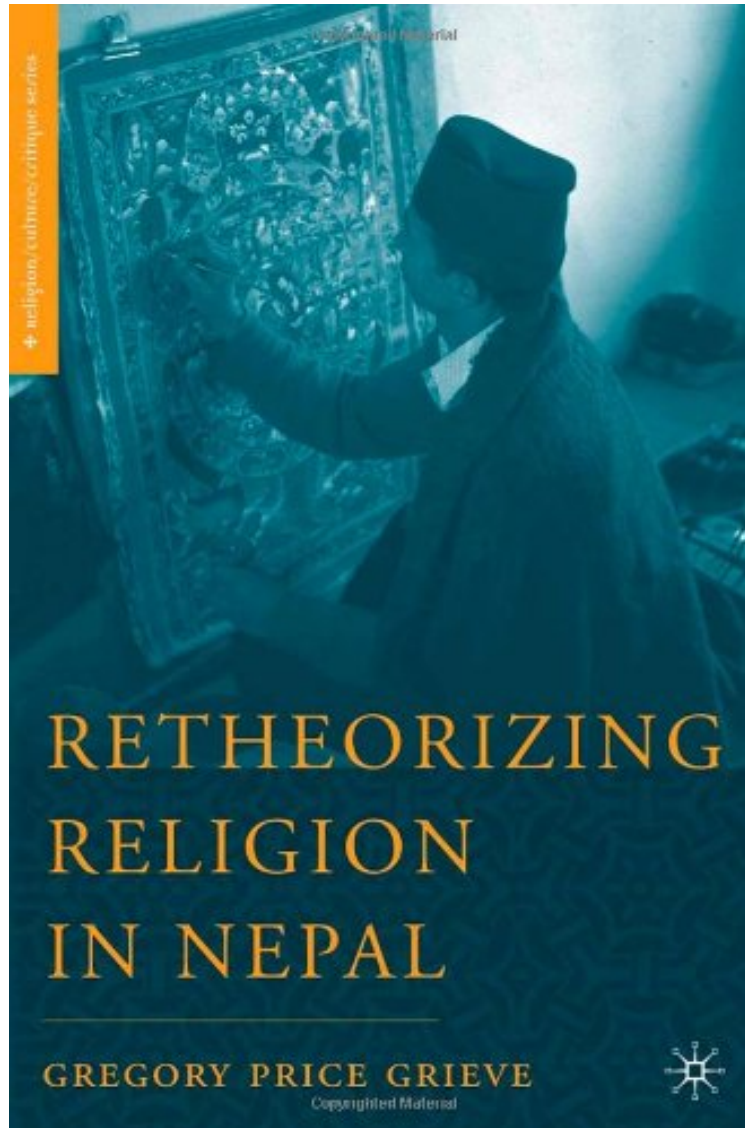


[Library ebook] Retheorizing Religion in Nepal (Religion/Culture/Critique)

Retheorizing Religion in Nepal (Religion/Culture/Critique)

G. Grieve

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G. Grieve : Retheorizing Religion in Nepal (Religion/Culture/Critique) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Retheorizing Religion in Nepal (Religion/Culture/Critique):

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Re-theorizing Religion in Nepal Grieve's powerful studyBy Frederick J. YoungRe-theorizing Religion in NepalPalgrave Macmillan (Series: Religion/Culture/Critique)November 2006208 PagesGregory Price Grieve's Re-theorizing Religion in Nepal is an engaging and thought-provoking study of religion in Nepal, with important insights for the study of religion and culture broadly conceived. What becomes so

appealing about Grieve's text is its opening and challenging of many theoretical concepts, philosophies and strategies both inside and outside the academy today. While it is almost impossible to lay out the complex working and performative strategies of Grieve's work here, I would like to pause and remind the reader that Grieve's work simultaneously performs the thing that it analyses and critiques, the fact that the book's chapters are structured as one would create a mandala is only the most obvious example of what will draw a wide and intellectually engaged readership to this important work. But, for the sake of brevity, here, I would like to address three interrelated lines of inquiry that Grieve sets into operation: First, the core of the work is ethnographic research concerning lived religion in Nepal, centering on the famous city of Bhaktapur in the Kathmandu valley. We have here the careful and thought provoking field work that took many years to complete, both at The University of North Carolina and the University of Chicago. Grieve draws upon interviews, theoretical observations, archival materials, websites and his experience studying how to make mandalas--it should be noted that he himself, is now somewhat of an accomplished mandala painter. He covers a wide range of Nepali concepts and practices, including the natures of persons, gods and god-images (statues, paintings, costumes), ritual practices including sacrifice and dance, and communal relations. His analysis attends closely to native terms such as karma, puja, shakti, and others. What becomes important is how Grieve's reading of these terms challenges the discipline of the theory of religion and also opens up crucial and broader questions for culture studies and critical theory. Grieve opens up the field by problematizing the concept of the "Book," and thereby expands not just what academics think about, but how they think. Second, based on that research, Grieve makes significant advances in the theory of religion. He highlights the importance of "prosaic" religious practices, the everyday religion of people in a city, in contrast with the "scripturalist" bias that scholars bring to the study of religion in South Asia. Grieve argues against the presupposition that Nepali religion today (or any religion, I think) can be well-understood only through canonical or elite written sources, and uses his theoretical dexterity, often subtly understanding, to deconstruct the canon. In this way, he focuses upon the common and physical dimensions of religion, the important practices of everyday life. But, the reader then runs into a complication, as Grieve does not simply replace the everyday or quotidian from the canonical. Instead, we witness, through his lucid descriptions, how Bhaktapur and the various rituals resist and play with any intervention, categorical or otherwise. Thus, in this way, he draws upon material from classical books and elite thinkers, but these are balanced and contrasted with critical historical work, observation of daily activities as well as festivals, and interviews with people from diverse parts of Nepali society. The result is an account of religion in Bhaktapur that reveals complexity, irony, and contestation at every level of practice. Third, framing all of this are subtle reflections concerning scholarship itself. Grieve is very attentive to the engagement between scholars (including himself) and Nepali society. He shows how prior scholarship has affected development projects in Bhaktapur. He notes that people he interviews have often read the same books that offers a critique of, and they sometimes even pull out those books when asked about their religion, playing against any readily available "arrest" or anticipation of what they should be saying or doing. He discusses cases when people are critical of past ethnographers' behaviors, or even asks them about religion so that they can "know what to tell the next ethnographer." Building on this awareness of cross-cultural interaction, Grieve argues that the scholar needs to be shaped by the culture studied, not only in the content presented, but also the form of presentation. To demonstrate this, as I mentioned above, the book is organized according to the process of making a mandala, thus modeling scholarly work on the creative work that generates Nepali religion. Each chapter begins with an evocative description of an element in the production of a mandala, and then the prose transitions in elegant ways to elements of religious activity in Bhaktapur. This style is very effective in that it performs what it does, setting into play an operation of "transformative critique," changing the relationship between ethnographer, Nepali, and the reader. Grieve's ethnographic work is extremely perceptive, and he takes great care in how he presents the people he writes about. I have rarely read a scholarly book in which those another culture appears so savvy, witty, curious, and challenging. A child points at a stone and asks, "What is a god?" A secretary defines the complex concept of shakti by replying, "Shakti is shakti, stupid!" A sagely teacher explains sacrifice by asking Grieve, "Where were you the year before you were born?" Grieve does not romanticize such responses, as one so invested in the culture and people might be apt to do, but rather he exposit their complexity in relation to his own observations concerning religion and society. In other words, he theorizes with the people of Bhaktapur, not only about them, and he situates their comments and actions in his rich analytic framework. Most distinctively, Grieve reveals a culture where people (and their gods) look back at "us," the readers, and talk. Nepalis comment on "Americans" and other tourists. They place Peace Corps volunteers in their parade floats. They paint ethnographers into their paintings. More generally, they are critically aware of the global environment with which they engage. Grieve draws this subtle ethnographic analysis into a critical reassessment of crucial academic concepts, not only about religion but tradition, history, modernity, development, and tourism. The book also shows great care in details, with intriguing quotes at the outset of the chapters, witty section titles, and very helpful figures and tables, which appeals, I am sure, to the ethnographer, as well as to those of us not directly trained in the field. Grieve's distinct mix of ethnography and theory, along with his reflexive sensitivity, make *Re-theorizing Religion in Nepal* a unique contribution for its intended audiences. Frederick Young is a Senior Lecture in the School of Technoculture, Humanities and Planning, in the Department of Literature, Communication and Digital

Media at the Blekinge Tekniska Högskola in Sweden.

Rethorizing Religion in Nepal is an engaging and thought-provoking study of Religion in South Asia, with important insights for the study of religion and culture more broadly conceived. Grieve uses ethnographic material as well as poststructuralist and postcolonialist approaches to critique and expand religious studies as a discipline.

"Grieve brings a refreshing new approach to the much-vexed question of the sorts of questions that one can ask of the logic of other peoples' rituals. He approaches the theoretical issues from the bottom up, by going there and talking to people, instead of writing his opinion in response to the opinions of other people here (or, for that matter, there). He has brought a particular inflection to the big generalizations, and this is a great relief. He knows a great deal about Bhaktapur, and his book about it is rich in data and persuasive insights." - Wendy Doniger, Mircea Eliade Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, and author of *Other Peoples' Myths: The Cave of Echoes*

"Blending ethnographic detail from the field with critical and theoretically-informed reflection on the academic construction of the religious, Grieve provides an insightful exploration of contemporary Newar tradition and culture through a detailed discussion of the construction of mandalas. In so doing the author challenges dominant scripto-centric accounts of South Asian tradition and society and seeks to open up a discursive space where subaltern concerns and perspectives can be taken seriously. Grieve constructs a scholarly mandala of his own in this work, providing much food for thought and contemplation for anthropologists, specialists of South Asia and scholars of religious studies." - Richard King, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Vanderbilt University, and author of *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"*

"Everyone in religious studies should find Grieve's contribution highly original and above all thought provoking." - David Holmberg, Cornell University

About the Author
GREGORY PRICE GRIEVE is Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA. He has published articles in *Numen*, *Culture, Theory and Critique*, *Journal of Material Religion*, and *Studies in Nepalese History and Society*.