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

Harold Coward

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BOOK REVIEWS

Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices. Julius Lipner. London: Routledge, 1994, xiii + 375pp.

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 Brahmanical 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 Anantanand 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 Dalits (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 a 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.

Harold Coward
University of Victoria

The Indian Christiad. Anand Amaladass and Richard Fox Young. Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1995, xvii+378 pp.

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