

January 1993

Book Review: "The Law of Karma"

Cromwell Crawford

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Crawford, Cromwell (1993) "Book Review: "The Law of Karma"," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 6, Article 14.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1083>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies. The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

the 'creative integration' of his own Christian, theistic perspective. But it is clear that in establishing *some* correlations between Advaitic and Christian mystical experience von Brück firmly locates spiritual experience at the forefront of inter-religious dialogue. From a Christian standpoint, intra-trinitarian, perichoretic transformation illustrates the 'trans-historical power of the Spirit'. (p.263) and moves the terms of conversion away from cognitive beliefs that are socio-historically conditioned, to experiences of the Spirit which are not exclusive to Christianity. As von Brück puts it: 'The "how" and "where" of this realisation cannot be confined to our theological pronouncements and church walls' (p.265).

Von Brück sees the Christ event as a limited 'historical accident' that qualitatively transforms history in that this aspect of the Trinity becomes the integrating factor in trinitarian perichoresis. Although the effects of this event are not exclusive to the western world, the personal and active experience of Christ is the natural extension of the non-duality of Advaita. It draws the historical into the contemplative mode and integrates the socio-historical with the unitive experience. But Advaita provides insight into the nature of the trinitarian unity, as well as the spiritual means necessary to the peri-

choretic movement. Moreover, von Brück insightfully adapts from Advaita a doctrine of rebirth, one which he deems necessary to coherent theodicy. He addresses traditional Christian theological objections to rebirth and criticises popular misconceptions as well as Advaitic perspectives which deny the reality of *samsara*. His views on spiritual growth and the socio-communal ideal of Christian perichoretic transformation require the postulation of a unique personal centre of the individual, and the rebirth into this particular realm of existence in progressive movement towards the perichoretic ideal.

Von Brück's theological development should stimulate discussion on a number of controversial issues: the relation of his mystic theology to more mainstream Christian perspectives; his stress on personal spiritual experience and the epistemology thereof; his interpretation of Advaitic doctrine; and his views on religious truth, rebirth, the Christ, proselytism, and the nature of inter-religious dialogue. *The Unity of Reality* is a provocative and significant book.

Michael Stoeber
Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C.

The Law of Karma. Bruce R. Reichenbach. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, 238p.

THE LAW OF Karma is a facet of Indian thought which is known best to the West but is understood the least. The book under review has all of the requisites to change that.

The philosophical approach of the book sets it apart from recent contributions to the field that follow historical and anthropological lines. It is also distinguished by addressing the issues of karma in its total Indian setting, and by delving into the subject

as 'a living thesis' that goes beyond the classical documents to the exposition of contemporary scholars.

Because this doctrine is a master key that opens many other religious and philosophical doors, the reader is ushered into numerous chambers that discuss the Law of Karma in relation to its Metaphysical Presuppositions; to the Law of Universal Causation; to Fatalism; to the Problem of Evil; to Causation and Divine Intervention;

and to the nature and destiny of the Self in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Step by step, logically and analytically, all variations of the larger concepts are examined to get to the meaning of karma, its truth, and its doctrinal consistency. At the end of his systematic exposition and interpretation of what has been said about the law of karma, the author attempts to put together the divergent pieces of the puzzle in a critical and constructive way.

The most creative and readable part of the book is the Epilogue. It is a rich repository of the truths and insights Reichenbach distills from this philosophical study. The values of the law of karma are cited in the objectivity of its ethics; its elevation of the principle of universal justice; its connection of actions with character; its positing of moral qualities through the notion of *adrsta*; its assertion that karmic actions have a cumulative effect; its championing of freedom over determinism; and most intriguing of all, its logic that a single

lifetime is insufficient for the formation of the kind of character that makes liberation possible.

In a bid to reconstruct some of the deficiencies of the law of karma, Reichenbach thinks 'some sort of theistic administrator of karma is necessary' (p.189). This appears to us as an effort to Christianise the law of karma in a manner that actually mystifies the operation of justice.

The bottom line is that to write such a learned exposition of the theory of karma, the author himself must have reaped the fruit of an excellent store of prior karma; but the same cannot be said for the reviewer. There has been some *dukkha* mixed with *sukkha*. The whole book is fractured by debates within debates. The point is too often lost amid the polemics.

Cromwell Crawford, Director
Centre for South Asian Studies,
University of Hawaii.

Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response. Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., New York : Paulist Press, 1992, 224p.

SALVATION OUTSIDE THE Church? is a historical survey of the ways in which the Catholic tradition has understood its claim that there is no salvation outside the church (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Beginning with the reflections of some of the earliest Christian writers and concluding with papal teaching after Vatican II, Sullivan discusses the seminal theologians, Councils, movements and historical factors which have influenced Catholic interpretations of this doctrine. This work makes available a wealth of historical detail which the author skillfully musters to help us understand the changing historical realities that have, at various times,

conditioned the formulation and expression of this doctrine.

Sullivan's study quite properly makes it difficult for us to discuss the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* doctrine generally, without attention to its historical context, its complexities, and its exclusions. Contrary to what may be widely believed, Sullivan establishes that this doctrine was not primarily applied to those outside the boundaries of the Christian church. In fact, during the early centuries of the church it was issued as a caution towards Christians who had separated from the church by heresy or schism. Christian writers during the first three centuries were optimistic about the