

***Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representation of India, 1721-1893.* By Michael J. Altman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xxii + 175 pp. ISBN: 978-0190654924. \$36.95, hardback.**

Michael Altman's 2017 *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu* is a thoroughly engaging and convincing genealogical history of how Americans came to theoretically construct Indian religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Taking his cue from Said's classic *Orientalism*, Altman provides a clear and focused narrative of a particular orientalizing process. He begins from the earliest documents that mention Indian religion—"heathenism"—and, piece by piece, demonstrates how Americans constructed their understandings of Indian religion. Importantly, Altman is not primarily writing a work on Indian religion itself; as he shows, especially in his fifth chapter, these constructions rarely resonated with Indian religion practitioners themselves. His work, instead, gives insight into American religious cultures. He focuses primarily on New England Protestants, and in so doing, he demonstrates, *a la* Said's classic argument, that American discourse on Indian religion reveals far more about American religion than it does about Indian religion.

The first chapter opens with Cotton Mather's description of Indian religion—significantly, both for Indians and Amerindians—as “heathenism.” For Mather, the true religion is Christianity, and other religions (especially non-Abraham ones) are unenlightened “heathenism.” As sources of Indian culture and religion (of course a contested term itself) appeared in America due to British trade, new understandings of Indian religion began taking shape. One New Englander in particular, Hannah Adams, took on the task of chronicling religions. With sources from dictionaries, missionary reports, and merchant records, Adams placed “Gentoo” (in successive editions, “Hindoo”) religion in her compendium. Notably, however, as a Protestant in late eighteenth century New England, Adams primarily catalogued Hindoo “beliefs and theological disputes” (19) and compared them to Christianity. While primarily contrasted with Christianity, Adams did emphasize aspects of “Hindoo” religion (e.g., tolerance) that she appreciated theologically.

Altman then turns to the fascinating and underexamined Raja Rammohun Roy, a late eighteenth-/early-nineteenth-century Indian who, because of his extensive education in both eastern and western language and philosophy, served as the premier spokesperson for Indian religion in America. Significantly, Roy argued that Indian religion was ideally monotheistic. Americans therefore saw him as a religious reformer akin to Martin Luther. Unitarians especially revered Roy as he paralleled Indian priestly polytheism with trinitarianism. He, like the Unitarians, sought to purify his religion epistemically. Roy was a religious purifier just as the American Protestants purified their own religion of Roman Catholic “heresy.” Missionary reports from this time often conjoined Indian polytheism and Catholicism as one and the same.

Altman's third chapter is a fascinating foray into nineteenth century print culture, namely, textbooks and magazines. These contributed to the construction of the Hindoo other over and against Americanism. Unlike Adams' focus on Indian religious beliefs, these print cultures taught distinct Hindoo and American identities. The former served as a “foil” (51) for the latter. Altman also utilizes a number of images from the print cultures in this chapter. The most striking image, Thomas Nast's famous “The American River Ganges,” (72) especially reveals how Americans used Indian religion as a polemic against Roman Catholicism: bishops whose toothy mitres make them “Catholic crocodiles” (72) emerge from the “Ganges” to attack children standing before a

crumbling US school. Between the children and the crocodiles stands a Protestant pastor defending the children. In essence, constructions of the Indian other reveal more about the US than India. India serves as a kind of battleground and imaginative context for American religious politics and identity-making.

The fourth chapter examines the extent to which Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were inspired by images of India. Altman clearly shows the large extent to which these thinkers relied on Indian texts, representations of India, and even Roy's thought. They imagined Hindoo religion as a means for the purification of American religion and "Brahminism" as the "contemplative and spiritual ancestor of Euro-America" (93). Drawn from the same Indo-European roots, they utilized eastern religion to complement overly-rational western religion.

The fifth chapter—the one in which Indian religious actors most clearly "talk back"—examines Theosophy's appropriation of Indian religion in order to develop a universal ethic, wisdom, and spirituality. The Theosophy Society, led by Madame Blavatsky, even went so far as to formally unite with the Bombay group Arya Samaj. Despite early excitement and agreements between the organizations, in-person meetings revealed the stark differences between the groups, and they bitterly disbanded. This revealed to the Theosophists that Indian religion was as disparate and diverse as Protestantism, and it demonstrated that American appropriation of Indian religion was a far cry from Indian religion itself (despite Roy's atypical westernism).

Altman concludes with a discussion of representations of India at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. The Parliament hoped to universalize religion, but this took place through a Christian lens. Understandably, the Indian attendees balked, rejecting the homogenizing project. The Parliament, in a sense, is seen as the end of a long American project seeking to assimilate other religions into Protestant Christianity. What began with Mather's othering of Indian religion in the hope of conversion to Christianity remained mostly intact a century later. Americans retained the hope that Indians would assimilate to Protestantism, but the images of how this might take place were diverse. Along the way, Indian religion was constructed into its own category, but this category always remained in relation to Christianity. It was a category analogous to Christianity even though Indian people did not understand themselves in this manner.

While Altman's book clearly contributes to Said's legacy, it is also relevant to studies of gender and nationalisms. His work on Hannah Adams reveals that she is worthy of much more attention, and he offers a couple ways in which Adams reveals the gender dynamics of her time. Notably, she provides an atypically positive reading of *sati*, and Altman includes an interesting story where Adams recruits the support of several men to verbally attack a man who is publishing in competition with her. For nationalisms studies, Altman's work on print cultures is helpful for the construction of American national identity. Examining textbooks and magazine images is an especially fruitful aspect of his work, and it is a model that could be used by others.

While Altman's book focuses more on American religious cultures and identity-making, fruitful further research could be done to show how Indians responded to the western construction of their religious (still, perhaps, an improper term) identity. Altman hints at this in Theosophy's engagement with Arya Samaj. Furthermore, after providing a robust picture of Roy earlier in the book, Altman may not actually give him enough credit for his influence on Emerson and Thoreau.

Perhaps his influence is simply one among many Indian representations, but it was striking that Roy's influence was not more significant for Emerson and Thoreau.

Rare among published dissertations, Altman's book is quite readable and engaging for the non-specialist. Because of its breadth, moreover, it will be helpful for people in a variety of specializations: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American religious and cultural history, Hinduism, interreligious studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, and even the literature of Emerson and Thoreau.

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