

Alexander Rocklin, *The Regulation of Religion and the Making of Hinduism in Colonial Trinidad*

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This study makes significant scholarly contributions in two ways. First, by exploring and interpreting primary historical materials, it presents an in-depth description of the landscape of power in colonial Trinidad, where subaltern South Asian immigrants managed to realign and recreate their religious cosmology, beliefs, and practices. Beginning in the late 1990s, there has been a surge of research on immigrant faiths, including many projects concerning South Asian immigrants, such as Corinne Dempsey's (2006), John Hinnells's (2007), and a series of Raymond Williams's (1996, 2017) international comparative studies on South Asian diasporic religions. In this context, ethnohistorical research on South Asian-derived religions in the Caribbean, such as Rocklin's study, assume new importance in comparative studies, synchronic and diachronic analyses of human mobility, and the concomitant religious realignment, because the region is one of the earliest destinations for mass migration from the Indian subcontinent. Rocklin's historiography of religion will be useful for researchers concerned with the meshing of faith and immigration among South Asian immigrants and diasporas beyond its geographic focus, Trinidad and Tobago.

Second, and equally important, this detailed ethnohistorical case study is valuable for examining an ongoing paradigm shift in the theory and methodology of religious studies known as "critical religion." As with the criticism of "culture" made by some anthropologists, some religious studies scholars have questioned the existential foundation of their discipline—"religion" as an analytical concept and category. They call for deprivileging "religion," defined as a sacrosanct phenomenon, and reconceptualizing it as a historical and power-saturated experience in relation to *unreligious* fields of knowledge, including hermeneutics, gender studies, economics, and anthropology. Rocklin's study responds to this call by placing "religion" at the heart of his analysis, using the following theoretical premise:

Religions are made. Religion-making is a set of collective, performative processes groups enact based on the specific norms for religion . . . naturalized in the particular context in which the category religion has been operationalized. . . . Religions are also unmade. Those practices and groups identified as religion, in moments of insecurity and contest, have been liable to be construed not as religion but rather as some one [*sic*] of religion's others . . . as part of ongoing attempts at social management. (8–9)

The first chapter describes the contexts and background in which South Asian indentured laborers settled, worked, and lived by faith. Rocklin first reminds us that

religion and race framed what Aisha Khan (2004, 24–25) refers to as “articulated discourses”: “The discourse on religion was racializing discourse, part of the work of racial projects . . . and the creation of whiteness.” South Asian immigrants had diverse phenotypic attributes and therefore were not automatically positioned in the established color-graded stratification along a white-black axis. Non-Christian faith and practice, their most visible cultural idiosyncrasy, was racialized to set them in the color-class ordering.

Rocklin also points to the need for a review of a popular assumption that indentured workers were allowed freedom of religious expression as incentive for their migration and servitude: “the liberal ideals of freedom and tolerance had their limits. For ‘liberal’ governments, freedom is never simply unfettered action. For practices to be eligible for freedom or tolerance, they had to be performed within the bounds of colonial norms of religion” (3). This proposal brings to my mind the nineteenth-century derogatory moniker “Coolie Fête” for South Asian observances subjected to regulation as a menace to the colonial religio-moral order. As Rocklin encapsulates, “religious freedom preceded religion for Indian laborers in Trinidad” (3).

The following three chapters explore the term “religion” from the perspective of three performative functions and effects: “converting,” “regulating,” and “outlawing.” First, Rocklin challenges the widely accepted view based on the low official number of “converts” that Christian missions had limited implications for the piety and devotion of South Asian immigrants:

Even if they did not convert, Indians gained secular sensibilities by learning to be “religious.” The incorporation of Christian and colonial norms and practices . . . became the basis for both Indians’ resistance of and collaboration with the colonial regime, other colonial groups, and among themselves, as they struggled to make a new place in the plantation colony. (72)

Rocklin goes on to examine the constant changes in definition and categorization of *Hosay* (the Indo-Caribbean commemoration of Muharram) as a reflection of the designators’ desire to “justify, avert, or condemn the regulation and repression” as well as the celebrants’ reactive readjustment of their expressions, practices, and identities (76–77). Finally, Rocklin elucidates how the practices of South Asian ritual experts engaged in the construction of *obeah*, a complex system of spiritual and healing practices straddling the racial and cultural boundaries that both conform to and react against Christian churches’ persecution and state censorship (110–12, 145–47).

In the last two chapters, Rocklin analyzes how Hindus made religion—what is known today as “Hinduism”—at different levels, both local and global. South Asian settlers brought in a mosaic of belief systems and pantheons, which reflected their diverse backgrounds, including places of origin and social standing, in the homelands. In the early indentured period, the restricted mobility and dialectical barriers led to distinct microcosms around different belief systems and pantheons. Rocklin illustrates how Hinduism as an “imagined unitary translocal social entity (a world religion) emerged out of the complex interactions among British Christian missionaries, colonial scholar administrators, and Indian elites” (156).

In the Caribbean, the colonial Christian mission and migrant religious leaders’ resistance against it established the discourse that “Indian religions” represented the permanent and inassimilable alterity of South Asian settlers despite environmental

changes. The discourse had long set the tone for research on Indo-Caribbean diasporas. This book describes the tensions and contradictions in cultural interaction that defy interpretive control due to the tangled racial politics of culture and reactive pragmatic cultural practices and presents an alternative approach that offers a conceptual escape from conventional dichotomies, such as conforming and resistance and transformation and preservation. In these ways, Rocklin's study has a complementary relationship to earlier studies, such as Aisha Khan (2004) and Keith McNeal (2011).

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