

RENATA IWICKA\*

(Jagiellonian University)

**Book Review:**

**Virinder S. Kalra, *Sacred and Secular Musics. A Postcolonial Approach*, Bloomsbury 2015**

*Sacred and Secular Musics* offers a new approach to an often understudied academic subject, which in this case is the binary relationship between sacred and secular music in the volatile region on the India-Pakistani border that is Punjab. The majority of the book is focused on the musical landscape of Punjab post-1947 (and in a broader perspective: both India and Pakistan), however the thick theoretic background of sources, dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, provides a holistic image of the sacred/secular dynamics in the musical traditions of the region, coming from both indigenous and colonial experience.

*Sacred and Secular Musics* explains in detail the historical process of musicology regarding Asia, how the methods of writing the religion into the music were implemented both in Western music, culminating in the secular Classical canon, and in South Asia where it remained as a pervasive force (thus, the author coins the term *Clessicul*, drawing on the Western 'Classical', but maintaining the local pronunciation). In order to do that, the author implements a postcolonial and deconstructionist approach, often referencing such names as Derrida, Spivak and Mandair. Deconstructing the opposition of sacred/secular, *Sacred and Secular Musics* provides a wide range of possible interpretative tools for further study.

The book relies not only on methodological tools to analyse the dynamics in the relationship between religion and music, but also includes a number of interviews with local artists who explain their art. This way, *Sacred and*

---

\* Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations  
Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland  
e-mail: grad\_ecmaise@yahoo.com

*Secular Musics* gives also an insight into particular situations and subjects, explaining the differences in status of traditional musical instruments and Western ones used during the performances. Those particular situations are taken directly from interviews with local musicians who provide a deeper insight into the complicated musical sphere of the region. As the author states: “[drawing] on examples from *qawwali*, *kirtan* and *dharmic geet*, this book offers new empirical material to the canon of musicology as well as new insights into conceptualizing religion and music”<sup>1</sup>. This is true not only in terms of conceptualization, but it also gives an excellent insight into the changes inside the society of musicians. With this in mind, Kalra provides some further explanation for his methodology:

Gender restrictions, religious boundaries and performance contexts shift and change in the period of a musician’s lifetime. Recording technology enables a continuity of aural appreciation and indicates traces of particular times. It is for this reason that oral testimonies from musicians, labelled as *qawwals* or *kirtanis* or folk, and their performances are crucial to this text<sup>2</sup>.

This statement cannot be argued with. It is hard to draw such a panoramic view of an unknown musical landscape without giving some local examples. The performances are explained in the text, but the book offers something more – a simple link to a YouTube channel, where all of 25 performances are uploaded and available to listen to. This way the reception of the text is different and the reader is fully immersed in the theories presented by the author.

The changes in the musical traditions of the region are closely knit with political, social, religious and economical shifts in both India and Pakistan. *Sacred and Secular Musics* explores those issues as well, describing new ways in which religion and music became intertwined and started to be expressed in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The abundance of examples given by the author makes it easy to understand the complicated dynamics of change in Punjab and both countries.

*Sacred and Secular Musics* fills the void in the musicology field, especially when it comes to non-Western music traditions and opens up a new range of perspectives as well as a theoretical background for further studies.

---

<sup>1</sup> V. S. Karla, *Sacred and Secular Musics. A Postcolonial Approach*, London–New York 2015, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

Table of Contents:

1. *Alaap*, Introduction
2. Postcolonial Musicological Present
3. Sacred-Classical-Clessicul
4. Crafting *Kirtan*
5. Saying *Qaul*, Being *Qawaal*, Singing *Qawwali*
6. Drumming Devotion
7. Finale

Bibliographical data:

Publisher: Bloomsbury Academic (January 15, 2015)  
Series: Bloomsbury Studies in Religion and Popular Music  
Edition: 1st  
Hardcover: 256 pages  
ISBN: 978-1441121325

