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Book Review of "Indian Religions: Renaissance and Renewal"

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Anna S. King, ed., *Indian Religions: Renaissance and Renewal* (London: Equinox, 2006), xix and 412 pages. Cost (in the United States): \$90

The eighteen articles in this volume grew from papers delivered at the 2006 Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions. The Symposium featured both newer and more advanced scholars who presented papers on a variety of topics and traditions of India (but especially Hinduism and Buddhism). The volume is only lightly edited, and retains the inconsistencies of citation style, transliteration (e.g., Śamkara, Śankara, Śaṅkara, and Shankara all appear), and terminology (e.g., “Hinayana” versus “Theravada”) one would expect in a collection of conference papers. Moreover, the Spalding Symposia are not generally oriented around a specific theme, and though there is some implicit conversation between and among the various articles in this volume, as a whole it lacks the cohesion of collections with more focused themes, having instead, as King puts it in her introduction, “the character of a scholarly journal” (xii). Therefore, while the volume’s value is occasionally greater than the sum of its parts, it is not significantly so. That is not to say, however, that there are not some rather impressive and provocative parts.

Indian Religions is divided into four sections. Klaus Klostermaier opens the first section, “Challenging Paradigms” with an article entitled “Hinduism—Hindutva—Hindu Dharma.” In this article, which King’s introduction suggests “undoubtedly evoked the most passionate, and even hostile, responses” (xii), Klostermaier argues that the true Hindu Renaissance (usually associated with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) is happening *right now* through the work of the Sangh Parivar and other exponents of Hindutva ideologies. Klostermaier compares the Hindutva movement so reviled by many western and Indian scholars to religious reform movements touched off by Shankara, Ramanuja, and Caitanya. These movements have in common, he claims, the fact that they “take elements of Hindu tradition and reshape them in the light of their own time so as to provide answers to the needs of their contemporaries” (10). Klostermaier takes religion scholars to task for their tendency to present Hindutva as an aberration of “true” Hinduism. Hindutva ideas and ideals should of course be compared to those of other forms of Hinduism, but to dismiss Hindutva as deviant rather than attempting to put it in its proper historical and sociological context (which Klostermaier believes is still significantly influenced by the memory of Muslim and Christian colonialism) is, he thinks, to arbitrarily essentialize Hinduism.

In the section’s second article, Hans Bakker differentiates the principle of *ahimsa* (“not killing”) from Hindu theories about warfare, which he says “was endemic in South Asia and seen as the right and duty of the Hindu king” (28). Bakker describes the various ways that warfare has been conceived and regulated in Hindu history and suggests that the Hindu encounter with Islamic invaders after the eleventh century altered Hindu views on the topic in ways that are still relevant to the interpretation of Indian communal unrest today.

Knut Jacobsen and Ninian Smart (posthumously) argue, in their contribution to this section, “Is Hinduism an Offshoot of Buddhism?” that the immensity of the Buddhist effect on Hinduism has been underestimated, so much so that—as the title implies—the usual presentation of Buddhism as an offshoot of Hinduism should perhaps be reversed. Among the central ideas and practices of contemporary Hinduism which may derive, the

authors argue, from Buddhism (appearing as they do in Buddhism at least as early as in the Hindu tradition), are rebirth, *moksha*, meditation, renunciation, *ahimsa*, vegetarianism, cosmic cycles, the soteriological centrality of religious teachers (gurus), etc. Despite its necessarily (yet sometimes frustratingly) tentative nature, the article is in many ways persuasive.

The last article in Section One, “The Philosophy of Religion from the Perspective of Indian Religions,” is authored by Karel Werner, founder of the Spalding Symposium. In it, he criticizes philosophers of religion for being overly influenced by western theism. After reviewing and critiquing the work of some prominent (and some not so prominent) western philosophers of religion (Hick, Proudfoot, Linhart, etc.) and noting, with surprise and disappointment, that even Arvind Sharma’s work on Hindu and Buddhist philosophies of religion falls prey to the theistic bias, Werner argues that an encounter with the Indian tradition will aid and correct contemporary philosophers of religion in what he considers their four central tasks: 1) “...the conceptual analysis of human thought and the ways in which it is expressed” which includes “descriptions of human experiences, in so far as they have religious contents” (60), 2) the “interpretation or elucidation of religious teachings in terms compatible with philosophical means of expression” (60), 3) a consideration of the justifiability of religious teachings “as ontologically conceivable in the realm of the possible” (60), and 4) participation in “philosophical thinking about religion” (61).

The articles in Section Two, “Text and Context” all focus on Indian textual traditions (or those who interpreted them). Dermot Killingley’s article provides a close textual analysis and comparison of various Vedic (esp. Upanishadic) and Samkhya formulations of the body and its functions, which appear frequently in scriptures as lists of five, or “pentads,” like the common Vedic formulation: speech, breath, sight, hearing, and mind (73). Killingley emphasizes the microcosmic/macrocosmic homologies prevalent in these conceptions and the continuity of Samkhya formulations with those that appear in the Vedas (despite the obvious differences between the two).

David Bastow’s “Time and the Sarvāstivādins” analyzes this early Buddhist community’s argument for the existence of past and future *dharmas*—“short-lived psycho-physical experience-events” (113)—which was based on the following three propositions: 1) That one can, in a meditative state, examine, or “see” one’s own state of mind, past states of mind, and the future consequences of present actions and/or states of mind, 2) That a state of mind which can be seen cannot be simultaneous with the seeing, and 3) That “whatever can be seen must exist” (112). Bastow provisionally accepts the first two propositions, but insists that we can only accept the third if we assume that “what is now open to [our] direct mental inspection is the very object itself [Direct Realism], not some representation of it [Representative Realism]” (121). This, however is an assumption he acknowledges is at the moment very much up for debate in philosophical circles.

An article in this section by Jacqueline Suthren Hirst describes Shankara’s strategies of “negation, complementarity and mutual purification of terms” (124), with which he analyzed scriptural language employed to describe the self (*atman*) and *Brahman*. Shankara (c. eighth century CE), considered by many the preeminent exponent of *advaita vedanta*, insisted that the various words used to describe such things should limit, correct, and qualify each other, and Suthren Hirst argues cogently that the diverse portraits of Shankara which have come down to us through history (Shankara as ascetic mystic, as

exegete, as philosopher, as social reformer, etc.) should be used in the same way. In the end, however, she contends that Shankara is most appropriately understood as a theologian with “soteriological concerns” (127) and a pronounced reliance upon scripture.

Kathleen Taylor’s delightfully sleuthing contribution to Section Two examines the influential and (at the time) controversially sympathetic series of works on the Tantras published between 1913 and 1922 by Sir John Woodroffe, the Calcutta High Court judge and connoisseur of Indian art, under the pseudonym of Arthur Avalon (a not-so-well-kept secret). Taylor suggests that Woodroffe used the pseudonym not to protect himself so much as to obscure the fact that he had collaborated with his far more knowledgeable Indian friend, Atal Bihari Ghose. Taylor hypothesizes that Ghose believed (probably rightly), that having sympathetic treatments of the Tantras associated with the name of a respected British Orientalist would have a more positive effect on public sentiment (British *and* Indian) than if they were attributed to an Indian Hindu, and therefore chose to remain anonymous.

David Gellner’s essay on Theravada revivalism in Nepal is the most lucid and theoretical of the contributions to Section Three, which is organized around the theme, “Encounter, Revival, and Reform.” The monks and nuns who introduced Theravada Buddhism among Mahayana-oriented Newar Buddhists in the first half of the twentieth century, Gellner argues, understood themselves to be restoring “authentic” monastic practice. Yet at the same time, they were clearly also a modernizing force. For this reason, while Gellner generally rejects the Theravada=Protestant, Mahayana=Catholic analogy when it is applied to Buddhism as a whole (and gives good reasons for doing so), he allows that it might have some utility in the case of the Nepalese Theravada revival.

Matthew Clark’s tentative but well-documented history of the Dasanami (“Ten Names”) renunciate lineages not only reads past the hagiographical *Mathamnayas* literature to trace the development, institutionalization, and standardization of this famous tradition, but also shows how, between the eighth and fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, Shankara is snatched by the normative literature from relative historical obscurity and enshrined as the putative founder of the tradition (while being simultaneously transformed from vaishnavite thinker to shaivite sage).

The article which follows, by Ron Geaves, critiques the common claim that Guru Maharaji (of the Divine Light Mission and international late twentieth-century fame) belongs to the Sant Mat (or Radhasoami) tradition. Based on persuasive historical and ethnographic work, Geaves traces Maharaji’s spiritual lineage back through the Advait Mat of Shri Totapuri ji Maharaj (Ramakrishna Paramhans’s teacher) to the Dasanami tradition, and uses this particular context to discuss, in a more general way, the formation of *paramparas*, *panths*, and the process of institutionalization itself.

Section Three also includes a thoughtful and erudite essay by Geoffrey Samuel on the eighth to twelfth-century Buddhist adoption of “extreme” Shaiva (Kaula) beliefs and practices, which Samuel attempts to account for and interpret with reference to its proper socio-cultural context, and another by Theodore Gabriel, which describes the Brahmanization of the Muttappan Cult in North Malabar (Kerala), and thereby puts flesh on the bones of M. N. Srinivas’s well-known (and oft-cited) theory of Sanskritization.

Section Four, “Renewing the World: Sacred Performance, Sacred Art,” begins with a meandering article by David Smith on the “classical Hindu imagination” (291) which derives, he writes, from Hinduism’s “most aesthetically satisfying texts and images”

(ibid.). These texts and images are to be found, he asserts (somewhat arbitrarily it seems to me) in “the classical Sanskrit tradition, itself formed by reading and rewriting the Vedas and the Epics—having as its core such texts as the *Devīmāhātmya*, the *Saundaryalaharī*, and the *Yogavāsiṣṭarāmāyaṇa* and such images as Durgā killing Mahiṣa, and Śiva Natarāja” (292). He then proceeds from these claims, very much against the spirit of Klostermaier’s opening article, to critique Vinayak Savarkar’s Hindutva “imagination” which, he contends, took on “monstrous form” (294) and was rooted in “mass hysteria” (295). Following this, Smith begins to rail against Hindu critics of Paul Courtright’s work on Ganesha, who he believes represent a “scary Talibanization” (298) of Hinduism. “There are true imaginings [of Hinduism] and there are false imaginings” (296), Smith maintains, but one wonders with what authority, and on what grounds, does he (or any other scholar) get to decide which is which.

The volume’s editor, Anna King, contributes an excellent article to Section Four on the Kumbha Mela and its presentation in the media. King cautions against assuming that all (or even all western) media representations of the Kumbha Mela are orientalist, and not only carefully shows how significantly media coverage of the *mela* varies, but also describes the complicated and mutually instrumental relationship that Kumbha Mela organizers and participants have with representatives of the media.

The article following King’s, by Alleyn Diesel draws upon fieldwork among ethnically Tamil Hindus in KwaZulu-Natal to suggest that powerful Hindu goddesses could (and should) be used “to provide women, even those outside the Tamil tradition, with empowering role models, encouraging them to challenge patriarchal injustices and gender abuse” (342). Unfortunately, the article fails to make use of much subtler and more nuanced academic treatments of the topic (such as those, for example, in Kathleen Erndl and Alf Hiltebeitel’s edited volume, *Is the Goddess a Feminist?*) and, in my view, oversteps its evidence.

Articles by Richard Shaw, on an impressive, sculpture-covered wall at the Mallikarjuna temple in Srisailam, Andhra Pradesh (with pictures and detailed documentation), and another by Christopher Aslet on various techniques used in Hindu and Buddhist art to evoke transcendent reality, round out Section Four.

As a whole, the volume assumes basic (but wide-ranging) knowledge of Indian religious history and a rudimentary knowledge of Sanskrit, and would not be accessible to undergraduates. That said, some of the individual articles (David Gellner’s is the best example) are written in a more accessible style. Though the contributions to the volume are, as I have suggested, of uneven quality, there are some truly excellent and provocative essays which would be of interest to a wide range of scholars and—in some cases—worth using in undergraduate or graduate classes. The volume’s utility, therefore, is rather like the scholarly journals to which King likens it in her introduction.

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