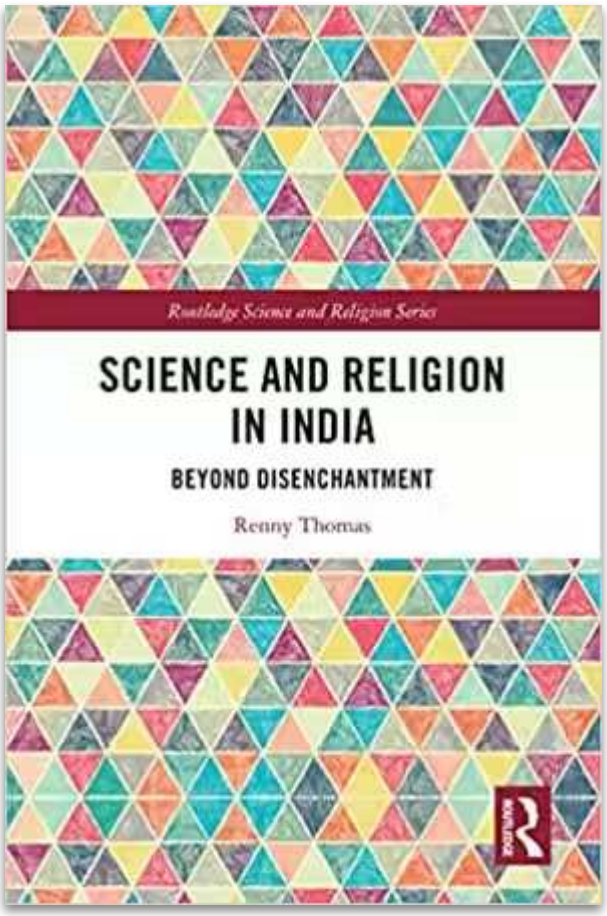


# Science and Religion in India

## Beyond Disenchantment

By: Renny Thomas

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FROM PUBLISHER

REVIEW HIDE -

*Science and Religion in India: Beyond Disenchantment* is an ethnographic study of science and religion in the Indian context, rather than a case study of Indian science. As a result, Renny Thomas, the author, conducted lunchtime interviews with research facility personnel in 2012. The ultimate output of these interviews, a closed-door study of lab personnel' opinions toward science and religion, reveals how they coexist in a conservative atmosphere. Renny's fundamental theory in these interviews was that, while India undertakes high-level scientific research, its legal system is interwoven with Hinduism and a caste structure. He disputes the notion that any conversation of science and religion must focus solely on conflict and complementarity, arguing that such discussions should extend beyond those two binary models.

The first chapter of the book "Science, rationality, and scientific temper in postcolonial India" covers historical religious practices in postcolonial India from a personal perspective. Renny uses former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s thoughts to show how historical and religious activities in post-colonial India shifted. As he points out, Nehru's passion for government support for research contributed to postcolonial India's scientific progress (17). As a result, Nehru advocated for a scientific attitude to modernize Indian minds and dispel illogical ideas (19). Nehru, on the other hand, failed to ask whether the Indian government should fund Ayurveda, a form of natural

medicine (22). As Renny explains more about Nehru's ideas that have been researched by Nehruvian scientists, it becomes clear that Nehru did not reject new scientific areas, but favored problem-oriented research in the Indian context. Renny examines the metaphor of modernity and how the scientific temperament is portrayed as a means of eliminating many of India's traditional beliefs and rituals. According to Renny, the argument that Nehru was neutral to India's history and many customs is untrue, given that he cherry-picked his decisions, such as not funding Ayurveda. Rather, Nehru's perspectives on historical and religious activities should be examined with his later opinions, Nehru himself indicated that he recognizes that science is the contemporary knowledge for assessing all such works, therefore the ancient works should be studied alongside and with a focus on scientific improvements, which makes sense (33).

Renny comments in Chapter 2, "Beyond Disenchantment: Scientists, Laboratories, and Religion," that scientists' promises to disenchant religion with science in Europe and India were unsuccessful. Consequently, Renny suggests that, while theoretically possible, disenchantment may not work in practice. Shifts in the secularization paradigm forced scientists to consider parts of religion differently, such as the need to standardize religion beyond church attendance. This is more evidence that, in order to foster disenchantment, he advises examining contemporary aspects of the religion-science debate outside of the divide between religion and science (75).

The third chapter, "The Making of Scientist-Believers," examines how some atheist or non-believer Indian scientists integrated religion into their work without becoming ritualistic believers (85). This study of varied levels of religiosity or spirituality in science and religion is intriguing because it demonstrates how such atheists or non-believer Indian scientists differ from the western definition of atheists or non-believers. Renny's research reveals a new aspect of the spirituality of Hindu scientists. He argues that Eurocentric perspectives on science and religion are inapplicable in non-Western contexts and that it is pointless to apply the Western paradigm to non-Western societies (104). He demonstrates this by citing Geetha Argade, a particle scientist who practices religion but does not believe in its ceremonial aspects (86).

Renny argues in his fourth chapter, "Being atheistic, being scientific: Scientists as atheists," that the Western understanding of atheism does not apply to Indian atheists, and that as a result, Indian atheists are the perfect examples of

a disenchanted view of religion and society, living according to their caste and religious law (134). He also indicates that although such Indian atheists are critical of the superstitious parts of religious scientists' beliefs and behaviors, they are quite accommodating since they share a similar cultural existence, such as attending other religious festivals and being vegetarians, as well as the same caste identity (126). Renny shows that majority of the scientists he questioned had a cultural practice that stems from the greater ethos of Hinduism or Brahmanism, although the majority of the scientists are Brahmins. He also contends that atheist scientists rejected God stories and other God-related events, but did not refute godlessness. Renny discovers that such atheist scientists are more akin to Sāṃkhya philosophers (125). Further, he discusses the perspectives of Bernard Lightman, David Livingstone, and Terry Eagleton that the idea of atheism should be contextualized as opposed to universalized to appreciate the differences between Indian and Western atheists, particularly about scientific conceptions of religion.

In the fifth chapter, "Caste, Religion, and the Laboratory Life," Renny investigates the impact of caste on scientific study. He discusses the faiths and castes of his interlocutors and devotes a chapter to studying how caste and religious characteristics manifest in lab settings. Renny contends that the deliberate silence of societal and cultural schisms in lab settings is a dangerous condition (138). He claims that the socially privileged Brahmin scientific elite dominates scientific research in India due to the subject-matter expertise. Renny's revelation of the absence of scientists from Dalit, Adivasi, and OBC communities at India's leading scientific and research universities and institutes is an excellent example of the deliberate silencing of non-Brahmin academics.

Renny also makes a crucial point regarding one of the atheist evolutionary biologists in the lab who makes a passing allusion to horror (living in fear, being terrified). Not only has the purposeful suppression affected the professional lives of atheist scientists, but so has their love for music. According to Renny, G. Padmanaban claims that his enthusiasm for music was stifled due to the industry's Brahmanical influence (147). This chapter also discusses other aspects of science-religion connections. Worry, or the so-called “fear culture,” as well as the fact of continuous violence against atheist scientists, are all overlooked socially binding features among India's working scientists of religion and society. Renny continues by claiming that the scientific experience of disenchantment is also an illusion, as atheist scientists

are restricted by the social acceptance of Brahmanical concepts. As Banu Subramanium's narrative indicates, he believes that the Brahmin Scientists use the influence they obtain through the combination of objectivity and value neutrality to preserve their reputation in the workplace (168).

The book's limitations include a failure to address the subtleties of secular politics, site-specific traditional cultural boundaries, astrological superstitions, and the difficulties of conserving India's various culturally ingrained faiths and gods. Another shortcoming is that the ethnographic findings on the topic are based solely on a single lab in India. Renny may have obtained a diversity of perspectives if he had interviewed several scientists from various labs in India, even though it would have been tedious. As a renowned religion, Hinduism is the topic of this book. Although no clause in the Indian constitution requires the state to remain neutral on religious matters, nor does it say that religion should be the basis or reference for state policy in Indian polytheist culture, it is hard to dispute that Hinduness (*Hindutva*) is the dominant political ideology. This is not stressed in the book, most likely because the focus is on individual decisions rather than the social reality of the scientific clash with Indian history, culture, and religion.

The culture and traditions of India, as portrayed in the book, make the relationship between science and religion more complicated. The book suffers from the common flaws of book chapter volumes: the quality of the chapters varies, the overall theme is not covered as systematically as one would expect, and the book lacks a unifying argument, despite the author's attempt in the preface. Even if the book does not fully explain the relationship and disenchantment between science and other religions, I strongly recommend that the interviews and personal reflections will be of interest to those who study Asian religions not only from an ethnographic perspective but also to observe how classical and post-classical Hindu philosophy has influenced modern Indian scientific society.

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