

institutional norms than on any individual freedom. Lane's work could be even more significant if it were expanded to see if other Catholic countries in the early modern era were similar to France in their approaches to vocational choices.

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

THOMAS WORCESTER

*Religion, enlightenment and empire. British interpretations of Hinduism in the eighteenth century.* By Jessica Patterson. (Ideas in Context.) Pp. xii + 355. Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. £90. 978 1 316 51063 6

*JEH* (74) 2023; doi:10.1017/S0022046923001148

Book titles which begin with a string of spacious abstract nouns can be dangerous things. They project ambition and relevance: who works on the eighteenth century that does not have an interest in (at least one of) religion, enlightenment or empire? In many cases, however, the proclamation of these grand categories can turn out to mask highly specialised studies, perhaps above all in books-of-the-thesis like this one. So jaded readers might open Jessica Patterson's monograph primed for disappointment. But any anxieties will rapidly melt away. Her monograph is not only an extraordinarily scholarly, rich and persuasive piece of intellectual history, but it also has important points to make about each of its three overarching themes. It ought to attract very general interest.

The book deals with British scholarly writing on Hinduism between the 1760s and the 1790s. Specifically, it is a study of five writers, all of whom were connected in different ways with the East India Company. These figures are John Zephaniah Holwell, Alexander Dow, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, Charles Wilkins and, much the best-known of the bunch, the celebrity Orientalist William Jones. Each man gets a chapter to himself, though these individual treatments include extensive discussion of the relations between the men's major works. They are complemented by an opening chapter on wider European intellectual contexts, and one halfway through the book on the protagonists' contemporary British and European reception, which includes further analysis of some of their principal texts.

Patterson's book has well-defined arguments to make about its subject matter. It wants to show that the most authoritative scholarly treatments of Hinduism in the later eighteenth century were British, and associated with British power; that they projected a 'philosophical' rather than an 'anthropological' understanding of the religion, focusing on texts and theologies instead of practices and ceremonial; that these conceptions changed over time, gradually detaching themselves from the influence of religious heterodoxy and coming to provide firmer support to British supremacy in India; and that shifting understandings of Hinduism affected seminal Enlightenment debates about civilisation, religious truth and the social effects of religion. On each of these points, the book is compelling. It is equally persuasive in the more specific claims it makes, too many to enumerate here, about how its mostly relatively well-known protagonists have been misrepresented or misunderstood in earlier scholarship. Here Patterson has clearly cultivated an encyclopaedic knowledge.

The most striking characteristic of the book, however, is its unyielding embrace of intricacy. In recent years, the wider fields of modern intellectual history and the history of political thought have started to become increasingly attentive to the

breadth of possible contexts into which patterns of articulate ideas might be slotted. The last half-dozen modern-Britain-related volumes of the well-known series in which Patterson's book appears are a case in point, pressing more deeply into the realms of elite politics, social history and intercultural contact than most of their predecessors. On the last theme, the rise of 'global intellectual history' has clearly been influential, though despite apparent overlaps it is not an approach with which Patterson chooses to align her book.

Patterson's methodological goal is to do justice to the awesome complexity of the contexts, relationships, encounters, translations, misunderstandings and beliefs which shaped this particular pattern of elaborated ideas, across cultures and within an empire. The unspoken headline argument of the book is that there are never, in fact, simple answers to anything. It is difficult to think of another recent intellectual-historical study in this general period and area which explores as far and wide as this one in its quest to identify and explore relevant contexts – certainly not which takes religious thought as a primary focus. So there are larger contentions here, albeit implicit ones, about the practice of intellectual history. There are also insights into how we should study 'the intellectual frames and assumptions within which political action took place' (p. 22), as a means of establishing the reasons behind that action.

Patterson's voyage takes us all the way back to that of Vasco da Gama in 1498, examining influential early treatments of Hinduism in European travel narratives, and forward to the Indian administration of Richard Wellesley at the turn of the nineteenth century. It touches medical theory, vegetarianism, metaphysics, poetry, dictionaries, histories and imperial policy. It provides a bracing critique of the concepts of 'anti-imperialism' and 'critics of empire' in eighteenth-century settings, pointing out – quite rightly – that imperial arguments were almost always too subtle to be summarised usefully in these terms. At one point, in its discussion of Charles Wilkins, it dives into his (mis)translations from his original Sanskrit sources (pp. 249–53), a dimension about which it would have been fascinating to hear more in relation to the other protagonists. Patterson's radically 'thick' approach to context works as well as it does because of the carefully limited nature of the exercise. Her subject is a small number of relatively well-documented men, who worked on many of the same foundational texts, referenced one another extensively, and were the pillars of a genuine intellectual tradition. Expanding the parameters of the problem much further would clearly generate methodological difficulties. These might, however, be interesting to grapple with.

Readers of this JOURNAL may be most struck, and encouraged, by Patterson's overarching argument that 'religion played a far greater role in the intellectual history of this period than has previously been assumed', and that the Enlightenment was therefore not as secular as we might have thought (p. 9). This argument alone might be enough to generate a major new debate. But readers should approach her book on its own terms, open to its invigoratingly eclectic approach to the study of eighteenth-century intellectual history, the interactions between politics, ideas and empire, and cross-cultural political thought. It is fascinating.

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

ALEX MIDDLETON