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THE SUBALTERN
NUMEN: MAKING
HISTORY IN THE NAME
OF GOD

Religiosity was, by all accounts, central to the [Santal] *hool* (rebellion). The notion of power which inspired it . . . [was] explicitly religious in character. It was not that power was a content wrapped up in a form external to it called religion. . . . It is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as religious consciousness. (RANAJIT GUHA)¹

For Germany . . . the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism. (KARL MARX)²

The first volume of the Subaltern Studies series appeared in 1982, edited by Ranajit Guha and published by Oxford University Press in Delhi, India.

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¹ Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 46, with my gloss of *hool* as "rebellion," which may more correctly be translated as "sudden attack." This essay originally appeared in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983). The latter volume is cited in later references to the essay.

² From the introduction to Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844), in *Karl Marx: A Reader*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 301.

The scholars who formed the core of the Subaltern Studies Collective—and who still largely constitute its central force³—diagnosed the historiography of India since Independence in 1947 as an unsuccessful project, representing a “failure of the nation to come into its own,” to expand beyond explorations of the past centered on the activities and concerns of elites.⁴ For over twenty years, the Collective has approached a rectification of this failure by examining India’s past through the key site of “the subaltern.” The term, following Antonio Gramsci, is used by the Collective in diverse ways; it ranges from simply denoting “peasant” to complexly indicating subjugation under a particular dominant social, political, or discursive structure, from the local to the state-national or global and from the economic and physical to the epistemological. In some essays within the pages of the series, and especially in monographs and articles by principal members of the Collective (most notably, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Gyan Prakash), one may notice the “supple subaltern” at work, a key, though nebulous, site of concurrence, in a decidedly subjective mode, to coercive formations of modernity such as “the nation,” “the state,” “science,” or “history.” Through all these uses of the idea of the subaltern, from the specific to the modular, from the practical to the ideological, the Collective has found religion activated in the name of subaltern subjectivity.

Thinking about Subaltern Studies and the study of religion in the same essay may seem to many a strange combination. The two rarely have been seen conversing in public. To my knowledge, no scholar situated within the professional field of religious studies has published in any volume of Subaltern Studies, and within its pages it is unusual to see reference made to the work of scholars of Indian religion or any other variety of religious phenomenon.⁵ Likewise, work by the members of the Collective is a rare sight on a religious studies syllabus or in the bibliography of a religious studies monograph. Yet there has always seemed to be an unwarranted antagonism between the two intellectual worlds. The study of Indian religious life has often entered upon those social and cultural spheres that would be considered “subaltern”—that is, the religious prac-

³ These scholars include Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, and Gyanendra Pandey.

⁴ Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 7.

⁵ This is made even more peculiar when one observes the truly interdisciplinary character of the series’s contributors. Though most contributors are historians, the roster prominently includes political scientists and literary critics, as well as anthropologists, economists, and sociologists; area, legal, gender, and cultural studies scholars; and even a computer software engineer (R. Srivatsan).

tices of so-called low castes and classes, outcastes and women, or simply the marginalized and unrepresented in history, public culture, and economic spheres—though these studies, unlike the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective, rarely engage the question of subaltern subjectivity in a substantive way. Conversely, the idea that religious sentiment and the prospect of divine intervention condition to a great degree “subaltern consciousness” is cast throughout the work of those associated with Subaltern Studies, as the epigraph above from founder Ranajit Guha suggests. Yet what constitutes the “religious” in these contexts remains unexplored. In other words, where the scholar of Indian religions overlooks the nature of the subaltern subject, the Subaltern Studies scholar bypasses an exploration of the subjectivity of religion.

This essay explores one-half of the dialectic between the study of religion and the study of the subaltern; that is, the way in which Subaltern Studies has made religion central to its understanding of “peasant consciousness” and the motivation for “counterinsurgency.”⁶ The mirror image of this view—the way that the study of Indian religious history has articulated an experience of the “subaltern”—is a project for another day. I will begin by investigating the nature of “religion” in the work of Subaltern Studies. Though Subaltern Studies arose to uncover and author narratives that countered elite historiography, the Collective as a whole and certainly individual monographs seem to have turned their attention to the very nature of historical thought in India. The claim seems to be that it represents an essential “subaltern” status in the context of Euro-American historiography. This shifts the Collective’s empirical data from the realm of the “peasant” to that of the middle class and the general Indian public sphere. One might notice that the first decade of the Collective’s scholarly output appeared dominated by historians, political scientists, and economists, while the second decade displayed a higher number of literary critics, cultural anthropologists, and gender studies scholars. Similarly, the first decade prominently featured the keywords “peasant,” “agrarian,” and “labor” in articles, while the following decade saw an increase in “mentality,” “imaginary,” and “power.” I point this out not as a criticism

⁶ As critics have noted, the project of Subaltern Studies appears to be to conduct two activities, the articulation of “histories from below” in what Spivak has termed a practice of “strategic essentialism” and the theorization of “subaltern” as a way of thinking about oppression and hegemony in general. It is in the context of the former, primarily, that members of the Subaltern Studies Collective draw upon religion, and here is where I will focus this article. See Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1988): 189–222; Jim Masselos, “The Dis/appearance of Subalterns: A Reading of a Decade of Subaltern Studies,” *South Asia* 15, no. 1 (1992): 105–25.

of the Collective—though other scholars have referred to this as a “disappearance” or a “decline” of the subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*⁷—but rather as a strength of the endeavor to expand the scope of critique, an expansion that emphasized the concept of religion from the first volume in 1982 to the most recent in 2005.

Throughout this body of work, religion becomes the horizon over which “insurgency” arises, whether it is the insurgency of the subaltern peasant in revolt or the insurgency of the *Subaltern Studies* historian challenging the modern historiographic status quo, often with recourse to the “private” or “secret” realm of culture that provides an alternative history and mode of reason.⁸ Religion is regularly definitive of this “secret” realm and is often construed as both the basic principle of subaltern insurgency and the explanation for that insurgency. Here, I will argue that the idea of religious consciousness in the work of those associated with *Subaltern Studies* represents a liminal state in reasoning about agency—the vanishing point of “rational” comprehension. We will see how the status of religion in *Subaltern Studies* historiography holds an ambivalent place within the studies of the Collective and note that religion appears foundational, though largely untheorized, in the career of this brilliant historiographic project.

I will suggest that *Subaltern Studies* is hindered in theorizing about religion as a site for historical agency by an antagonistic dialectic in modern historiography between religion and history. Religion, as a sphere of experience or of subjectivity (and hence its usefulness to studies of subjectivity, such as the *Subaltern Studies* project), makes no necessary references to politics, economics, culture, or society to explain its activities, and this poses a challenge to the modern historical practice of explaining the past. However, the notion of religion representing a mode of explanation outside the purview of rationality is a well-known territory in the study of religion in general, an area marked off as “nonrational” by Rudolph Otto and termed “the numinous.”⁹ The site of the numinous, or the numen itself, is meant to foreclose the possibility of explanation and allow only for representation and description. It suggests that some actions are beyond words or, at least, beyond the vocabulary of modern historiography. Here the study of religion and that of *Subaltern Studies* share a crucial problem: how can the numinous be historically understood as a site of agency?

⁷ See the edited volume by David Ludden, *Reading Subaltern Studies* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), for several essays that make this point, especially those by Sumit Sarkar, Jim Masselos, and Rosalind O’Hanlon.

⁸ See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁹ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), trans. J. W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

THE SUBALTERN AND RELIGION

Members of the Collective have taken as their central problematic the way in which elite historiographers (of either Indian or colonial persuasion) sought to compose histories for India that took the shape and followed the teleologies of the modern Western practice and literary genre of history. Against the weave of this elite historiography, the Subaltern Studies Collective endeavors to expose “unwritten” and “unspoken” histories of the subaltern, expressed through action, resistance, and belief. Its scholars propose a new history of the Indian nation, tied to a novel historiography, one that calls upon innovative sources and sites, reading them in unique ways, while subverting the modern Western genre in part but never as a whole. Drawing as its members do on Marx, Gramsci, E. P. Thompson, and Michel Foucault, among many other thinkers, the Subaltern Studies Collective is comfortably situated within the modern discipline of history as a kind of nest of critique.

Given that the Collective’s thesis inherently opposes the master narrative of “History,” many of the principal scholars of Subaltern Studies have shifted their analysis to how the category of “subaltern” allows us to think through various issues, making the term more supple in its use. On observing this shift, critics accuse the Collective of abandoning what Spivak has referred to as a “strategic essentialism,” a positive historiography of the subaltern, the creation of a new archive.¹⁰ The interplay of Gramscian Marxism and, in later work, postmodern and postcolonial theory has always been present in the Subaltern Collective’s writings, though one may detect a greater emphasis on the latter over the last decade, particularly in the monographs published by many of the Collective’s strongest voices, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyan Prakash. Yet these works should still be read alongside those of Partha Chatterjee and Ranajit Guha, who I believe remain quite close to the “strategic essentialism” of that earlier period.

What interests us here is not this shift between substantiating the history of the subaltern empirically and theorizing the subaltern in supple ways—the two require each other symbiotically—but the consistent place held by the modern concept of religion throughout the writing of members of the Collective. In a recent book, a prominent scholar of South Asian culture contended that the Subaltern Collective “remains singularly incapable of dealing with religious belief.”¹¹ This critique addresses, I think

¹⁰ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 314. See also a critique of the politics of this “strategic essentialism” and an abandonment of the history of the subaltern by Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Vinay Lal, *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 20.

rightly, the general lack of engagement in the Collective's work with the instrumental use of religion to cast Hinduism as a nationalist project by the Hindu Right—what Dipesh Chakrabarty refers to as the “secular-calculative” use of religion.¹² Yet one consistent theme in the writing of the Collective is the concept of religion and its relationship to articulations of the “peasant” and of the “elite.” For the Subalterns, religion is, at least in part, definitive of “peasant consciousness,” as Guha suggested in the epigraph above. Drawn from his essay, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” this unequivocal yoking of religion to peasant consciousness appeared in the second publication in the Collective's series, articulated very early in the Collective's intellectual venture.

The importance of religion is perhaps more evident in the treatment the term receives by one of the key members of the Collective, Partha Chatterjee, in the first publication in the Subaltern Studies series in 1982. Of all the Collective's members, Chatterjee has sustained the longest, most productive, and most insightful engagement with religious discourse. In “Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926–1935,” Chatterjee demonstrates how religion deeply influenced communal identification in agrarian contexts and appeared both as a weapon of dominance wielded by a Hindu majority under a secularist banner and a tool of resistance uniting Muslim peasants.¹³ In his essay “Caste and Subaltern Consciousness,” Chatterjee devotes considerable time to drawing from Gramsci a set of theoretical concepts that can help the Subaltern Studies project deal with religion, which he considers a “constitutive force in subaltern consciousness” and interlaced with caste.¹⁴ Relying on Gramsci's comments on philosophy, “common sense,” and religion (which, it should be noted, Gramsci sees almost exclusively through the history of the Roman Catholic Church), Chatterjee understands religion to be a common fabric shared by elite and subaltern alike but restructured, even inverted, by the subaltern as a means of marking the intention of insurgency.¹⁵ The subaltern formation of religion, set in opposition to religion's dominant form, is an example of (quoting Gramsci) “that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude.”¹⁶

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14. The Collective seems to have begun to address this criticism. See, e.g., Satish Deshpande's essay, “Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: The Nation-Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth-Century India,” in *Subaltern Studies XI*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 167–211; as well as S. Mayaram, M. S. S. Pandian, and Ajay Skaria, eds., *Subaltern Studies XII* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005).

¹³ See Partha Chatterjee, “Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926–1935,” in Guha, *Subaltern Studies I*, 9–38.

¹⁴ Partha Chatterjee, “Caste and Subaltern Consciousness,” in *Subaltern Studies VI*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 169.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Chatterjee provides at this early stage of the Collective's work a rather startling summary of the history of religions in general, which he understands to consist of "two opposed tendencies—one the attempt to articulate a universal code for society as a whole, and the other the struggle by the subordinate to resist the dominating implications of this code."¹⁷ What is surprising is how easily one might read this statement as an elite perspective of religious history, one that posits the subaltern's "common sense" and religious conviction as always a negative reaction to dominant religious forms, and not germane to a subaltern subject him- or herself. To paraphrase the title of one of Chatterjee's monographs, this suggests that subaltern religion is always derivative, inversely, of elite religion.¹⁸ That Chatterjee reads religious history along the lines of this dialectic is also evident from a later essay that examines the life and recorded discourses of the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna (1836–86) in relation to the construction of a middle-class cultural identity in Bengal.¹⁹ Here we have Chatterjee's influential equation of the "private" and "inner" with the "secret history" of India, a history in which religion deeply influenced resistance to "the most universalist justificatory resources produced by post-Enlightenment rationalist discourse," which is to say, the discourse of European colonialism.²⁰

Indeed, the figure of Ramakrishna appears regularly in the work of a handful of the Collective's members, especially in essays and monographs by Sumit Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee, Gyan Prakash, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. In these contexts, Ramakrishna is often cast as a counterpoint to capitalist orders of time and space, a sovereign space of "religion" in a world increasingly organized by principles of the secular accumulation of wealth and practices of labor. In any case, Chatterjee finds religion to be vital to the "secret history" of Indian nationalism, and his contributions to the Subaltern Studies series consistently invoke religion in the context of both "peasant community" and "subaltern consciousness," as well as within the Bengali middle class.²¹ Yet Chatterjee is proposing something more complex than merely a mapping of religion onto class struggle. He

¹⁷ Ibid., 174.

¹⁸ I am referring to Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (1986; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Here, too, religion is present, but in a far less systematized way than in Chatterjee's later work.

¹⁹ Partha Chatterjee, "A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class," in *Subaltern Studies VII*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandey (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40–68.

²⁰ Ibid., 68. The idea of the "secret history" of India is much evident in Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, especially in the final chapter.

²¹ See Partha Chatterjee's other essays in the series' volumes, such as "Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society," in *Subaltern Studies III*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 153–95, and "Claims on the Past: The Genealogy of Modern Historiography in Bengal," in *Subaltern Studies VIII*, ed. David Arnold and David Hardiman (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1–49.

is suggesting that religion is the “code” of dominance and subordination, not just its sign; religion is the medium through which dominance is enacted and resisted.

Many other examples of an engagement with religion can be found in volumes of the *Collective* by various authors. I would group these investigations of religion into three general categories: (1) religion as definitive of subaltern consciousness; (2) religion as the “private” or “secret” sphere of the middle class under colonial rule, following Chatterjee, which is often also construed as antithetical to hallmarks of modernity, science, and reason in the service of colonialism; and (3) religion as a sociopolitical formation, usually coercive and promoted in relation to either Gandhi, the Hindu Right, or the politicization of the Hindu-Muslim axis in India.

In the first category we might include the work of Ranajit Guha, as noted above, or that of David Arnold, who, in the first *Subaltern* publication, situates myth and religion at the center of the motivation of subalterns, providing a means of articulating action.²² In a later piece, Arnold sees religious cosmologies of responsibility (“dharma”) associated with peasant understandings of famine.²³ David Hardiman likewise observes how religious practice provided a position in the religio-economic sphere for *adivasis* (“original inhabitants”),²⁴ while Saurabh Dube traces religion as “myth” and “symbol” in the Satnampanth of northern India.²⁵ We might also look to essays by Tanika Sarkar on the charismatic tribal leader Jitu Santal,²⁶ or the brilliant investigation of religion, history, and place in Tamil Nadu by Sundar Kaali.²⁷

In the second category, we can consider most of the work of Partha Chatterjee that engages religion,²⁸ as well as essays by Sumit Sarkar, such as his reading of the “Kalki Avatar” scandal in early twentieth-century Bengal and its reception in the Bengali public sphere.²⁹ Sarkar, who has

²² David Arnold, “Rebellious Hillmen: The Gudem-Rampa Risings,” in Guha, *Subaltern Studies I*, 88–142.

²³ David Arnold, “Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action: Madras, 1876–1878,” in Guha, *Subaltern Studies III*, 62–115.

²⁴ David Hardiman, “Adivas: Assertion in South Gujarat: The Devi Movement of 1922–1923,” in Guha, *Subaltern Studies III*, 196–230.

²⁵ Saurabh Dube, “Myths, Symbols and Community: Satnampanth of Chhattisgarh,” in Chatterjee and Pandey, *Subaltern Studies VII*, 121–58.

²⁶ Tanika Sarkar, “Jiru Santal’s Movement in Malda, 1924–1932: A Study in Tribal Protest,” in *Subaltern Studies IV*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 136–64.

²⁷ Sundar Kaali, “Spatializing History: Subaltern Carnivalizations of Space in Tiruppuvanam, Tamil Nadu,” in *Subaltern Studies X*, ed. Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash, and Susie Tharu (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 126–69.

²⁸ Particularly Chatterjee’s multiple investigations of Ramakrishna, of which I would highlight Chatterjee, “A Religion of Urban Domesticity,” 40–68, as well as his monograph *The Nation and Its Fragments*.

²⁹ Sumit Sarkar, “The Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal,” in Guha, *Subaltern Studies VI*, 1–53; see also Sarkar, “The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-co-operation, c. 1905–22,” in Guha, *Subaltern Studies III*, 271–320, esp. 308–17.

subsequently left the Collective, has a somewhat ambivalent view of religion. At times he suggests that religion appears crucial to understanding “subaltern militancy,” as in an essay in the third *Subaltern Studies* volume where he discusses Gandhian civil protest in Bengal.³⁰ Yet his understanding of religion seems pejorative at times as well. In lieu of “religion” he invokes “magico-religious” practices and summons Marx’s comments on religion—where we find the infamous “opium” metaphor—found in the introduction to *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1843–44).³¹ Sarkar understands subaltern militancy that invokes religion to be uninformed by a “disenchantment with the world” that is the product of Western Enlightenment.³² Thus, Sarkar also appears to suggest a previous “enchanted” vision, one lacking a rational sense of the real, which is replaced by the magical. In a publication outside the scope of the Collective’s series, Sarkar finds that religion provides a means of expression and social organization but also quells action with a narrative of subordination, particularly in relation to bhakti, a thought system, he contends, that presents subalterns with a logic for bearing their oppressive conditions.³³ On the contrary, Gyan Prakash, as we will see below, situates religion in a counterpoise to science and, as such, in a dialectic of resistance, not of subordination (but, unlike Sarkar, Prakash is not examining labor and capital here).³⁴ We might also include the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, both in the pages of the series and in other monographs,³⁵ where, as we will also see below, he grapples with the possibilities and limitations of “religion” as an epistemological category in the context of historiography.³⁶

Examples of the political use of religion, the third mode I have outlined, might include Gyan Pandey’s brilliant essay “Rallying Round the Cow,” in the second *Subaltern Studies* volume, where he reads the discourse of communalist violence between Hindus and Muslims in the Bhojपुरi area of northern India in the 1890s and 1910s.³⁷ Likewise, his

³⁰ S. Sarkar, “The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy,” 309.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 308, 310. Marx’s study is also sometimes entitled “Contributions to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law,” the attribution given by S. Sarkar in his article. See the translation by Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Malley of Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

³² S. Sarkar, “The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy,” 308.

³³ See Sumit Sarkar, “Social History: Predicaments and Possibilities,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, nos. 25–26 (June 22–29, 1985): 1081–86.

³⁴ Gyan Prakash, “Science between the Lines,” in *Subaltern Studies IX*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also Prakash’s monograph *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

³⁵ See, e.g., Chakrabarty, “The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British India,” in Arnold and Hardiman, *Subaltern Studies VIII*, 50–88.

³⁶ In particular, see Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*, esp. chap. 4; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), esp. chaps. 2 and 6.

³⁷ Gyan Pandey, “Rallying Round the Cow,” in Guha, *Subaltern Studies II*, 60–129.

essay “The Prose of Otherness” observes the description, often in religious terms, of the “fanatics” who are the antithesis of the modern, rational citizen.³⁸ Consider also Shahid Amin’s study of how Gandhi became a divine, miraculous figure in Gorakhpur, where Amin teases out the implications of Gandhi’s hagiographical character.³⁹ In addition, we might observe Ishita Banerjee Dube’s compelling study of religious reification and jurisprudence in Orissa,⁴⁰ as well as Shail Mayaram’s study of partition violence in Mewat.⁴¹ Satish Deshpande and, to a lesser extent, Qadri Ismail, directly engage religion and nationalism in India and Sri Lanka, respectively.⁴² Ranajit Guha emphasizes the coercive force of religion (echoing Gramsci) in several essays, such as “Chandra’s Death” and “Discipline and Mobilize.”⁴³ Thus, it should be apparent that religion holds a significant place in the work of the Subaltern Collective, central to both mentalities and ways of remembering. Its centrality to understanding “subaltern consciousness” in multiple conditions is rarely challenged.⁴⁴

We can press this exploration further by examining a recent “position statement” by Gyan Prakash, published outside the pages of the Subaltern Studies series but meant perhaps to speak for some of the essential principles of the Collective’s work. Exploring the paradoxical space of “Indian” or “subaltern” historiography, Prakash points toward the historiographic possibilities in first recognizing the essential impossibility of writing histories that “recover” the subaltern, necessarily a perspective with no fixed referent. Instead, he offers in its place the articulation of a shifting relationship to colonial and postcolonial authority, a critique constantly voiced from within the field of power.⁴⁵ This can be read as a challenge

³⁸ Gyan Pandey, “The Prose of Otherness,” in Arnold and Hardiman, *Subaltern Studies VIII*, 188–221.

³⁹ Shahid Amin, “Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–1922,” in Guha, *Subaltern Studies III*, 1–71.

⁴⁰ Ishita Banerjee Dube, “Taming Traditions: Legalities and Histories in Twentieth-Century Orissa,” in Bhadra, Prakash, and Tharu, *Subaltern Studies X*, 98–125.

⁴¹ Shail Mayaram, “Speech, Silence, and the Making of Partition Violence in Mewat,” in Amin and Chakrabarty, *Subaltern Studies IX*, 126–64. Religion is more fully explored in Mayaram’s monograph, *Against History, Against State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁴² Deshpande, “Hegemonic Spatial Strategies”; Qadri Ismail, “Constituting Nation, Contesting Nationalism: The Southern Tamil (Woman) and Separatist Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka,” in Chatterjee and Jeganathan, *Subaltern Studies XI*, 212–82.

⁴³ Ranajit Guha, “Chandra’s Death,” in *Subaltern Studies X*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135–65, and “Discipline and Mobilize,” in Chatterjee and Pandey, *Subaltern Studies VII*, 69–120.

⁴⁴ I have not yet thoroughly read the most recent volume published in the Subaltern Studies series, but its subtitle—“Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History”—suggests a central engagement with religion in line with the third category I have proposed here (Mayaram, Pandian, and Skaria, *Subaltern Studies XII*). See also Shahid Amin, *On Representing the Muslim*, SARAI Reader 04: Crisis/Media (Delhi: SARAI, 2004), 93–97.

⁴⁵ Gyan Prakash, “Position Paper: The Impossibility of Subaltern History,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 2 (2000): 293.

to “strategic essentialism” in that Prakash suggests we enact a “post-foundational” kind of history, one that balances a desire to investigate and present positive knowledge with skepticism about the power inequities and cultural misalignments that characterize the colonial and postcolonial world.⁴⁶ In the case of India, how might this “post-foundational” history be formed? How do we make the impossible possible?

Prakash’s position statement, composed in 2000, refigures the subaltern as an internal critique of power within modern historiography but one that is regularly managed by being discursively externalized. In the process of this important intervention, the essay provides a cogent treatment of how religion is a site for the management of a culture’s relationship to modernity and “Western reason,”⁴⁷ while at the same time constituting a locus of resistance against hegemony. The genealogy for this idea is generated within a postcolonial understanding of the ways “indigenous” religious practices can challenge, subvert, and emend the hegemony of colonial modernity; in other words, this is not a study of religion in the service of the colonial (or other) state but of religion as a mode of resistance to the state’s hegemonic coercion.

Prakash’s discussion involves the ways in which the religious reformist agenda of late colonialism in India sought to excise “superstition,” of which Puranic or “mythic” literature was exemplary, from “a rational religion of the nation,” epitomized by Vedic Hinduism in reformist thought.⁴⁸ Prakash finds in the failure of this project “the possibility of overcoming the imperative to arrange culture and power according to the demands of Hinduism as a rational religion of the nation, and to construe religion according to the demands of western reason.”⁴⁹ He astutely argues that Western reason seeks a certain kind of religion, one conforming to a rational understanding of this anthropological and juridical category as it has grown within Western fields of knowledge (the same seedbed from which sprang the Western academic notion of history, it might be added). However, religion, in its multiple and sometimes nonrational formulations, resists a single character, in Prakash’s view. What is perhaps most interesting for our purposes is that such a significant position statement on the possibilities of writing subaltern histories should take religion as its primary subject, a further indication of the connection between history and religion in discussions of subaltern subjectivity.

⁴⁶ Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 2 (1990): 383–408.

⁴⁷ Prakash, “Position Paper,” 293.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

While discussing the work of his colleague Partha Chatterjee, Prakash notes that Chatterjee delineates the “imagination of the nation” as a space constituting an “inner sphere, a ‘spiritual’ domain.”⁵⁰ Prakash’s article on “impossibility” carries perhaps paradoxical signs of a religious turn, rather than a linguistic one, within a group of scholars who have had a profound impact on the historiography of South Asia and postcolonial studies. Or perhaps “turn” is not correct since, as we have seen, from the very first articulations of the project of Subaltern Studies, Guha has invoked the religious as a preeminent site of the “prose of counter-insurgency.” This seems to propose a Marxist analysis that takes seriously the spiritual attributions of action made by its subjects, a point of view that is both apparent, and problematic, in the work of Guha, the Collective’s key figure.

In the second Subaltern Studies publication, released in 1983, we find Guha’s engagement with the prose of counterinsurgency, in an article masterful for its investigation of how the “will and reason” of the peasant rebel might constitute the practice of rebellion.⁵¹ So deeply invested in an explanation of how religion informs the autonomous rationale of subaltern insurgent action, this article would be at home in religious studies courses.⁵² The preface by Guha to *Subaltern Studies II* makes plain that the project of Subaltern Studies is to reveal “all aspects of the subaltern condition, material as well as spiritual.”⁵³ Discussing the Santal uprising of 1855–56 in Bengal, Guha reads colonial accounts against their grain to discover that insurgency is not outside peasant consciousness.⁵⁴ He finds “religiosity” at the center of this insurgency. Thus, in the context of the Santal uprising, religious sentiment and insurgency are one and the same according to Guha. Though Guha does not state this explicitly, it appears as if religion replaces class consciousness in his evaluation of the mentality of the insurgents.

Yet there is irony in Guha’s valorization of religion as central to conscious action, for we also read in the first paragraph of this essay that religion appears to mean something else when practiced by the elite—where

⁵⁰ Prakash, *Another Reason*, 202.

⁵¹ Guha, “Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” 2.

⁵² As an example of the antagonism between religious studies and Subaltern Studies: we can see how Chakrabarty, in the introduction to his *Provincializing Europe*, explains why he does not use the sociology of religion in his treatment of religious phenomena: “I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human, and think from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits” (16). In other words, he rejects sociological explanations for religious belief as reductive and probably, in some cases, pathological, yet his statement here would be lauded by many historians of South Asian religions. Indeed, the idea that “being human involves . . . being with gods and spirits” could serve as a motto to be engraved on the doors of many religious studies departments in America.

⁵³ Guha, preface to *Subaltern Studies II*.

⁵⁴ Guha, “Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” 3.

it is a tool of instrumental dominance. Here religion has nothing to do with subaltern consciousness but rather “subalternity was . . . sanctified by religion,” which is to say that religion became the moral explanation for oppression of non elites by elites.⁵⁵ We must understand that Guha sees religion, much as Gramsci did, as a shared fabric that serves whoever commands it in the name of action. Here is a good example of the way in which religion for the Collective is paradoxical. If subaltern consciousness is regularly expressed through religion yet religion reinforces the oppression of the subaltern (by “sanctifying” their degraded status), then it becomes problematic to read the expression of religion as an instantiation of insurgency or rebellion. On the contrary, when religion is invoked, subaltern status is reinforced. The paradox seems to form a core dilemma for the subalterns that operates, for the most part, under the surface, allowing much more explicit subjects of reasoning that surround the key terms of “subaltern” and “history” and thus sublimating the question of when and how religion is either oppressive or liberative.

Dipesh Chakrabarty recalls Guha’s study, and others by him, in *Provincializing Europe* (2000). Chakrabarty notes that Guha, in the work of making “the subaltern the sovereign subject of history . . . tak[ing] their experiences and thought seriously,” found “a phenomenon common in the lives of the peasants: the agency of supernatural beings.”⁵⁶ Following Guha’s critique of Hobsbawm’s designation of peasants as “pre-political,” Chakrabarty reiterates from Guha that the “peasant-but-modern” sphere is one that integrates the supernatural with the machinations of politics, a field of power available to subalterns that reflects access to networks and worldviews through which they operate.⁵⁷ This alignment of subaltern consciousness with the material of religion intrudes on the authorized space of elite historiography. Chakrabarty disapprovingly writes, “Historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody’s belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will be [to] go against the rules of evidence that give historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past.”⁵⁸

For Chakrabarty, histories written through the logic of religious sentiment constitute “subaltern pasts, pasts that cannot ever enter academic history as belonging to the historian’s own position” because a modern historian, “unlike the Santal, cannot invoke the supernatural in explaining/describing an event.”⁵⁹ Throughout the engagement with religion found

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁶ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 102–3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 105–6. Invoking the supernatural to explain history is ironically what Hegel does in *The Philosophy of History*—ironically because Hegel is the starting point for many post-colonial critiques of the “people without history” thesis.

in the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective, we do not see any assertion that the subaltern subjects investigated therein compose their own “histories,” by which I mean they do not produce a discourse that would be recognized within the field of modern historical study. But we do see that they explain history in their own way, often in relation to religion. This, as I will note below, is the heart of that very modern historiography that would not allow a historian to ascribe agency to the supernatural. What precludes the modern historian from making the supernatural a key to historical explanation?

PROVINCIALIZING HISTORIOGRAPHY

Part of the problem lies in the procolonial Orientalist conceit that India is among those “people without history” first articulated by G. W. F. Hegel. Anyone familiar with the rumpus in the Indo-Euro-American scholarly continuum over the history of history in South Asia would not be surprised to know that two books published within the last three years, both by acclaimed scholars, present diametrically opposed views of the presence and possibility of historical discourse in India. We might quickly survey this debate as expressed in these two recent publications in order to get a sense of the problem in general.

Vinay Lal, writing a book on the political production and consumption of scholarly history in modern India and its deployment in the service of “religious nationalism,” states that “ahistoricism is one of the defining features of Indian civilization” and adds that “certainly it is not too much to say that Indians were supremely indifferent to historical productions.”⁶⁰ Lal sees “historical thinking” emerge only with the introduction of Islam to the subcontinent, and he finds its apotheosis in the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective, whom he yet criticizes for searching out “history from below” by recourse to the thoughts and practices of elite Euro-American critics of historiography.⁶¹ However, Lal does not explore nonelite articulations of the past. The sites of Lal’s study are elite literary worlds, Sanskrit compositions, the historiography of colonialism and Indian nationalism, and contemporary scholarship—in short, the upper levels of the Indian public sphere. Lal suggests that “historical consciousness” was not known in India before the advent of Islam or colonialism. His bold statement on the possibility of historiography in “premodern” India should be contextualized: Lal’s interest is in history as a modern genre invested in science and state power, not in refiguring the very concept of what constitutes

⁶⁰ Lal, *History of History*, 14.

⁶¹ Lal, of course, is not alone in this critique; see the essays by Jim Masselos (“The Disappearance of Subalterns”), and Sumit Sarkar (“The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies”) that are reprinted in Ludden, *Reading Subaltern Studies*, 187–211 and 400–429, respectively.

historical inquiry outside the venues of modernity. In this context, Lal is simply stating the obvious, nothing more controversial than noting that Indians did not make films until the technology was invented in Europe and imported to India. Yet it seems at times that there is some historiography, however unrecognizable as such, lurking around the edges of the elite sphere Lal engages. He notes that Indians rejected “history” as a useful discourse and replaced what might have been historiography with a “willful amnesia,” which allowed Indians to forget that “their country had repeatedly been subjected to the rule of foreigners.”⁶² Lal suggests that if history is connected to consistent political victory, then regular political defeat would require a principled forgetfulness. Therefore, a lack of history provides a freedom of action, in Lal’s view. Although some might discount Lal’s argument as taking too seriously the dictum that “history is written by the victors,” he nevertheless proposes a unique possibility. What Lal is suggesting is the existence of a historiographic capability in premodern India subverted by failure; in other words, history was present, just subjugated so as to oppress the voice of the defeated. As he writes, “The acceptance of history is nothing but the narrowing of man’s options, the submission of a people to the reigning ideas of the time, and the renunciation of multiple eschatologies for the exceedingly dubious benefit of being part of the global destiny of the human race.”⁶³ Lal proposes here a kind of provincialization of modern historiography. Lal places history in the position of the subaltern and suggests that what subaltern subjects really desire are “multiple eschatologies,” a phrase I would replace with “religions.” I cannot help but recall here the Santals’ rejection, as rehearsed by Guha, of the usual features of a material historiography—economics, class, social forces, and so forth—for the freedom to express the past as divine intervention, the freedom to be free from history.⁶⁴

On the other side of the fray, V. Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam jointly wrote an extraordinary monograph on historical “texture” in narratives from South India composed between 1600 and 1800. These authors, like Lal, are unequivocal. They find “no dearth of historians in South India during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—perhaps earlier as well, for not all records have survived.”⁶⁵ They explore multiple narrative sites in order to “demonstrate that the assertion [that] ‘History is a post-Renaissance Western genre’ . . . can only be sustained by willfully ignoring a vast body of materials available

⁶² Lal, *History of History*, 58–59.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁴ Guha, “Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” 34.

⁶⁵ V. Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* (New York: Other Press, 2003), 252.

from South Asia.”⁶⁶ Similar to the work of Romila Thapar in the search for “embedded” history, their book follows the trace of historical narrative not as a genre but as a “texture” within various kinds of narratives, mostly dealing with heroic stories of South Indian figures.⁶⁷ The authors use the term “mnemo-history,” following Jan Assmann, a kind of “history of memory” that I read as a historicization of sites of memory (or *lieux de mémoire*, as Pierre Nora has put it).⁶⁸ A mnemo-history is therefore something like a history of an archive, where the archive is human memory and its sites. Unlike Lal’s, their subject matter is not drawn from elite narratives; it is extracted from more diverse sources, ranging among several languages, time periods, and substantially engaging with oral narratives. They pluck stories from folklore, published work, colonial ethnography, and, most importantly, from what they call “*karanam* culture,” the world of the professional record keeper of South Indian villages and towns from the sixteenth century onward, whose job it was not just to keep records but to represent the state of a minor polity, to write its economic and political history for an imperial audience.⁶⁹ History, Rao and his colleagues argue, must be heard by an ear tuned to the particular notes and cadences of the historical voice. Historical narrative, in their view, does not cause entrapment in hegemonic domination or delimit the routes of possible futures, but rather it opens the landscape of experience. Interestingly, the sphere of the indigenous Indian historian embodied in the *karanam*, an “autonomous agent” who enacts “pragmatic, strategic thinking” in the production of historical discourse, is a sphere of the nonreligious for the most part, of the secular.⁷⁰

What do we make of these opposing positions? Did India possess historical narratives composed before the entrance of Islam, colonialism, and modernity? Or can we see, as Lal suggests, a “disavowal of history as a legitimate form of knowledge” in India?⁷¹ Lal does not deny that India has a past that comes with a memory of that past in the present, a memory substantiated in texts, performances, and places. Rao and his colleagues, however, search out correlations with modern historiography through their approach to “texture,” searching for a corollary to modern western history in India before, or in ignorance of, the European context in which this

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁶⁷ See Romila Thapar’s essay “Society and Historical Consciousness,” in *Interpreting Early India* (1986; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 137–73; cf. Sudipta Sen’s essay “Imperial Orders of the Past,” in *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, ed. Daud Ali (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 233.

⁶⁸ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” in *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.

⁶⁹ Rao et al., *Textures of Time*, 19.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 139. Note that the authors put “secular” into scare quotes in their text.

⁷¹ Lal, *History of History*, 16.

practice originated.⁷² We might take another example from Daud Ali, who lucidly explores writing in an Indian context that he argues is analogous to—or virtually the same as—Euro-American history in his study of Chola-period (after 400 CE) copperplate inscriptions. He reads the inscriptions as the instantiation of “world history” rather than simple state records that a historian might use as a “historical source.”⁷³ Like Rao and associates, Ali seeks to uncover epistemological motivations and finds a historiographic impetus at work.⁷⁴

Modern history is inescapably a modern Western genre, tied to the nation-state, to science, to literacy, and to humanism. This recognition of history as a modern Western genre is meant not to disavow all other practices of remembering, recording, and narrating the past but rather to “provincialize” history, set it in its province and its context. In asserting the strategic rejection of historical thought, Lal pertinently asks, “Cannot the not-writing of history be a way of writing history, or perhaps more simply be a mode of living with the present, an insistent and urgent reminder that history is another mythography?”⁷⁵ While Lal may conflate history as a modern Western discourse and history as simply “the past,” he does point to the strategy of refusing to name and describe one’s past in the language of one’s hegemon, whether that language is of colonization, modernity, patriarchy, or science. Rao and his colleagues show conclusively that the past is narrated, marked by signs of authority and authenticity, and set apart, as a different discursive “texture,” from other kinds of narrative within a single genre; thus, they detect the texture of historical discourse, even as they do not find a direct correlation to the modern Western genre of “history.” But what is perhaps most important to note here is a site of agreement between the two sets of authors. They all meet on the question

⁷² Note that even though Rao et al. (*Textures of Time*) begin by stating that India certainly has always possessed “history” (9), they conclude by stating that “unlike modern Europe, South India has no single historical genre” (252). A commonly understood genealogy of Western historiography is of course one of its key features—it is self-referential. Thus, it is also supremely exclusive by its nature. In many ways, the critique of India as having no “historical consciousness” rests on the observation that India has never evinced a single genre that can be described as “history,” a point on which there appears no disagreement between Lal and Rao et al. See also Thapar’s ideas about *itihāsa - purāṇa* as constituting a genre of history (*Cultural Pasts*, esp. chaps. 7 and 8), an idea she seems to have recently repudiated. See also the excellent essay by Sumit Guha titled “Speaking Historically: The Changing Voices of Historical Narration in Western India, 1400–1900,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 4 (2004): 1084–1103.

⁷³ Daud Ali, “Royal Eulogy as World History,” in *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia*, ed. Ron Inden, Jonathan Walters, and Daud Ali (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 166, 225.

⁷⁴ Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh, *History and the Present* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002).

⁷⁵ Lal, *History of History*, 40–41.

of the relationship between history and religion. Lal juxtaposes “histories” and “eschatologies”; Rao and associates locate historiography in India in the late medieval period primarily within a world of secular record maintenance. In both cases, where one finds history, one does not find religion.

Most of us now share Jean François Lyotard’s “incredulity towards metanarratives” with respect to the supremacy of “the West” over “the rest.”⁷⁶ There is no doubt that Indians practice modern history today. And there is equal agreement that Europe did not practice modern history until after the eighteenth century. Colonial scholarship may have invested in the possession of history the right of sovereignty or the fact of epistemological development, but surely postcolonial scholarship after the interventions of figures like Edward Said, Bernard Cohn, Ronald Inden, Partha Chatterjee, and Nicholas Dirks has moved us beyond this narrow limit.⁷⁷ We no longer invoke Hegel’s designations of those without history as existing in a dreamlike state or rehearse James Mill’s categorical rejection of any historical sense in India. However, as Lal does, we may agree that the modern Western genre of history is anachronistic in India before the colonial period and certainly before the introduction of Islam on the subcontinent, and we may do so while also suggesting that historical consciousness and genres or “textures” of history have always been a part of cultural production in South Asia.⁷⁸

A recent essay by Shahid Amin helps illustrate the difficulty of seeking out “alternative history,” especially in the context of religious history, while remaining wedded to the idea of history as a “post-Renaissance Western genre.” Exploring seventeenth-century narratives about the life of Syed Salar Masaud Ghazi, or Ghazi Miyan (eleventh century), described as a “Muslim warrior saint,” Amin reads hagiography for historiography in order to investigate an “alternative history” of the Turkish entrance into northern India.⁷⁹ Amin suggests we might use the hagiography of a warrior-saint to compose a new history of eleventh-century South Asia that can hold its own against the “Big Story,” the space Daud Ali identifies

⁷⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

⁷⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Inden, Walters, and Ali, *Querying the Medieval*; Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, and *The Nation and Its Fragments*; Nicholas B. Dirks, “History as a Sign of the Modern,” *Public Culture* 2, no. 2 (1990): 25–32, and *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

⁷⁸ See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (1837; New York: Dover, 1956); James Mill, *The History of British India* (1826; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁷⁹ Shahid Amin, “On Retelling the Muslim Conquest,” in Chatterjee and Ghosh, *History and Present*, 31, 42.

as “World History” in the tradition of Hegel.⁸⁰ Unlike Ali, however, Amin concludes that an alternative history outlined in his essay must await “the actual writing” of that history; the intervention of the modern historian is required in “making narrative and historical sense of the hagiographic, sectarian, demotic and performative literatures” that lie variously scattered in the public cultures of northern South Asia from the seventeenth century to the present.⁸¹ Where Ali perceives a practice sufficiently similar to modern historiography apparent in the post-Gupta inscriptions, Amin notices an archive awaiting the historian who can see the “alternative” before her or him, a history not of capital but of heterogeneous lifeworlds, what Dipesh Chakrabarty, in a critique of Marx, considers the second order (“History 2”) of historical production.⁸²

Two ideas separate Ali and Amin in their assessment of their materials. The first is a differing understanding of what constitutes history: for Ali, history is not confined to Euro-American mentalities; for Amin, history is a Euro-American genre but one in need, especially in the South Asian context, of a greater understanding of what constitutes a historical source. The second distinction between the two—and the more important one for this article—concerns religion. Ali is exploring inscriptions that unite a polity to world history, an operation reminiscent of modern historiography. Amin, on the other hand, is investigating a Muslim warrior-ascetic who is remembered through folktales and oral memory, embedded in hagiography. The figure is thus outside the normal space of the Euro-American genre of history but well within the literary, cultural, and social spheres identified as “religious” in common academic parlance.

The act of “provincializing Europe,” as Chakrabarty has outlined this idea, seems wedded to reassessing the practice of historiography, as well as the meaning of “history,” and this refined view locates the category of religion as one of the principal axes in this reformation. Unlike the kinds of historiography in South Asia (and internationally) that serve to set an imagined Hinduism at the center of India’s national trajectory, which is the discourse of Hindutva and the Hindu Right, the Subaltern Studies Collective and the numerous historical studies that have followed in response to it mirror Pierre Nora’s association of the peasant with religion and memory, as well as Nora’s desire to see this subaltern memory reinserted into the stream of history.⁸³ Religion may be characteristic of both

⁸⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁸¹ Ibid., 42–43.

⁸² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 67.

⁸³ Nora, “Between Memory and History.” An excellent example of work inspired by, and critical of, Subaltern Studies can be found in the writings of historian William Pinch, especially in his *Peasants and Monks in British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

elite, Hindutva discourse and nonelite, subaltern discourse, but these two ideas of religion do not therefore unite these two disparate pursuits. One might read the postcolonial project of Subaltern Studies as a move to return religion to the center of a historiographic practice that investigates the nonelite, nonliterate, and extrapolitical. Perhaps this accounts for Subaltern Studies's lack of investigation of religion in the politicized public sphere of modern India, primarily articulated by the Hindu Right. Though the Collective's project here may involve a largely untheorized understanding of religion, it nonetheless calls forth a series of associations in modernity that set religion against other forces, such as rationalism, secularism, and historiography. In the context of South Asia, the modern dialectic of history and religion is of central concern.

Nicholas Dirks has reminded us that history is a sign of the modern.⁸⁴ We might extend Dirks's notion and regard religion as a sign of the non-modern, as the perennial signpost of tradition, of the ancient and spiritual invading the contemporary and scientific.⁸⁵ Figured this way, religion and history mark mutually exclusive domains. Furthermore, Talal Asad has demonstrated that the rise of ideas of secularism, history, and religion in the modern West were symbiotic, though also antagonistic.⁸⁶ In the modern category of religion are placed ritual, memory, and belief; invested in modern historiography are rationality, evidence, and logical conclusion. Lal, reflecting on why Islam and Christianity, the spiritual domains of eight centuries of political hegemony in India, might hold "history" so vital to their civilizational projects, suggests that monotheism and proselytism are the necessary precursors to historical production,⁸⁷ but these theological-social positions are not themselves bearers of historiography. The doyens of Western modern discourse and historiography—figures like Hegel, Marx, and Max Weber—all addressed "India" in their work as a touchstone for the "religious," as modernity's stepping-stone, never on par with "the West" but always representative of some apotheosis of caricature, a historical generalization now surpassed by the modern world (replete with its own nonironic caricatures).⁸⁸ The apparent need for an antonym

⁸⁴ Dirks, "History as a Sign of the Modern."

⁸⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

⁸⁶ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

⁸⁷ Lal, *History of Religion*, 59–60.

⁸⁸ For Hegel, see Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*; as well as Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990); and Inden, *Imagining India*. For Marx, see Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India," *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 25, 1853, and *On Colonialism: Articles from the "New York Tribune" and Other Writings* (New York: International, 1972); as well as Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Marxism and Indology* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1981); Said, *Orientalism*, 153–57; and a response to Said in Ajiz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New Delhi: Oxford

for modernity could be satisfied by the “East,” as Said and others have made abundantly clear.⁸⁹ It is beyond the scope of this essay to articulate exactly how this opposition between history and religion came about in modern historiography, but we can briefly trace the arc of its narrative.

THE ARC OF ANTINOMY

Talal Asad has made the argument that religion to the premodern, medieval Christian would not be religion to the modern Christian.⁹⁰ The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century in Europe began to reshape epistemology in relation to power, epitomized by the persecution of Galileo in the early seventeenth century by the Catholic Church. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe have often been characterized as the victory of science over religion in European states and civil societies, and the period witnessed innovations in technology and economy that were expressed in philosophy and especially in the philosophy of history. Yet this so-called battle between religion and science in the Enlightenment not only gave rise to figures with decidedly antireligious sentiments (specifically, anti-Catholic), such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, but also produced many figures who appeared equally habituated to both religious and rational venues; figures such as René Descartes, Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, Blaise Pascale, Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, Thomas Paine, Hegel, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz all sought to invest their scientific and rational-philosophical work with their religious beliefs.

Teleological expression of the fulfillment of historical development were common, and many such philosophies of history invoked the motivation of supernatural agency, just as many scientists or “natural philosophers” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw natural philosophy as the explanation of some divine activity. For example, we can see the supernatural at work in the writing of figures like Leibniz, with his notion of “monads,” or in the thought of Hegel, who seemed to be a Christian philosopher of his age, offering the notion of “Spirit” exerting its desire in the world and thus engendering history.

Hegel deserves special attention given his important place at the beginning of a long genealogy of modern thought from Marx and Weber to Benedetto Croce and Bertrand Russell, but he also deserves special attention for the detrimental effect of his denial of historical consciousness to most of the world, including India. With “Spirit” Hegel invoked

University Press, 1992), 221–42. See Max Weber, *The Religions of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, ed. and trans. H. Gerth and D. Martindale (1921; Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958); as well as David Gellner, *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian Themes* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸⁹ Said, *Orientalism*; Inden, *Imagining India*.

⁹⁰ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*.

more than the culmination of rationality and freedom, coalescing into a shared human spirit; he was quite directly referencing “Providence” and “God.”⁹¹ Hegel’s Spirit is the invocation of the supernatural (certainly the superhuman) in explaining history; it is, to recall Chakrabarty, to grant “real agency in historical events” to the supernatural, a kind of “intelligent design” for the early nineteenth century.

This kind of philosophy of history was quickly dismissed or transformed by two forces. One was the rise of scientific historiography, regularly attributed to Leopold van Ranke in the early nineteenth century. Attention shifted away from what we might call the “reverse eschatologies” of the philosophy of history that sought teleologies of historical development (often religious in nature). Instead, following Ranke, historiography moved toward the process of composing rational, empirical narratives of the past. A second force was the appropriation and transformation of Hegel’s dialectical historiography by Marx and his materialist conception of history, more commonly called dialectical materialism. Here the philosophy of history would no longer exhibit the self-realization of Spirit but would play out in the material world, a world of economy, labor, and capital—the realization of class consciousness. The cumulative effect of these transformations and the growing apparent antagonism between science and religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries helped juxtapose religion, recalling the past as revelation unfolding, and history as recalling the past through scientific principles.⁹²

In modernity, history has the propensity to replace religion, which is the domain of the premodern and the private, not the civic and scientific. As a discipline, the history of religions has traditionally studied religions other than Christianity and Judaism, sometimes including Islam in its roster, or has studied these religions in a comparative context with other, often “non-Western” traditions, perhaps linked along the Indo-European continuum. Comparative religion, the precursor to the history of religions, often sought to find homologies between Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices and those of “oriental” origin, searching out a common structure to explain the very phenomenon of “religion,” one that often invoked Saussurian binary models, or what Marshall Sahlins has called “yin-yang structuralism.”⁹³

⁹¹ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 13.

⁹² Note how R. G. Collingwood suggests that science and religion share the same ground of “theology”: R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. Jan van der Dussen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 255–56. Indeed, Collingwood’s first work was on philosophy, religion, and science, where he argued that religion and philosophy are united in their inability to be explained through science: see Collingwood, *Religion and Philosophy* (1916; Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994).

⁹³ Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), xvi.

I would argue that the universal homology of religion that allows both for a global history of religions and a system of comparative religion is rooted in the nineteenth-century idea of social evolution and the “science of religion,” a disciplinary marker that preceded comparative religion but is more accurately the genealogical fountainhead for the contemporary historical study of religions. The anthropological study of religion that Clifford Geertz popularized, for example, has at its core the science of religion and social evolutionism practiced by John Lubbock, Edward Tylor, Herbert Spencer, and James Frazer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What Geertz accomplishes is the removal (for the most part) of a judicial “world history” teleology by means of a symbolic anthropology, yet Geertz’s notion of religion retains some of the character of religion as situated in a place along the path to modernity. The early nineteenth-century studies of religion were essentially histories, tracing the grand progress of modernity as it evolved from atheism (Lubbock) to animism (Tylor), ancestor worship (Spencer), magic, religion (Frazer), and then to modernity in the European worldview. Therefore, through writing a history of religion, scholars of the science of religion were also writing a history of modernity. Likewise, through writing an anthropology of religion, Geertz was making the nonrational actions of communities under the sign of religion intelligible to the modern world. For Geertz, religion was a set of symbols, it *meant* something; it was not the sheer nonsense of belief but something tangible, knowable, a phenomenon that the anthropologist could decode if one stayed within the autochthonous system; step outside the system, into the realm of “world history,” and religion lost its symbolic, and also practical, meaning. Indeed, belief was something modernity could explain, but religion was not.⁹⁴ What accounts for this antagonism, a juxtaposition of history and religion, is difficult to unravel. Whether through a disciplinary prejudice for the totalizing, rationalizing narratives of social science, or latent prejudices generated in the age of social evolution and colonialism, it is clear that religion and history are made to stand in opposition to one another in modern thinking.

NUMINOUS HISTORY

The antagonism between religion and history offers the Subaltern Studies project an avenue of possibility, because they can make use of the anti-theoretical attributes of religion in the discourse of modernity. But it also

⁹⁴ Geertz seems to hint that “knowing” is preceded by “belief” and replaces the latter (*The Interpretation of Culture* [New York: Basic, 1978], 110, 112). In contrast, notice how Bourdieu uses the idea of belief in his work as the unifying principle of a cultural field: see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 74–111.

suggests a blind alley of difficulty in the project of historical explanation, as Chakrabarty has suggested. The possibility lies in aligning religion's external relationship to historical reason with the subaltern's peripheral position in historical production. When the Santal insurgents fix religion as the subject of their insurgency, they are (however unwittingly) opposing the usual course of modern historical reason. They are, to borrow Prakash's phrase, being exceptionally "post-foundational," or perhaps pre-foundational, appealing to a foundation largely unrecognized by modern historiography. Yet the problem posed by religion to the Collective's endeavors involves both its indeterminacy, its "emptiness" as a category in theorizing about the subaltern, linked with the difficulty for modern history to incorporate a narrative of supernatural agency into historical explanation.

There is another way in which this link between history and religion poses a problem for the Subaltern Studies Collective. In contemporary public culture, there is no doubt that a similarity is apparent between a description of subaltern consciousness as essentially religious and a description of non-Western society through the lens of some neo-Orientalist scholarship.⁹⁵ Yet there are important differences to mark. In a mode reminiscent of procolonial Orientalism, a voice now resurfacing in variations on Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, religion is pejoratively described as antagonistic to modern democratic humanism.⁹⁶ However, for the Subalterns, religion presents a challenge to modern historical reasoning; it reinvests subjecthood in human action by taking seriously the expressions of agency given by actors. That religion in this context poses an impassable limit point is where the Subaltern Studies Collective and the scholar of religion might meet.

When, in his 1917 book *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolph Otto invoked the term "numinous," an adjectival form of the word "numen," he meant to indicate a "non-rational feeling" of divinity that could not be considered conceptually, that furthermore "is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other [mental state]; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and

⁹⁵ It is not possible to characterize centuries of Orientalist scholarship as a whole, and much of that work neither distilled Indian culture to a function of religion, nor characterized religious sentiment as a lesser episteme to Western modernity, nor suggested the inherent difference of "East" and "West," nor constructed chauvinistic teleologies. I apologize if I appear to replicate the wholesale disavowal of the scholarship produced within the discourse of "Orientalism."

⁹⁶ It seems to me that Orientalist scholarship that self-consciously advocated colonialism, or those scholars who drew upon such scholarship (like Hegel and Marx, for example), often found a characterization of India as "religious" to be a moral position upon which to justify colonial rule. For Huntington, see Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (summer 1993): 22–49, and *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined.”⁹⁷ Otto also referred to this numinous sense as a perception of “the Holy.” While Otto was concerned primarily with a kind of epistemology of religion, or rather the limits of epistemology, his book concludes with a consideration of history and how religion enters into historical processes. Otto writes, “Plainly, then, religion is only the offspring of history in so far as history on the one hand develops our disposition for knowing the holy, and on the other is itself repeatedly the manifestation of the holy.”⁹⁸

In many of the narratives consulted by scholars of the Subaltern Studies Collective regarding the motivations of peasant insurgency, we hear that religion has entered into the streams of history by enacting its own agency, by acting through people, in a way not too dissimilar from Hegel’s notion of the realization of Spirit or Providence in the unfolding of history; history is the proof of religious belief. And this action, if we are to accept the Subaltern Studies Collective’s important search for nonelite historiography, literally brings subaltern history into being. The noted resistance by subalterns to analyze or explain their actions beyond recourse to something like Otto’s numen is the by-product of its nature as *sui generis*. There is nothing to explain, on the subalterns’ part, since they are within the course of history, their history, the history of their religion made manifest in the world.

Chakrabarty concludes his compelling book *Provincializing Europe* with a critique of the historian’s explanatory power in light of worldviews deeply informed by “superstition” and the influence of the “personal.”⁹⁹ He advises that to challenge the reign of historiography “is not to reject reason but to see it as one among many ways of being in the world.”¹⁰⁰ He gives, as examples, two vignettes in the lives of two “men of science”: the father of the famous scholar of Indian religious literature and bhakti A. K. Ramanujan, who was a mathematician and astronomer, and Nobel laureate C. V. Raman, a physicist. In both cases, they inhabit two worlds conditioned for them by their stature and labor as scientists: one of science, the logic of historiography, and another of “superstition.” In the case of Ramanujan’s father, Krishnaswami Ramanujan, he was also a practicing and believing astrologer.¹⁰¹ In the case of C. V. Raman, who would perform a ritual bath before a solar eclipse, he is said to have described his work as a physicist as “science” and his ritual actions as “personal.” The personal is, of course, the realm of the religious in modernity, the site of the

⁹⁷ Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁹⁹ Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 237.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁰¹ A. K. Ramanujan, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23, no. 1 (1989): 4.

experience of the numen, and, in some cases, the epicenter of subaltern insurgency, political, social, and cultural.¹⁰²

As we have seen, the Subaltern Studies Collective seems deeply invested in the location of agency within the realm of the religious. Yet there also seems to be a tension present. As Chakrabarty has demonstrated in his analysis of Guha's work on the Santal rebellion, it appears that the rebels dismiss their own historical agency by invoking that of their deity, whom they refer to simply as Thakur or "Lord."¹⁰³ Yet there is no reason to assume that ascribing motivation to one's deity restricts humans' historical agency. As Otto has suggested, belief and an encounter with the numinous is an activity, not a passive occurrence. All people are capable of it, but there must be an election on their part to experience the numen.¹⁰⁴ When the Santal claim the authorization of action on the part of their deity, they are embracing this dissolution of self and deity, so perennially a subject of Indian "devotional" work, either bhakti or Sufi, from the *advaita* of Shankara to the ecstatic states of contemporary gurus. They are thinking in another way, "being in the world" in another way. This does pose a problem to the historian, as Chakrabarty insightfully points out. But the problem lies not with the subaltern but with the historian.

The problems encountered here with "religion" and "history" shift between two understandings of what it is to "make history." On the one hand, the insurgent, always subaltern, makes a clear break with history, just as a political constitution interrupts political history with a new statement of action, a discursive insurgency within the time line of a nation. On the other hand, these breaks with history are filled by a new historical genealogy, the sense of a new history at its inception. Foucault, who was otherwise rather silent on religion, finds cause to discuss religion and history in the context, pertinently, of revolt, specifically of the Iranian Revolution.¹⁰⁵ In an essay published in 1979, he wrote, "[The] action [of the man who revolts] is necessarily a tearing that breaks the thread of history and its long chains of reasons so that a man can genuinely give preference to the risk of death over the certitude of having to obey. . . . The man who revolts is, thus, 'outside of history' as well as in it, and since life and death are at stake, we can understand why revolts have easily been able to find their expression and their mode of performance in religious themes."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 253–54.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 103–8.

¹⁰⁴ See Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Others have engaged Foucault's highly problematic reading, and endorsement, of the revolution, but it is important to note the slippage between religion as a means of resistance and religion as a mode of oppression, a slippage between the valorization of religion as a feature of "subaltern consciousness" in the work of many Subalterns and religion as the mode of political discourse at the heart of Hindu Right rhetoric.

¹⁰⁶ Michel Foucault, "Is It Useless to Revolt?" in *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*, ed. Jeremy Carrette (1979; New York: Routledge Press, 1999), 131.

As Foucault suggests, the insurgent breaks out of one chronology to begin another, and this, naturally, is quite similar to the insistence by many religions that time begins and ends with their unique calendars, time parsed by belief. Similarly, this is the act of the historian in general, to mark time periods with the narratives they produce, which necessarily have a beginning and an end, often justified by recourse to “epochs” or “eras.” All histories, we might argue, are made at the expense of others and always justify themselves by proposing a break with older histories and the creation of new ones—this is one of the definitive signs of “the modern,” that is, its self-proclaimed newness. When the subaltern speaks through a religious consciousness in describing a historical rupture, we have the articulation of a new time based upon a new subject. Foucault, in the same essay, calls this religious dual sense of the individual and general coalescence of time as the “irreducible element” of revolt and the means by which “subjectivity introduces itself into history and gives it the breath of life.”¹⁰⁷

I have suggested in this essay that religion is both foundational to many of the chief works of the Subaltern Studies Collective and yet also its blind spot. At times, religion is the expression of insurgency, whether for the subaltern Santal or the nonsubaltern Bengali *bhadralok* (“refined people” or landed and administrative middle classes in Bengal from nineteenth century to the present), as we see in the numerous engagements with Ramakrishna and middle-class Bengal, for example. At other times, religion is a tool of dominance, either by the colonial state or by elites exercising control over subaltern subjects. Finally, in terms of historiography by the Collective, religion becomes the site of the inexplicable, a problematic location for any historian. The multiplicity of the use of “religion” here is because no one within the Collective has as of yet endeavored to treat the category of religion with as much brilliant scrutiny as has been applied to ideas such as “history,” “agency,” and “modernity.” Conversely, these three sites of experience have perhaps received less attention than one would desire in the field of religious studies. The product of such scrutiny, should it happen, may resemble the invocations of the “impossible” and the “fragmented” that characterize many of the theoretical contributions of the later Subaltern Studies Collective members; it may invoke the same threshold of Otto’s numen. Religion, in this context, might yield unto theory simply the character of irreducibility, but with a historical sensibility, nonetheless. The numinous for both fields of scholarship is, as I have argued, a limit point, a vista on the immense space of lifeworlds inaccessible to scholarly inquiry and hence a compelling destination.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 133.

Such places of stark contrast form the boundaries of our fields and create locations where we can find the greatest promise for new critical thought. Religion, here, is not instrumental, which is to say, religion is neither the means nor the mode of action but the very reason for action itself. In Marxism, religion is easily accommodated (though arguably falsely so) as an instrument of action, of producing a certain kind of consciousness conducive to exploitation, but also as an expression of insurgency against exploitation, not just the “opium of the people.” Marx writes of religion that “religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering.”¹⁰⁸ While Marx may equivocate, in postmodernism religion is simply not taken seriously. Thus, in the two reigning paradigms of inspiration for the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective—Marxism and postmodernism—religion marks a lacuna. It is in this empty place that I would suggest we find the root of the role of religion in subaltern historiography. Both religious studies and the study of the subaltern share this vanishing point where explanation fails and only description is possible. Where religion comes to occupy this position of uncertainty, of a kind of ineffable but positive agency, is the point at which historiography finds itself describing a numinous epicenter of insurgency.

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¹⁰⁸ Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"* (edition translated by Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley; see n. 31). For a study of Marx and religion, see *Marx on Religion*, ed. John Raines (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

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