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The Oeuvre of Peter van der Veer

Max Planck Institute for the Study of
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften



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Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the corpus of writings by Peter van der Veer, a Dutch anthropologist described by Dipesh Chakrabarty (unichicago.edu 2019) as “one of the foremost scholars in comparative studies of religion, nationalism, and urban life in Asia,” and “a globally recognized theorist of comparative studies.” In the first part of this paper, which consists of three parts, I will dwell on van der Veer’s early works from 1985 to 1994. Here, I discuss his contributions to the studies of Hinduism, orientalism and nationalism. In part two of the paper, I analyze his works during the second phase from 1995 to the present. Though diverse, I have arranged the analysis of these works under the overarching category of comparison. The final brief section identifies the style and mode of van der Veer’s interventions the *sine qua non* of which I call, after Nietzsche, theorization with a hammer. In conclusion, I highlight themes and questions, which van der Veer’s works do not squarely address but gainfully enable future research.

Keywords: anthropology, China, colonialism, comparison, Hinduism, India, Islam, modernity, nation, Orientalism, religion

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Introduction

The fundamental objective of this paper¹ is to present a critical assessment of the diverse writings, spanning over three decades or so, of Peter van der Veer, a well-known Dutch anthropologist and arguably one of the foremost scholars of comparative studies of religion, nationalism, and urban anthropology. In order to undertake this task, I begin with a brief personal note in so far as personal and academic are connected, at least in part.

Only two weeks after I was awarded the University of Amsterdam scholarship (in 2000) to begin my doctorate, I was granted another one – the Government of India Commonwealth scholarship. For a while, I was in somewhat of a fix about whether I should go to the UK or Amsterdam. I chose Amsterdam. One key reason was van der Veer's book *Religious Nationalism*. As an M.Phil. student at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, I had read its photocopied version. I liked it on three counts. Besides being relevant to what I wanted to do, it contained some hard truths about nationalism, particularly Indian nationalism. At that time – recall that Hindutva activists in league with state agencies had illegally destroyed Babri Masjid in 1992, and Muslims lived in its wake in a state of fear – “secular” critique of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva rested on retrieving Nehru-Gandhi ideals, taken as alternative to and an opponent of Hindutva. This approach was evident, inter alia, in books like *Making India Hindu* (Ludden 1996). In contrast, van der Veer argued that “so much of the culture of the Indian state is already Hindu, in its ‘pluralist’ version” (1994: 31, 94, 23). In some ways, van der Veer anticipated Masuzawa's (2005) argument by over a decade. If Masuzawa argued that the invention of “world religions” was a way to preserve European/Christian universalism, van der Veer had argued how the Orientalists-mediated reading of Hinduism as a “universal religion” included Islam only through exclusion, as it stigmatized Islam as an unwanted particularity. Similarly, for van der Veer, Gandhi was not an effective antidote to Hinduva, for Gandhi's idea was itself a “moderate” version of Hindu nationalism (more on this, below). Nehruvian secularism was likewise complicit, manifest in the non-action against those, who in 1949, had illegally installed the Hindu idols inside the Babri Masjid or when the “secular” state, in 1950, backed construction of the Somanth temple project (1994: 155-157, 146-152).

Second, the book appealed to me with its theoretical grip, which was absent, for instance, in Jaffrelot's (1996) otherwise voluminous book on the same topic. In addition to critiquing Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and others, it also questioned the “derivative discourse” thesis. Van der Veer argued that “Indian nationalist politics is to a sig-

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference “Religion and Nationalism”, held on June 17-18, 2019 at the Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

nificant degree ‘indigenous’” (1994: 20) – a point recognized by political theorist Bhikhu Parekh (2019: 246).

Third, its exposition of Islam – a subject I was interested in – was significantly different from other works, which either simply erased Muslims (e.g., Chatterjee 1993, on which see Ahmad 2017, Hasan 1998) or if they at all discussed it, it was done patronizingly. Before I began my doctoral studies at the University of Amsterdam, my knowledge of British academia was limited, if not poor. I was familiar with the historian Francis Robinson’s work, but he did not have much to say about “postcolonial” India. I was also familiar with the works of Sudipta Kaviraj, then based at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and was in touch with him. He is a political scientist who was not a specialist of Islam. The challenging journey of my M.Phil. research working on a Muslim movement and the decision to continue to do research on Islam for my Ph.D. made me readily appreciate the worth of such terse sentences in *Religious Nationalism* as these: “anthropologists want to make a contribution to the understanding of what is understood to be the ‘dominant culture’ of the majority. They thereby unwittingly support Hindu nationalism” (1994: 196). I also felt a sense of the scholarly isolation that van der Veer articulated later so tellingly: “students of Indian Islam almost form a separate community...reflecting the separateness of the community they study, almost implicitly acknowledging that Muslims do not ‘belong’ to India” (2008: 385).²

From this personal note, let me now switch to an overview of van der Veer’s works, at the analytical core of which, is the triad of Western modernity, its relations with contemporary non-West (especially, India and China) over the *longue durée* and the subject of religious-cultural diversity. Put differently, his scholarship is mostly an investigation of interrelationships between modernity’s political form – the nation-state – and religion which the former, until recently, took as no more than a residue of the past. Van der Veer’s scholarship broadly falls into two different, yet overlapping phases: 1985 to 1994 and 1995 to our very present, which is ongoing. While each has some distinct features I will shortly discuss, there is also a commonality across the phases. Three elements constitute this commonality: comparative, historical and empirical – all marked with a combative theorization. I use combative as Talal Asad (in Scott 2006: 247-249) does. All these elements bear the light of van der Veer’s rendezvous with philosophy: now secret, now public. Derrida’s remark that “Bourdieu relates to philosophy as a man relates to his mistress”³ (in Hage 2013: 79) seems pertinent here. Whether engaging with Hegel, Marx,

2 For an article reviewing works on Islam, see van der Veer (2004a).

3 Mistress signifies a secret relation with pure enjoyment. Derrida seemed to think of philosophy “as the unlimited jouissance of a thought that knows no empirical restraints” (Hage 2013: 79).

James Mill, Charles Taylor, Habermas, Rawls or Seyla Benhabib (van der veer 2016: 73-79, 2001: 3-II, van der Veer and Lehmann 1999: 3ff.), van der Veer is both philosophical and anti-philosophical. With eyes cast on the ground, and the mind in quest to grasp the larger picture, he is against the supposed universality and “generalism” of philosophers and the “endless particularity” informed by British-style inductive empiricism evident in many, including anthropological, works (2016: 148). His mode of intervention is often persuasively combative.

This paper has three parts. In the first part, I dwell on van der Veer’s early works from 1985 to 1994, and which, largely deal with South Asia. Here I discuss his contributions to the studies of Hinduism, orientalism and nationalism. Part two is devoted to an analysis of his works during the second phase from 1995 to the present, 2016 to be precise. Though diverse, I have organized the critical analysis of these works under the overarching category of comparison. The final brief section aims to identify the style and mode of van der Veer’s interventions the *sine qua non* of which I describe as theorization with a hammer. On occasions, I invoke snippets of personal interface to elucidate certain points.

Hinduism, Orientalism, Nationalism: 1985-1994

The first combat was directed against orientalism as a field of inquiry as well as a method. It is manifest most glaringly in van der Veer’s doctoral monograph, *Gods on Earth* (1988) – described by Nita Kumar (1990: 583) in *American Ethnologist* as “an exceptionally valuable and enjoyable book.” Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork (from 1977 onward) in Ayodhya, a famous Hindu pilgrimage center believed to be the birthplace of god Ram (considered as an incarnation of Vishnu), and supplemented with archival research, it was a powerful critique of Indology as a field. Indology then dominated the study of Hinduism and anthropologists such as Jonathan Parry, too, subscribed (1985: 306), if differently, to it. In some ways, *Gods on Earth* was probably a critique of van der Veer himself; more accurately, his earlier pre-anthropological training as a Sanskritist and Indologist at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands (1988: vii).⁴ Focused on the

4 At Groningen van der Veer (1986: 343) studied Indo-Iranian languages (including Sanskrit) and cultures from 1973 to 1979. Jacob Ensink, acknowledged in *Gods on Earth*, taught Sanskrit there from 1951 to 1984. In 1953, he established the Institute of Indian Studies (dutchstudies-satsea.nl 2019). From 1980 to 1984, van der Veer lectured in “Religious Anthropology” at Free University, Amsterdam.

Hindu specialists of priests and monks – the Rāmānandī order – who lived in Ayodhya rather than the transitory hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who visited the town, its main problématique was the formation of the identity of these Hindu specialists. Contrary to his predecessors and many contemporaries who privileged Hindu values in their analyses, van der Veer instead looked at their contextual actions and practices. In place of eternal values read through the lens of and enshrined in sacred texts, he urged scholars to take priests as political actors shaping as well as being shaped by larger historical processes of economy and the state formation. Among the Hindu priests and monks were serious competitions, and even conflicts. Against the popular perceptions, which took Sadhus as a category of spiritual specialists disinterested in society or unmusical about politics, van der Veer found them to act like businessmen. Furthermore, they were not an unsullied emblem of non-violence. Rather, unlike Tyāgīs and Rasiks, the subgroup of Nāgās among the Rāmānandīs, indeed believed in violence and were also trained in fighting.

The journal articles from his doctoral research (e.g., van der Veer 1985, 1987) criticized specific Indologists without using the term Orientalism, which *Gods on Earth* frontally did. Orientalism fashioned a portrait of Hindu society as “static, timeless” and “dominated by Brahmans as guardians of the sacred order of society.” After World War II, when anthropologists shifted their attention away from tribes living on the frontiers of the Hindu civilization to studying villages, they participated in the orientalist portrait as follows. The synchronic study of villages by anthropologists such as Robert Redfield and Milton Singer operated on the binary premise of great versus little tradition: the former enshrined in Sanskrit literature and spatially anchored in “sacred centers,” the latter found in villages as forms of deviation from the former (McKim Marriot called it parochialisation as opposed to its obverse process of universalization). Louis Dumont and his collaborator, David Pocock, consolidated this line of inquiry by announcing in 1957, that a proper sociology of India must combine sociology and “classical Indology.” For Dumont, classical Indology was so foundational that he saw no difference between religious and social because “all that appears to be social is in fact religious.” Drawing on Talal Asad’s critique of Clifford Geertz, van der Veer argued that orientalists in general, and Dumont in particular, likewise did not account for the shifting relations between meaning and power. In so doing, they unduly privileged the self-perception of the Brahmans. Describing this approach as distinctly theological, he found it “detrimental to anthropological research.” Hence the call to free the “anthropological study of Hinduism” from “the orientalist perspective with the intellectual and theological overtones that have dominated it from the start” (van der Veer 1988: 55, 57, 58).

Five years after issuing this call, van der Veer, however, found out that it was not that easy to free the anthropological study of Hinduism and India from orientalism. The volume *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament*, co-edited with Carol Breckenridge, synoptically expressed this with the word “predicament” in its title. Its main aim, as laid out in the Introduction, was to examine the “relations between colonialism and nationalism in the politics of culture in both the societies of the ex-colonizers and those of the ex-colonized.” For Breckenridge and van der Veer, postcolonial nationalism can barely bypass Orientalism, the intellectual-scholarly wing of colonialism. Building on, as well as critiquing Edward Said’s (1978) work, they extended the scope of debate to south Asia from the Middle East, the prime focus of Said. The extension was also thematic, from literary to the administrative catalogues and practices within social sciences.⁵ Unlike Said’s voyage largely into history, they were instead interested in the present postcolonial south Asia where they saw “significant continuities” between colonialism and postcolonial nationalism. Their basic criticism of Said was that “colonized subjects are not passively produced by hegemonic projects but are active agents ... in the formation of their societies.” Moreover, orientalism informs the Orient as much as the Occident. The postcolonial predicament vis-à-vis orientalism was manifest in the fact that the methodologies and theories used by the postcolonial subjects themselves had emerged during the colonial era. Postcolonial nationalism and decolonization, therefore, cannot “escape from a history characterized by a particular discursive formation that can be called ‘orientalism’” (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993:I, 4, 5, 2).

Van der Veer’s own chapter in the volume –“The Foreign Hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and Communalism” – made a systematic analysis of Dumont’s scholarship on India, especially of his famous essay on nationalism and communalism (Dumont 1970). In it, he argued that “Indian nationalism undoubtedly is an anticolonial force, but in its very anticolonialism, it shares basic discursive premises with orientalism and with the nationalism of the colonizing British.” Far from being antagonistic to each other, he went on to say that the Gandhi’s discourse and the postcolonial Hindu militant discourse “present variants of Hindu nationalism.” As a discipline, anthropology did not stand outside these historically constituted relationships between knowledge and power. Rather there were “fascinating convergences” amongst orientalism, Hindu nationalism and sociology such as Dumont’s. Van der Veer also connected his argument to the then emerging subject

5 Trained in orientalism, Wael Hallaq (2018), a scholar of Islam currently at Columbia University, too critiqued orientalism to the extent that he found Edward Said wanting in recognizing the comprehensive constitution and effect of orientalism as an epistemic regime beyond the literary domains.

of transnationalism (dwelling chiefly on the transnational movement of Vishva Hindu Parishad, VHP; see, van der Veer 1994a, 1987a) to conclude that “it is the postcolonial predicament that orientalism is reinvented in the dialectic of nationalism and transnationalism” (van der Veer 1993: 39, 40, 41, 43).⁶

Van der Veer did not limit his critique of orientalism to the South Asian contexts; he also brought it back home, as it were. In his 1995 book on orientalism in Dutch, he undertook a critique of Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), the internationally renowned Dutch orientalist who was professor of Islam and the chairperson of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV, Royal Institute of Linguistics, Geography and Anthropology) in Leiden. Maarten Kuitenbrouwer’s book on KITLV published to mark its 150th anniversary and sympathetic to Hurgronje and his tradition, described van der Veer as one who targeted Hurgronje, and “assailed Leiden Indologists past and present with Said’s contention.” To place this issue in a perspective, the Dutch Ministry of the Colonies had financed Hurgronje’s trip to Arabia to make inquiries from Indonesian pilgrims to Mecca. Later, the Dutch state used Hurgronje’s knowledge in the bloodiest military assault, in 1898, on Aceh that killed over fifty thousand people in a population of about 500,000 (van der Veer 2010: 215). In Kuitenbrouwer’s account, van der Veer, “the Amsterdam scholar of religious sociology”⁷ viewed Hurgronje as an imperialist and drew an analogy between Dutch colonialism in Indonesia and the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Such responses to van der Veer’s critique as by Kuitenbrouwer were largely acrimonious, if not un scholarly. While in a newspaper column, historian H. L. Wesseling took down “the Amsterdam sociologist” calling his intervention “modern stupidity”; for H.W. van den Doel no amount of criticism of Hurgronje could dislodge the fact that the latter was “the radiant sun in the Leiden universe” (in Kuitenbrouwer 2014: 72, 8).⁸ If response to his critique in this case was less than civil and academic, in another case van der Veer received, an unexpectedly reasoned response, approximating as it did the notion of a critical discussion in the academia. In publications resulting from his doctoral fieldwork, he had immanently criticized the works of Jonathan Parry and Chris Fuller, both at the London School of Economics (LSE). On publication of his critique and exem-

6 For collaborative works on Hinduism outside India, especially in the Caribbean and Surinam, see van der Veer and Cose van der Burg (1986a) and van der Veer and Steve Vertovec (1991).

7 Kuitenbrouwer stresses van der Veer’s Amsterdam University and discipline identities for Leiden University is deemed as *the* seat of orientalism. There is also some rivalry between the two universities.

8 For references to Hurgronje in his other works in English, see van der Veer (2002a, 2004) and van der Veer (2001a) in Dutch.

plifying the British idea of “fair play”, he received an invitation to become a visiting scholar at LSE (van der Veer 2008: 378).⁹

Returning to the subject of interconnections between nationalism and orientalism the volume co-edited with Breckenridge (mentioned earlier), foregrounded but fell short of offering a full-scale treatment of the former, it logically followed that an examination of nationalism in its own right was overdue. This precisely became van der Veer’s goal in *Religious Nationalism* that was published one year after *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament*. As I have already discussed aspects of *Religious Nationalism* in the Introduction, I will mention here some additional features that I regard as salient.

Focused on Hindu traditions, *Gods on Earth*, too, was comparative, if diagonally. The comparison in *Religious Nationalism* was across traditions – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh. The academic community received it with much enthusiasm and applause. While *The Journal of Asian Studies* (McKean 1994: 1309) praised it as “an appealing book” on account of the “clarity of its argument, the breadth of its dialogue with other works on nationalism, and its informative range of ethnographic and historical materials”, *Man* termed it as a “challenge” to “the received wisdom” (Fuller 1994: 1025). According to Brian Smith (1997: 164), a scholar of comparative religion, it offered “the best and most sophisticated analysis to date” of religion and nationalism and as such was a “definitive work.” At its core, the book offered a resounding critique of modernization theory, which, based on the Enlightenment premise, instituted a correlation between secularism and nationalism. Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner’s works displayed this secularist assumption in their conceptualizations of nationalism. For Gellner, by erasing the particularities of tradition, industrialization engineers homogenization, which in turn leads to individualization and nationalism, both of which he viewed as far removed from religion. In Anderson’s analytical scheme, nationalism marks a rupture from the traditional religious community and dynastic realms, which preceded it. In contrast, van der Veer argued that the religiously diverse case of India showed the continuing significance of religion in nationalist discourses and practices, past and present. The pervasive role of religion, however, did not mean religion as a timeless idea but as a practice constituting and constituted by modernity. To demonstrate this thesis, he focused on sacred centers, networks of religious specialists (Hindu saints, Muslim Sufis/reformers), religious rituals and their modes of communications, Hindi and Urdu, competing notions of self and the other, imaginations of territory and the like. In sum, the book called the modernization paradigm into question, urging scholars to pay attention to the power of religion beyond “the master narrative of European modernity” (1994: 202).

9 For a quasi-autobiographical account of his academic journey, see van der Veer (2008).

Was the Indian phenomenon of religious nationalism unique, however? Or, could it be compared with cases elsewhere, including those in Europe? The stage was set for a comparison different from the one undertaken in *Religious Nationalism*. Co-edited with Hartmut Lehmann, *Nation and Religion*¹⁰ compared Asia and Europe by discussing the intertwinement between religion and nation in India, Japan, The Netherlands, the Middle East (partly) and the UK. Anderson, in its final short chapter, defended his earlier argument.

Beyond the liberal obsession with volition and choice, the decision for this comparison was not entirely van der Veer's own will, though. After researching the Hindu social-political formations, van der Veer wanted to work on Indian Muslims. Against the common perception, shared by "liberal-secular" intelligentsia too, van der Veer considered Islam an "Indian religion" on which he had also began his fieldwork in Surat (see, van der Veer 1992), a city in the Western state of Gujarat where the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi hails from. However, the Indian government did not grant him permission to conduct fieldwork. The large-scale anti-Muslim violence in Surat after the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992 contributed to abandoning any such research plan (van der Veer 2008: 385). From the early 2000s, van der Veer's interests shifted to China and its vicinity. Despite friendly warnings that it was too late for him to begin to study a new language and culture, he started learning Mandarin (van der Veer 2014: ix-x). Such was the determination! In many important ways, this determination inaugurates (non-mono-directionally) the second phase of van der Veer's academic life.

Comparison Past the Enlightenment Hubris: 1995 – to the Present

If there is a singular theme that variously undergirds van der Veer's work from 1995 onwards, it is, in my view, comparison. His work from this point on becomes a multifarious exercise in enunciating, clarifying, refining and demonstrating what comparison, taken otherwise as a truism by anthropologists and others, means or should mean for our times. Contra the demotic notion of comparison as a method, in what follows I will discuss the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of van der Veer's comparison, culminating as it did in *The Value of Comparison* (2016). Delivered first as the prestigious

10 In 2018, the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, Qatar, published the Arabic edition (which is visually so attractive) of this book. See, van der Veer and Lehmann (2018).

Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture, in some ways, this book may be considered as a summative manifesto of some sorts of his many works of significance during this phase.

One way to understand the subject of comparison is to begin with an outline of its general parameters. Though an exponent of *longue durée* approach in history, unlike Fernand Braudel for whom it may mean several centuries, or even a millennium (Ahmad and Kanungo 2019), in practice for van der Veer it means a shorter (and evidentially more plausible) time span – from eighteenth century to the present. Notwithstanding this difference, both Braudel (1980) and van der Veer share the refusal to be seduced by presentism (van der Veer 2014, 2011: 9). This history, for van der Veer, is “interactional” as opposed to the prevalent form of nationalist historiography exemplified in “little Englandism” on one hand, and “big Indianism” on the other. That is, if Indian historiography is largely unmusical vis-à-vis the impact of the colony on the metropole, the English history erects an immunity from influences from the colonies, the latter assigned to the specialists of colonial history. The task of interactional history, situated in the matrix of knowledge-power, by contrast, is to show the entanglement of that which is seen either as opposites, or unconnected or both. How is this specific interactional history different from global history and world system types of the political economy framework practiced, though not identically, by Andre Gunder Frank, Karl Marx, Sydney Mintz, Immanuel Wallerstein, Eric Wolf and others? While appreciative of many merits in such frameworks, van der Veer finds them deficient because they do not tell readers about “the ways people shaped their understanding of these world historical processes.” Moreover, they privilege factors of economy to under-stress the salience of culture and religion (van der Veer 2001: 8-II, 2014: Ch.I, 2016: 17-18). The insistence on the valence of the social and cultural gains further significance because van der Veer, like Marshall Sahlins, rejects the cognitive and evolutionary anthropology with a focus, among others, on the so-called universalism of brain science (van der Veer 2016: 41ff.).¹¹ Van der Veer’s discomfort with materialist frameworks does not mean a celebration of the “culturalist approach” like Weber’s, however.¹²

In *Imperial Encounter*, which offers the most elaborate account of the notion of interactional history cast in a comparative frame, the goal is fairly modest. In it, there is no

11 He also does experimental psychology and behavioralism at large whose conclusion is based on a sample of Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies – an evocative acronym (van der Veer 2016: 46). With an excellent deconstruction of PEW survey, he detects flaws in quantitative research, showing alternatively the richness of anthropological knowledge.

12 Cf., Brigit Meyer’s (2012) “mentalistic approaches” and “mentalism” in the studies of religion.

claim to present “an alternative history”; instead, it offers “alternative ways to look at the familiar problems and materials” (van der Veer 2001: 13). One of its principal objectives was to interrogate the opposition between the religious and the secular, in Britain and India alike. This inquiry is tracked through various sites: by investigating the very concept of religion and its changing trajectory, the role of Hinduism in the making of the masculine Hindu man and the role of Christianity in the making of the masculine Englishman, and the entailment of race, religion and nationalism and so on. In *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, the goal, over a decade later, is noticeably bolder: “What I offer in this book is a nonsecularist counter narrative.” The question of the secular-religious opposition unfolds here differently, as a “syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality”, where the four elements in the chain are interdependently located in relation to the state (van der Veer 2014: 9).

Along with the scale and temporal horizon, what to foreground as a unit of investigation is a much-debated issue in the literature on comparison. For van der Veer, the unit cannot be civilization as Max Weber posited it. Weber’s discourse compared “civilizational essences” rather than “historical networks” (van der Veer 2001: 10). One may add that as a sociologist of empire, Weber effaced empire as an important category in his analysis (Allen 2017). This Weberian preoccupation with essences, van der Veer justly observes, was predicated on an “oriental deficiency” (2016: 66). Though he does not say so, van der Veer’s refusal to deploy the category of civilization also implies a critique of Norbert Elias (most explicitly, of Samuel Huntington, of course). A theorist of civilizing process and Weberian in his orientation, Elias, in Jack Goody’s view, was ethnocentric as he took the civilizing process as unique to the history and sociology of the West (Goody 2002, cf., Liston and Mennell 2009 who defend Elias). Taking Elias’ theory as biased, Goody contended how Elias made no systematic comparative investigation of the non-West. This, however, did not prevent Elias from positing the increasing self-restraint at the heart of his argument about the civilizing process as opposite of “*Naturvolk*” in Ghana.

If not civilization, what about the nation-state? Van der Veer categorically shuns this too, as a viable unit of comparison on the following ground. The emergence of social sciences as disciplines in Europe coincided with the nation-forms and nation-thinking (2014: 9-10). Since anthropology was barely an exception to this historical association, it pursued research agenda in cahoots with the interests and aspirations of the states. Many anthropologists took the anthropological notion of holism as synonymous with society, which in turn had become substitutes for nation-states (Giddens 1990). Such a conception of society “as a unified whole” led to “the typecasting of societies and religions in a particular unifying way.” Especially revealing in this context is van der Veer’s phrase

“the macro sociological form of ethnic profiling,” which he uses to characterize holism-inspired works such as *Patterns of Cultures* by Ruth Benedict, *The Cultural Background of Personality* by Ralph Linton as well as works by Abraham Kardiner and Francis Hsu (van der Veer 2016: 31, 159n20).¹³

If neither civilization nor nation-state is a viable unit of comparison because of the notion of a priori “whole” both are predicated upon – whether in ideal types or universal models – then, what is the alternative? Van der Veer’s answer is “fragment.” In my reading, the relations between the fragment that he strongly advocates for and the whole that he wants to abandon for good, however, is hazy, if not under thought. One thought that comes to mind is: fragment, fine – but which entity is the fragment part of: conceptually, relationally and spatially? Does fragment have an existence of its own? Is not fragment a whole kept in abeyance by a power configuration? Setting these questions aside for the moment, the highly illustrative examples the book offers judiciously guide anthropologists and others to the path of his project of comparison. An example of comparison of fragments that arrested my attention in *The Value of Comparison* is the chapter on care and sanitation vis-à-vis the subalternated. With a historical lens, this chapter beautifully illuminates this subject by comparing China, India and the Netherlands. Equally revealing is the chapter that compares the issue of religious minority: Muslims in India, China and Western Europe – a comparison that is unusually rich as much as it is rare. Seen from the Indian nationalist perspective, it is almost defiant in that many Indians display their own brand of “exceptionalism” in resisting any comparison between “democratic” India and “communist” China.¹⁴ Beyond the respective differences in their forms of political arrangements, here, van der Veer instead shows how the commonality of nationalism, its discourse for a unified nation threatened by “others” allows for a comparison of fragments across China, India and Europe.

In addition to showing a fresh path of sustainable comparison, the contribution of *The Value of Comparison*, as I see it, is theoretical. More boldly and convincingly than other works, it questions the “continuing Western ethnocentrism in research” derived

13 Omission of Clifford Geertz here is a bit surprising. His *Islam Observed* argued that although both Indonesia and Morocco were mostly Muslim, they had contrasting holistic “historical personages,” “character,” and a “national archetype.” See, Ahmad (2018).

14 At Monash University, Australia, I supervised a doctoral thesis, which aimed to comparatively explain why China left India behind in the economic growth after 1947. The candidate, a Chinese national, explained it in terms of Hinduism and caste system (oblivious, additionally, of the fact that about twenty percent of India’s population is not Hindu) and charisma of chairman Mao (as if India lacked charismatic leaders). She completed her thesis after I left Monash University.

from as well as evident in the modernization paradigm or the very concepts beholden to the Enlightenment and its postulates: be it democracy, tolerance, civil society, religion, public sphere, secularism, family, and so on. Though articulated more forcefully here, a healthy distrust of Western/Christian categories or categories derived therefrom is discernible as early as 1987, well before the publication of van der Veer's first monograph. In an article in *Man*, he disowned the prevalent use of the term "sect" which scholars un-problematically applied to the Rāmānandī branch of Hindu monks (discussed above). Pointing out the origin of the term "sect" in Europe as a breakaway group from Church, he described Rāmānandīs as an order rather than a sect because Church as an institution did not exist in Hinduism (1987: 683: ff.). By raising such conceptual questions, *The Value of Comparison*, in short, becomes a remarkable intervention – the task of which is nothing less than putting the regnant idea of "the self-sufficient Euro-American modernity" (van der Veer 2016: 46, 28) in its place. Early on and with an expanded horizon for anthropology, the Introduction makes it clear. Below are some "fragments:"

Anthropology is primarily an engagement with 'difference' and 'diversity' and focuses on problems of cultural translation. As such, it offers a critique of the universalization of Western models and provides thus a basis for a comparative sociology. Ethnographical data derived from fieldwork form a big part of anthropology, but the study of other kinds of material – historical, textual, and visual – also benefits from an anthropological perspective.

Anthropology is the only social science that reflects on Western ethnocentrism and takes the problem of translation seriously.¹⁵

Comparison is thus not a relatively simple juxtaposition and comparison of two or more different societies but a complex reflection on the network of concepts that underlie our study of society as well as the formation of those societies themselves. It is always a double act of reflections (van der Veer 2016: 9, 20, 29).

One should note, if parenthetically, the presence of the Netherlands, van der Veer's home nation-state, in the entire comparative enterprise. Certainly, it is not a formal site of his research. However, its history, sociology and politics inform the comparative enterprise throughout, though not necessarily and overtly everywhere. Whether writing about secularism, tolerance or sanitation in India and China and placing them both in comparative relations to the West, the Netherlands serves as one among many points of references (van der Veer 2006, 2016: chapter vi). I, too, came to comparatively learn the Dutch meaning of "home," though rather differently. In the very early months of my PhD, van der

15 On issues of cultural translation like incommensurability and isomorphism, see Ahmad (2019).

Veer arranged a reading session with me to think comparatively about my own research on India. My assignment was to read and discuss with him two works: Robert Hefner's *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (2000) and Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1994). After the session, I casually mentioned it to some of my fellow Ph.D. friends. One of the responses I still remember was: "He invited you to his *home* for the discussion?" For me, there was nothing surprising in it. Many of my friends visited me in Patna, India, at my parents' home – a two-room first-floor apartment where, if we had meals, we had with newspapers or tablecloth spread over my father's bed in the room close to the tiny balcony (there was no separate dining area). Home invitation in the Netherlands often excludes visitors' access to the bedroom. It was hard to miss the comparative meanings of home in Patna and Utrecht. This observation contributed, partly at least, to my formulation of the neologism of *domophilia* as a phenomenon relationally positioned to Islamophobia as a global phenomenon and well beyond the divide of the "East" and the "West" as well as democratic versus authoritarian/monarchical nation-states (Ahmad 2013).

On the Very Style, and A Little More

Let me say a word or two about the intervention style of van der Veer as a prolific writer. In my opinion, it resembles Nietzsche's mode: "to philosophize with a hammer." This phrase is the subtitle of *Twilight of the Idols* (Brobjer 2010: 38). For the purpose of this paper, let me rephrase it as "theorizing with a hammer." Often hastily yoked by his commentators to the vocabulary of warfare alone, Nietzsche's metaphor was an expression that is also constructive and diagnostic. Deborah Cook (2018) and Amy Allen (2016: 193-195) use it as a method of exaggeration and hyperbole – the objective of which is not to exit the putative reality but to underline the sheer value of a thought at its utter extreme, unclouded by excess of ifs and buts. This method – or technique if you will – also informed writings of Adorno and Foucault; the latter once telling his interviewer that he had written nothing else but fiction (Cook 2018: 150n130).

While making arguments, many, if not most, anthropologists verily proceed with utmost caution, especially if and when they engage with viewpoints they want to contest or position themselves against. "Nuance", "off the mark", "over-stretched", "one-sided" "too watertight", and so on thus characterize their prose. Not van der Veer's, however. I do not mean that such words or expressions are entirely absent from van der Veer's writings.

What I instead suggest is that his writings also (and often) contain words like “mistake”, “erroneous”, “misleading” and “meaningless.” Having discussed Dumont’s structuralist understanding of the Hindu caste system and without mincing words, van der Veer wrote that to assume “a structural opposition of asceticism versus devotionism” is “to commit a *basic error*” (van der Veer 1987: 693). Likewise, in criticizing Jonathan Parry’s understanding of the position and role of Brahman priests, van der Veer wrote: “In Parry’s analysis...the highest aim in life for the Brahman priest is to leave his priestly profession...I think this interpretation is *erroneous*” (1985: 319). To take another example, he criticized Edward Said as follows: “It would be a *serious mistake* to deny agency to the colonized in our effort to show the force of colonial discourse” (van der Veer 1993: 23). About Anderson, van der Veer wrote: “Such a *misleading* conception is also fundamental to Benedict Anderson’s ground-breaking discussion of nationalism” (1994: 15). One more example will suffice to demonstrate my point about van der Veer’s theorization with a hammer: “religion’s organization, its place in society...are so different in Japan that...a simple form of the secularization theory...derived from...Western Christianity becomes *meaningless*” (van der Veer and Lehmann 1996: 10, all italics here are the author’s).

To conclude this short section, let me note another feature of van der Veer’s scholarship. A reader of his works from the 1980s to the present is struck by the fact that while he has engaged amply with things new, continuity of certain ideas, themes and authors mark his oeuvre. For instance, regardless of the change in fieldwork sites, relocation for employment from one country to another, and movements of time, religion and modernity/West, both broadly construed, have remained the pivot of his thinking. Thus viewed, globalization is not a process unhooked from religion, as economists and political scientists would have us believe, but a “genre” of religion (van der Veer 2011: 9). As for authors and interlocutors, Arjun Appadurai, Talal Asad, Louis Dumont, Clifford Geertz, Marcel Mauss, Max Weber, among others, recur in his texts from the first monograph in 1988 through to the latest in 2016.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

This paper makes no claim that it is an all-inclusive analysis of van der Veer’s entire corpus of writings. Rather, it is one among many possible analyses – and a preliminary one at that. To be sure, the paper bears the marks of my own research interests (hence limitations). I do not have a precise conclusion to make. In lieu of it, I use this space to make

some remarks about themes and questions, which van der Veer's works do not squarely address but gainfully work as analytical enablers for future research.

From van der Veer's publications, it appears that he is hardly an admirer of the nation-state as a political institution or nationalism as a corporate ideology – the passion of which has much affinity with modern religion, itself considerably nationalized. He is equally skeptical of nationalism in its current more popular garb of civilizationalism, put in place by Huntington and readily embraced by such International Relations theorists such as Peter Katzenstein, who characterizes China, India and the US as civilizational states (van der Veer 2016: 64). One can sense this discomfort splashed, not often directly enough, throughout much of his writings. Yet, one does not see a full-blown theorization of the pre-, non- or anti-national forms of life (intertwined with death) as alternative, parallel, or counter to the nation-state, much less to postnational belonging (on which, see Appadurai 1996), which is surely hegemonic, even naturalized, but the history (and probably the future, too) of which is soaked in blood. True that an ascendant Europe from the eighteenth century significantly transformed much of the non-Western world by mapping it along the axis of nationalism, and eventually in the institutionalized forms of the nation-states. No less true, however, is the presence of counter imaginations, in West and non-West alike, to the hegemonic projects of nation-states. Writing about the French West Africa, Fredrick Cooper (2011, 2018) observes how during the 1930s and 1940s, many intellectuals and politicians there as well as those in France nursed and worked for political programs that cannot be reduced to the nation-form or nation-thinking. In India, Hasrat Mohani (1878-1951), an important anti-colonial leader and journalist, viewed the future free India as the “Constitutional Indian Union of Federations of Republics”. He visualized one federation each in east, south, center, south-west, and west of India, each federation in turn comprising many republics organized along regional and/or linguistic lines (in Ahmad 2015: 103). Clearly, there was hardly any enthusiasm for Mohani's vision, certainly not among the ethnic partisans of muscular Indian/Hindu nationalism. And today most Indians do not even know his name. The absence of enthusiasm vis-à-vis Mohani's ideas and an utter lack of knowledge among contemporary Indians about who he was should not astonish us. Given its anti-doxa force, Mohani's proposal looked confusing and disturbing to the partisans of nationalism. This by no means diminishes the radical import of non-national forms of thought in West Africa or India. The point is to recognize that nationalism or nation-state thinking was not the only thought available. We should also note that states like Syria were created not in consonance with the “national” wishes of its people but in “defiant opposition to the vast majority” (Farouk-Alli 2014: 8). In short, and especially because of the world-wide rise of populism, the significance

of investigating non-national forms of life, by an accomplished comparativist that van der Veer is, need not be stressed. In a review of Eric Wolf's famous book, *Europe and the People without History*, Asad (1987) asked: "are there histories of people without Europe?" To pursue such questions, one may ask: Are there histories of non-, anti- or counter-nationalism within and without Europe? If so, do they have any future – immediate, postponed, delayed, interrupted or denied?

As for religion, which along with nation has been van der Veer's life-long concern, in a recent interview with *Time Higher Education* (Matthews 2018), he observed that the Netherlands of his childhood was so religious that the whole life was organized along religious affiliation, his own being a form of Dutch Reformed Protestantism. Reading the interview, I was reminded of Edmund Gosse's (1925) account of growing up in a Plymouth brethren environment in the late nineteenth century Britain. In the interview, van der Veer remarked that "I have never been a believer." At the age of eight, he had found out that the belief in God or religion was "not very plausible." To some, it may seem somewhat too early (and hasty to boot). Loosing something before acquiring it, or exiting a zone¹⁶ before duly arriving there?

This critical evaluation of Peter van der Veer's diverse body of works published over the past three decades or so, I hope, will interest anthropologists, sociologists, scholars of comparative religions and politics, Indianists, Sinologists, Asianists, and historians. In particular, it will interest Dutch sociologists and anthropologists. Scholars of academic biographies, intellectual historians, especially of Europe, too, may find this paper of some relevance.

16 The choice of "zone" is intentional; van der Veer edited the Routledge's book series titled "Zones of Religion," which van der Veer (1996) is a part of.

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