events that – even when they are as bloody as the genocide on the Herero and Nama – quickly migrate into the advertising fabric of racial picture making. Not only does the constitution of what Advertising Empire calls ‘visual power’ (309) have its own historicity; it also imposes it on ‘non-visual history’. As such, the book is a welcome contribution to the expanding field of visuality in cultural studies.

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Parna Sengupta, Pedagogy for Religion: Missionary Education and the Fashioning of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal (2011), x+211 (University of California Press, Berkeley, £44.95/$65.00, paperback £18.95/$26.95).


In the first section of the book, Sengupta lays out the relatively autonomous context within which ‘Anglo-vernacular’ schools in Bengal grew. In keeping with the goals embodied in Charles Wood’s dispatch of 1854, the colonial state began to provide ‘grants-in-aid’ for Bengali language and Anglo-vernacular schools. As with the case of the flawed Permanent Settlement of 1793, Wood’s dispatch pinned its faith on a category of ‘improving’ educators that did not exist. The bhadralok (English-educated upper-caste Hindu reformers) who took advantage of the grants to educate members of their own social class were not interested in ‘downward filtration’. The promise of upward mobility that education proffered was partly fulfilled by mission schools. But here, too, as Sengupta elaborates in subsequent chapters, training and knowledge were disseminated in gradations across steep gendered, racial and class lines. Equality was not a Victorian trait.

The connections between evangelicalism and the growth of primary education in Britain and her empire and the tensions both between education for the ‘higher classes’ and the ‘masses’ and between various denominations and their proselytizing impulses are well developed in the first few chapters of the book. Sengupta points the reader to the unexpected: we learn that most missionary schools in Bengal preferred using schoolbooks written by the bhadralok reformer Iswarchandra Vidyasagar to those produced by the Christian Vernacular Education Society. Arguing that the language and examples employed by Vidyasagar were more ‘authentic’, these Protestant missionaries wished to reconfigure the curriculum so that Christianity was taught in school as a separate subject.

Sengupta skilfully traces the way pedagogical techniques travelled and mutated across cultures: Pestalozzi’s ‘object lessons’ meant vastly different things to children in Austria, England and
Bengal. The replacement of objects with pictures of objects and the ‘backward’ native with the equally ‘backward’ and fetishistic tribal in books produced by the British and the bhadrak on are two such examples. In subsequent chapters Sengupta examines the different methods and books used to train native Christian and bhadrak teachers in normal schools that were established by missionaries as well as upper-caste Hindus. The development of the ‘gallery’ method as opposed to the monitorial method of teaching, the multiple goals of ‘civilization’, ‘uplift’ and conversion, the obsession with providing racial ‘models’, the presence or absence of the tribal teacher trainee in schoolbooks produced by the missionary and the bhadrak provide new ways of thinking through the relationship between various social strata in late colonial Bengal.

Sengupta also provides an interesting explanation for the slow growth of women’s education in Bengal. Tracking the initial interest in training low-caste bairagi women in the newly established Dhaka Normal School in the 1860s, Sengupta suggests the subsequent disinterest was because new norms of respectability cultivated by upper-caste Hindus prevented such women from being hired as tutors in so-called respectable families. It was the ‘paradox of teaching respectability through non-respectable teachers’ that led to the limited reach of women’s education in colonial Bengal (122).

In a final chapter Sengupta turns to the much-discussed trope of Muslim ‘backwardness’ in the 1870s and 1880s to argue for patterns in the colonial state’s patronage of particular kinds of religious education. Initially averse to spending more on their Muslim subjects, the colonial state continued to patronize existing pathshalas (Hindu-dominated rural schools). However, according to Sengupta, the sectarian atmosphere of late nineteenth-century Bengal provoked the government into recognizing Muslim maktabs as true primary schools. Fortuitously for the colonial state, the ashrf (Muslim elite) were also troubled by what they considered were ‘un-Islamic’ practices of the Muslim masses; this led to a concerted effort among both the state and the ashrf elite to emphasize texts over practice. The schools that received the most funding were those that ‘functioned most like Christian schools’ (139). This allows Sengupta to reiterate her central point: it was religion and religious identity rather than secularism that became characteristic of modern education.

Yet she is unable to square the circle of her own evidence – apparently hardening lines between religious communities in late nineteenth-century Bengal dissolve in the two commission reports produced in 1935 and 1942, which affirmed the need for a single school system for the children of multiple religions. What might be the genealogy for such a recommendation? Although Sengupta’s book offers numerous pieces of evidence suggesting that religious identities were growing increasingly polarized, she does not dwell on alternative possibilities and ways of thinking in her earlier chapters.

I am reminded of the opening lines to ‘Astronomer’, the poem written by the poet-linguist-philosopher A. K. Ramanujan for his father: ‘Sky-man in a man-hole/with astronomy for dream/astrology for nightmare.’ It is this seemingly incompatible juxtaposition – their ‘new ways of thought and behavior do not replace, but live along with older “religious” ways’1 – that is missing in Sengupta’s otherwise informative and well-researched book. Pedagogy for Religion contains a wealth of detail on changes in the curricula and organization of education in

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formal spaces such as the mission school and the normal school; it does not, however, engage with what remained of the past. What a child might have learnt or retained from non-formal arenas such as family and kinship networks is not addressed in the book. So complete is her reliance on colonial sources or sources that addressed a colonial audience that one of Bengal’s most celebrated and indeed ‘alternative’ educationists Rabindranath Tagore does not merit a mention. The other lacuna is that Pedagogy for Religion offers no comparisons with other regions. We learn fleetingly of training manuals being translated into other Indian vernaculars. But there is hardly any discussion of developments in education, missionary or otherwise, in other parts of India. These gaps notwithstanding, Sengupta has written an important book on an increasingly significant subject.

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The fifth chapter of Coller’s Arab France reconstructs a forgotten ‘pogrom’ (121) that razed Marseille’s Egyptian village in June 1815. The recovery of this lost episode brings to mind other instances of ‘racial violence’ (9) that targeted North Africans during the twentieth century, from the First World War and the Algerian War for Independence to eerily similar events during the summer of 1973, when the killing of fifteen North African workers in Marseille prompted the Algerian government to end emigration to France. While Coller chooses to frame his work against the background of the unrest of 2005 rather than situating it in the much longer history of violence against Muslims, his narrative is part of a growing literature that seeks to highlight the connections between the hexagon and the empire in order to demonstrate the existence of a ‘transcultural exchange’ (12). Coller unearths a range of sources that allow him to reconstruct the experiences of a little-known group of quite heterogeneous Egyptians, Syrians and others from across the Levant, who settled in France between the collapse of Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign and the conquest of Algiers in 1830.

The book is roughly divided into two parts, with the violence of 1815 separating Coller’s analysis of two distinct periods. The early chapters explore the origins and experiences of a culturally, socially, ethnically and religiously diverse group forced to flee after having co-operated with Napoleonic forces in Egypt. One of the book’s strengths is its ability to demonstrate how the Arab community’s fate was directly attached to ‘a single regime, even a single man, Napoleon Bonaparte’ (122). Coller shows how, despite both significant tensions within the Egyptian émigré community and Napoleon’s desire to stifle their influence, France’s first sizeable Arab population put down considerable roots in Marseille, Melun and Paris. The later chapters examine why Napoleon’s fall from power proved so disastrous for the communities that constituted Arab France.