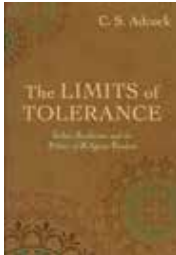


India



C. S. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom*

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THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE gives life to the often vacuous claim that the boundary between the religious and the secular is historically contingent. C. S. Adcock's subject is the Arya Samaj (a Hindu revivalist group founded in the late nineteenth century), and the ways that movement was condemned by turns as too political or too religious in the British colonial period. Ultimately Adcock seeks to illuminate the very discourse of religious tolerance that still has profound political consequences in contemporary India.

Of the many cogent analyses of aspects of the religious/political history of the Arya Samaj in *The Limits of Tolerance*, I only have the space to highlight two here. In the second part of the book, Adcock provides a fascinating illustration of the ways that the European comparative religions discourse became mixed up in British colonial politics in India. Following widespread protests in Punjab in 1907, the Arya Samaj found itself under increased government scrutiny. For several years afterwards the movement took pains to distance itself from politics, and it did this, Adcock shows, particularly by arguing that its mission was religious and not political, with this task proving easier for one of the two factions of the Arya Samaj, the Gurukul Party, than for the other faction, the College Party. Having analyzed the European comparative religions discourse about national as opposed to universal religions, Adcock presents evidence that the College Party envisioned the Arya Samaj as contributing to the former, building up and consolidating the Indian nation, while the Gurukul Party tended to characterize the mission of the Arya Samaj as universal. The Gurukul Party rhetoric, about a religious movement theoretically international in scope, which did not stress the Arya Samaj's ties to the Indian nation, came in handy in the efforts by Arya Samajists to get out from under the cloud of the government's suspicion.

Further changes are rung on the complex relationship between religion and politics in India in the third part of *The Limits of Tolerance*. Here Adcock analyzes Mohandas K. Gandhi's condemnation of the Arya Samaj for "reviling other religions" (144). Adcock places this judgment in the context of the Mahatma's rejection of the Arya Samaj's practice of *śuddhi*. Literally "purification," the *śuddhi* label is used for rituals developed by the Arya Samaj, but also later used by other groups, to convert non-Hindus. During a period when the collaboration of Muslims with Hindus in the noncooperation movement against the British was beginning to unravel in the early 1920s, Gandhi rejected *śuddhi* of Muslims as inconsistent with Hindu tolerance, criticizing the founder of the Arya Samaj for having "made his

Hinduism too narrow” (144). By characterizing *śuddhi* as a religious practice, and condemning it in those terms, Adcock argues that Gandhi ignored a second, and demographically much more important use of *śuddhi*, and that was to raise the status of untouchables and other low caste groups. Insisting that *śuddhi* of untouchables was about changing ritual status, and also about gaining political leverage, Adcock wields the dreaded hyphen, calling *śuddhi* a means of “ritual-political assertion” (127). When Gandhi condemned it as a religious offence, he concentrated on *śuddhi*’s interreligious religious usage, while stripping it of its intercaste political significance. This comes as no surprise, in Adcock’s account, since Gandhi is well known for having resisted untouchable activism at the same time that he decried untouchability itself. Dignity would have to be something bestowed upon Harijans by their high-caste coreligionists, not something that untouchables could seize for themselves. So, by Adcock’s lights, the same logic that served to build a bridge to Muslims, by protecting them from being the object of proselytization, burned a bridge with lower caste people.

Adcock insists that her goal in *The Limits of Tolerance* is not to rehabilitate the reputation of the Arya Samaj nor to save it from the opprobrium into which it was cast by Gandhi and in which it has remained for many later scholars. And she does not offer an alternative for the version of Indian tolerance that her history complicates. Rather, throughout *The Limits of Tolerance*, the author uses visual images to describe her ultimate objective. For example, early on Adcock writes that she “seeks to open to view the forms of political practice that the language of religion conceals” (7, with similar writing about making things visible on 15, 19, 40, 115, 116, and 173). What first caught my attention about these statements was their more or less awkward passive style. However, I also think they disclose something about Adcock’s overall perspective that is important and perhaps something of a problem. At one point in *The Limits of Tolerance*, Adcock summarizes a debate between two recent scholars (one being the grandfather of American Arya Samaj studies, Kenneth Jones) about whether the Arya Samaj’s College Party could be labeled “political,” while the Gurukul Party was, by contrast, “religious.” This debate misses some of the historical nuances, Adcock argues, precisely because of the analysts’ “urge to adjudicate” (86). So her goal in this book is to lay out some of those nuances for the reader to see and apparently to draw her own conclusions. As a practical matter this strategy also has its limitations, I think, since even the decision about what historical problems beg to be nuanced depends largely on the conclusions to which the process is understood to lead.

That being said, *The Limits of Tolerance* is the first important new book about the Arya Samaj to appear in more than fifteen years. Adcock does a good job of relating the history of that relatively influential organization to very consequential questions about the role of religion in Indian politics, not only in the colonial era, but down to the present—one of the great problems with which India continues to struggle.

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