further eroded Brahmanical authority, which encouraged them to take a more interventionist role in religious doctrine and public worship.

Ultimately, however, centralized power rapidly deteriorated, and early medieval India (200 CE to 700 CE) became characterized by chronic political instability (Chapter 4). Nevertheless, long-distance trade flourished during this period, facilitating the development of universalizing strands of *bhakti* devotionism, which situated the subcontinent’s innumerable local cults within an Indo-Aryan cosmology. These developments, coupled with a resurgence of Brahmanical authority and the emergence of the Sanskrit *Puranas*, signal for the authors the advent of a broadly incorporative, pan-Indian “Hinduism.” However, while the authors admit that “Puranic Hinduism” was largely accepting of religious plurality, they suggest that the *Puranas* themselves reflect a growing Brahmanical intolerance of heterodoxy and that practical acceptance of plurality should not be conflated with modern notions of religious toleration.

The authors then consider periods of Muslim rule, focusing on the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1398) and Mughal Empire (1526-1707) (Chapters 5 and 6). They show that despite the need of the Delhi sultans to legitimate themselves through a close partnership with the Muslim clerical elite, the sheer numerical size of the non-Muslim population over which they ruled necessitated pragmatic policies vis-à-vis religious plurality. This commitment to pragmatism deepened under the Mughal emperors, who drew upon Perso-Islamic, Turco-Mongol, and Indic idioms to represent themselves as upholders of universal justice, mediating in religious disputes and continuing to distribute patronage among India’s diverse array of religious sects. However, the authors also highlight the ways in which contemporary texts of ostensibly syncretic *bhakti* sects reveal a growing sense of communal identity and animosity during this period.

This concurrent development of communal consciousness and religious violence is elaborated further in an examination of India’s “long eighteenth century” and the Maratha polity

(Chapters 7 and 8). The authors maintain that by the seventeenth century, the entrenched usage of the term “Hindu” by Hindus for self-identification and in opposition to other religious groups indicates that while the contours of the Hindu “community” remained fluid, a “Hindu consciousness” had emerged by the early-modern period. They argue this growing sense of community, coupled with the political and economic upheavals of the eighteenth century, triggered increasing incidents of what can be characterized as pre-modern communal violence.

Still, the authors insist that such events were comparatively rare until the nineteenth century and the establishment of British colonial rule. In explaining the subsequent upsurge in violence, they argue that despite the East India Company’s initial attempts to remain “neutral” in Indian religious affairs, it, like its predecessors, was compelled by the expectations of its subjects to adjudicate religious disputes and intervene in religious life (Chapter 9). These interventions became more frequent as communal identities hardened in response to challenges from Evangelical Christianity, the colonial bureaucracy’s use of narrow communal categories to classify and enumerate its subjects, and the appeal of these categories in agitating for political and economic privileges from the colonial state (Chapter 10). In conjunction with severe social and economic disjunctures, rarefied communal boundaries and increased competition for communal “rights” led to an expansion of religious violence. As the state became increasingly unable to quell the growing violence and as the nationalist movement and popular protest steadily undermined the credibility of the regime in the early twentieth century, the authors argue, the British gradually ceded legitimate authority to intervene between religious antagonists to the nationalist leadership (Chapter 11).

Following independence, partition, and the creation of the Indian nation-state, communal violence has failed to abate and has grown ever more deadly in recent decades. However, rather than attribute these failings to the innovations of the modern state, the authors insist that contrary to its claims of maintaining its “secularism,” the contemporary Indian state has upheld, and, in fact, deepened, traditions of state involvement in religious life. Furthermore, they maintain, the persistence of communal violence is not a function of the modern state’s tendency towards homogenization but rather an effect of vote bank politics and attempts by various political parties to mobilize voter turnout through appeals to religious identity and solidarity, thus explicitly linking democratic governance with the threat of communal conflict (Chapter 12). However, by way of a cautiously optimistic conclusion, the authors assert that while it appeared that with the rise Hindu nationalism in the 1990s and 2000s, India would be increasingly wracked by convulsions of communal violence, recent electoral tendencies towards the formation of coalition governments has discouraged stridently communal appeals, suggesting that the dangers inherent to democracy in India may in fact be self-correcting.

The above summary hardly does justice to the complexity and nuance of the arguments presented by the authors or to the range of issues they have deftly handled in this volume. Particularly impressive is their ability to synthesize an immense breadth of often-contradictory literature into a coherent narrative and to reconcile, without appearing overly equivocating, opposing viewpoints on a range of contentious issues, most notably the influence of the colonial state on the development of communal identities. While theirs may not be the final word on many of the topics they have addressed, the authors are to be commended for putting forth an original synthesis of such breadth and scope.

Nevertheless, as one would expect with a work of such chronological sweep and ambition, there are a few problematic aspects. Most significant is the uneasy juxtaposition between the chapters dealing with the “ancient” and “medieval” periods and those concerning

the eighteenth century and after. Where the second half of the text neatly balances the book's twin themes of state policy regarding religion and the development of communal violence, the first half struggles to elucidate either fully. This is, of course, a problem of source material. Yet while the authors explicitly address the methodological challenges of using largely normative texts to reconstruct both state policy and social attitudes concerning religious identity, these obstacles are never entirely surmounted. Although their desire to refute utopian notions of pre-modern religious harmony is admirable, it is not clear that the sources will permit more than vague suggestions to the contrary.

In addition, for the chapters on the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire (the book's weakest), despite the much richer source base that exists for these periods, the authors over-rely on such well-trod texts as the *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi* and the *A'in-i Akbari*, as well as a somewhat dated body of secondary scholarship. More problematically, they focus almost solely on the ideological programs of these states without considering sufficiently their structure and operation. Their insistence on understanding the state as a process rather than a fixed structure is well-taken, but a more nuanced examination of the ways in which these states engaged practically with local religious communities—which several recent studies have provided for the various medieval sultanates and Mughal provincial governments—would have dovetailed nicely with the authors' later discussions of Maratha and British colonial governance. These issues, however, do not irreparably detract from what is ultimately a provocative and challenging work and a timely contribution to the historiography of communalism and of the relationship between political and sacred authority in India. It would be a welcome addition to both advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars in history and religious studies, where students would benefit from its historiographic and conceptual breadth and its potential to spark productive and engaging conversation.

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