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Book Review: "Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices"

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BOOK REVIEWS


INTRODUCTIONS TO HINDUISM have made great progress in recent years. Thomas Hopkins's, The Hindu Religious Tradition, the standard work when it was published some twenty-five years ago, looks rather primitive when compared with Klaus Klostermaier's A Survey of Hinduism already in second edition by 1994. Can more books add anything new? Julius Lipner's contribution certainly does. Rather than being organized systematically in terms of basic doctrines and the three paths to release - the usual approach - Lipner weaves together various themes, ideas, and stories so as to lead the reader into an understanding of Hindus in a radial and spiral rather than linear fashion. The result is a fresh and most engaging presentation of the tradition that communicates well to those of other traditions while it brings new insights to Hindus about their own religion.

Divided into three parts, Part 1 examines the guiding voices for the Hindu: scripture as Veda and “Veda”, tradition as Varnasrama dharma, tradition as caste and narrative, tradition as folklore and the intellectual heritage, and the voice of experience. I especially liked the way Lipner first offers a bird’s-eye view of the essential characteristics of Hinduism and then gently leads the reader into a deeper understanding of each, but grounded in the overall context. His chapters on Veda and “Veda” (pp.2,3) are models of this new approach. He contextualizes the understanding of Veda in Bhartrhari’s uniquely Hindu view of language which makes the Veda the criterion form not only of all scripture but of all language – in its oral, spoken form as mantra. While giving a full historical presentation of the historical development of the Brahmical Veda, Lipner quickly introduces the particular genius of Hinduism in extending authoritative “Veda” to include epic poems such as the Gita or Ramayana and the devotional writings of the poet mystics. The fluid nature of the Hindu Canon is well conveyed, as are the attempts of modern Hindu reformers (e.g. Rammohun Roy, Dayananda, and Vivekananda) to “rationalize” this fluid scriptural tradition. Weaving the modern reformers into the classical discussion of Veda makes for the most complete and satisfying presentation of Hindu scripture I have yet read. Unfortunately the author did not have access to Anantananand Rambachan’s 1994 volume, The Limits of Scripture, which gives a most powerful presentation of Vivekananda’s reinterpretation of the Vedas and its influence upon contemporary Hinduism.

The way Hindus hear the voice of “tradition” is presented in chapters 4, 5, and 6, and masterfully weaves together ideas and practices of caste, stages of life, and dharma with cross-cutting themes of order vs chaos and choice vs necessity. The result is not systematic but does convey the lived sense of Hinduism successfully. There are some areas that are treated too briefly, namely, women (Vasudha Narayanan’s recent text is stronger in this regard) and the Dahllits (Ambedkar is not mentioned). The classical philosophical systems are lumped into this section with a result that is too brief to be helpful to a beginning reader.

Part 1 concludes with, to my mind, Lipner’s best chapter, “The Voice of Experience”, by which he means the more private voice of personal experience. The unique way faith and reason condition each
other, the special Hindu understanding of
tolerance and truth (a must-read for
Christians in dialogue with Hindus), the
powerful impact of devotional poetry and
classical dance, and the special guru-student
relationship, are all given sensitive
exploration. Much of this material is usually
left out of introductory texts on Hinduism,
yet it is of crucial importance in
understanding the tradition from the inside.

Part 2 of the book focuses on reason and
morality. Here again Lipner’s approach is
fresh and effective. Rather than approaching
these issues through classical Hindu
philosophy, he engages them in a much
more accessible way through their
appearance in story – namely the dicing
incident in the Mahabharata and the Gita’s
contribution to the notion of sva-dharma.
The second chapter of this part examines
“Morality and the Person” and concludes
with a discussion of the nature of the human
person from the Hindu perspective. Lipner’s
analysis is helpful – especially at a time
when issues of ethics in health care and the
environment make it essential that the ethical
agent in each tradition be understood.
However, I have a slight quarrel in that
Lipner’s emphasis on the spirit as the
centre of gravity for the human person (p.241ff)
ignores the important influence of the
“collective self” engendered by the extended
family (see Alan Roland’s In Search of Self
in India and Japan). It also fails to take
account of the body-mind-environment
Gestalt of human identity in Hinduism that
Ariel Glucklich so effectively demonstrated
in his recent book The Sense of Adharma,
but of course this was only published in
1994.

Part 3 concludes the reader’s
introduction to Hinduism by examining that
tradition’s unique way of reckoning time,
space, and eternity. These are ideas I usually
present at the beginning when introducing
Hinduism. Yet I must confess putting them
at the end worked very well. Having a much
broader understanding of the tradition before
coming to ideas such as the beginningless
cycles of yugas, rebirth, and final release
probably enables a deeper understanding to
be achieved. Chapter 11 offers a particularly
rich descriptions of how the sacred manifests
itself in a myriad of forms in Hinduism:
animate, inanimate, and human. The
Himalayas, the Ganges, pilgrimage to
Varanasi, Tantric worship, and issues raised
regarding the status of women are all
included. The final chapter offers the many
ways and means of realizing release in
Hinduism – from participation in festivals
like Diwali, to various forms of worship or
puja and the practice of ascetic or devotional
yoga.

This is an very well written book which
will hold the interest of any willing reader.
While the author has limited himself to the
Sanskrit traditions, the Hinduism that is
evoked is rich and well rounded, with a
warm and appealing human face. The
chapters are supported by careful and
scholarly, but not excessive notes. And there
is a brief but helpful Sanskrit glossary. This
book has a permanent place on my shelf of
Hinduism introductory texts and will be
valued by my students.

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The Indian Christiad. Anand Amaladass and Richard Fox Young. Anand:

If Sanskrit has been the medium of all
Indian religions, why should it not be a
vehicle for the Christian faith in India with
a long history of Christianity? In fact, the