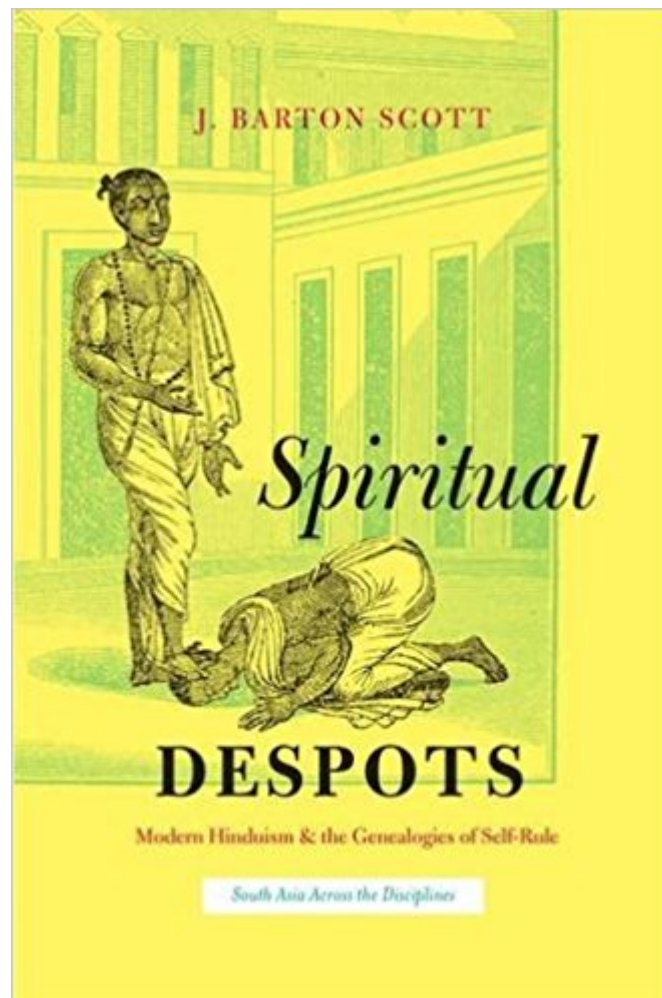




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# Spiritual Despots: Modern Hinduism And The Genealogies Of Self-Rule (South Asia Across The Disciplines)



## Synopsis

Historians of religion have examined at length the Protestant Reformation and the liberal idea of the self-governing individual that arose from it. In *Spiritual Despots*, J. Barton Scott reveals an unexamined piece of this story: how Protestant technologies of asceticism became entangled with Hindu spiritual practices to create an ideal of the "self-ruling subject" crucial to both nineteenth-century reform culture and early twentieth-century anticolonialism in India. Scott uses the quaint term "priestcraft" to track anticlerical polemics that vilified religious hierarchy, celebrated the individual, and endeavored to reform human subjects by freeing them from external religious influence. By drawing on English, Hindi, and Gujarati reformist writings, Scott provides a panoramic view of precisely how the specter of the crafty priest transformed religion and politics in India. Through this alternative genealogy of the self-ruling subject, *Spiritual Despots* demonstrates that Hindu reform movements cannot be understood solely within the precolonial tradition, but rather need to be read alongside other movements of their period. The book's focus moves fluidly between Britain and India, engaging thinkers such as James Mill, Keshub Chunder Sen, Max Weber, Karsandas Mulji, Helena Blavatsky, M. K. Gandhi, and others to show how colonial Hinduism shaped major modern discourses about the self. Throughout, Scott sheds much-needed light how the rhetoric of priestcraft and practices of worldly asceticism played a crucial role in creating a new moral and political order for twentieth-century India and demonstrates the importance of viewing the emergence of secularism through the colonial encounter.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Much has been written on nineteenth-century Hindu reformers. Scott's intervention in this discourse, however, is unique and stimulating; written through the lens of postmodernism and using English, Hindi, and Gujarati writings. Scott effectively provides new insights into the role of these reformers and their connections to ideas and theorists beyond the subcontinent, thereby going beyond the boundaries of nation and culture. This intellectual history will be essential for the student and scholar of neo-Vedanta and modern Hinduism." (Journal of the American Academy of Religion) "Spiritual Despots is a valuable and quite unusual intellectual history centered on the idea of priestcraft; an important subject, though sorely neglected in recent academic scholarship. Scott offers a substantial contribution to the new trend in intellectual history that tries to breach the boundaries of national space and pursue movements of thought across spatial and cultural boundaries. Interesting and persuasive, Spiritual Despots poses a significant methodological revision for this type of intellectual history; it shifts comparatively back and forth between Indian thought on religious reform and contemporary British discussion on the nature of religiosity under conditions of modernity. Written clearly and with precision, Spiritual Despots will be indispensable to academic circles in Indian intellectual history, religious thought, and social scientists engaged in rethinking theories of secularization." (Sudipta Kaviraj, Columbia University) "This wholly original book offers us a sophisticated account of the making of a new kind of spiritual and political subject in colonial India. Scott argues that the modern Hindu self is produced within a global context in which the autonomous subject of liberalism is questioned and undermined. He elegantly shows how this results in a subjectivity defined by self-rule as a form of splitting and self-referentiality that eventually provides the foundation for an anticolonial politics that was at the same time a practice of psychic revolution." (Faisal Devji, University of Oxford) "Spiritual Despots is an intelligent contribution to several ongoing conversations in religious studies and South Asian studies. Scott's argument is sophisticated and clearly written, and he approaches several 'big questions' associated with various works of Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Charles Taylor from a novel perspective. Spiritual Despots will be of interest to any scholar of religious studies, South Asian studies, intellectual history, or comparative political theorists." (Andrew Sartori, New York University)

J. Barton Scott is assistant professor of historical studies and the study of religion at the University of Toronto. A

This is a challenging but rewarding book!

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