



November 2014

Book Review: *Hindu Theology and Biology. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa and Contemporary Theory.*

Ana Laura Funes Maderey
University of Hawaii at Manoa

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



Part of the [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Maderey, Ana Laura Funes (2014) "Book Review: *Hindu Theology and Biology. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa and Contemporary Theory.*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 27, Article 17.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1589>

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 digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

But Dr. Barua points out that neither theologian is fatalistic: For Augustine, God's foreknowledge of our free choice does not constrain that choice, any more than a parent's foreknowledge that her child will major in English constrains that choice. Similarly, for Rāmānuja, every individual soul (jivatman) has the ability to rise above or sink deeper within samsara, freely. More importantly, true knowledge of God frees the soul from its accumulated karma. So, every moment is a morally and spiritually free moment, according to both theologians. Human beings are not determined. We are agents, and faith heightens our moral and spiritual agency. (182-185)

Dr. Barua's book is an exercise in comparative philosophy of religion, so the next criticism may not be fair. Nevertheless, I will offer it: I would like to have seen more speculative philosophy of religion, or

constructive comparative theology, in the book. Dr. Barua clearly possesses great analytical, philological, and comparative ability. His discrete presentations are sound and his comparison incisive. But incisive comparison begs for synthetic answers. Dr. Barua establishes that both Rāmānuja and Augustine value embodied, temporal existence. But how has his in-depth study of these two preeminent theologians transformed Dr. Barua's own experience of embodied, temporal existence? I would like for Dr. Barua to share that transformed knowledge, because the world needs that transformed knowledge. As Dr. Barua continues his academic investigations, I look forward to even more originality from this promising young philosopher.

Jon Paul Sydnor
Emmanuel College, Boston

Hindu Theology and Biology. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa and Contemporary Theory. Jonathan B. Edelmann. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 251pp.

THERE are many works on Hinduism and Hindu Theology that offer an in-depth analysis of the tradition in the religious, anthropological, historical, and philosophical aspects, but few are the ones that engage the study of the sacred sources of Hindu tradition into a meaningful and careful dialogue with contemporary Western scientific thought. Jonathan B. Edelmann's book does precisely this, and more. The author critically analyses both, the theological discourse of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the scientific language used in the history of Darwinism to create possibilities of high standard academic "cross-pollination". The

result is a fertile land in which the symbolical, teleological, and spiritual world of this Hindu text is maintained in all its richness, at the same time that it harmonizes in a mature way with evolutionary biology.

The author is aware of many of the presuppositions involved in bringing science and religion into dialogue. One of them is the stereotyped characterizations that have frequently surrounded both of these human practices since the dialogue between Christianity and modern evolutionary science began in the seventeenth century. Edelmann prepares the ground for the dialogue by

124 Book Reviews

putting both, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the biological literature, into perspective and carefully lays out the ontological and epistemological background from which each of these traditions emerge. In doing this, the reader is confronted with a more nuanced, but not at all simplistic, view of the distinction between science and religion, where elements of one are shown to be present in the other (e.g. the criterion for objectivity and the recourse to testimony). Yet, the elements of proximity between science and religion that the author so clearly brings to light does not preclude him from acknowledging that there are difficult challenges to be addressed.

The dialogue between science and religion, as Edelmann recognizes, has been carried out many times with the assumption that science represents the objective side of the story, while religion, in order to continue making sense, must adapt to the challenges posed by the contemporary scientific paradigm. Edelmann intends to balance out such presumption and sets out to reconcile the problematic differences between them. The author shows, in a very original way, how Hindu theology can be used to reinterpret the findings of contemporary biology without doing violence to the scientific enterprise and, at the same time, without compromising one of the most fundamental beliefs of the Hindu theological and philosophical tradition: the irreducibility of consciousness. Edelmann dedicates a whole chapter to fleshing out the meaning and the relation of notions such as body, mind, and consciousness in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and compares them to the views found in Darwin and Neuroscience. This allows the author to establish a necessary link between theology and the study of the natural world. He explains

that the scientific study of nature can deepen someone's personal relation with God if the world is taken as a divine manifestation from which consciousness, at the same time, distinguishes itself. He also shows how and why the scientific study of the natural world is important for the cultivation of virtues valued in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, such as self-restraint and dispassion, arguing that these are characteristics of scientific objectivity as well.

However, Edelmann's position is perhaps too optimistic for someone with a hard-fleshed materialist view. The postulation of consciousness as independent from and irreducible to matter is something that perhaps would have to be proved first, in order for an atheist and materialist scientist to even pose the question about their relation in theological terms. On the other hand, the book's strength lies in that it offers no defense for a particular way of thinking about God, nor does it offer an argument against scientific materialism. This book also takes several examples from the history of science and its dialogue with religion and theology to demonstrate that the belief in God, whatever it may be, does not have to oppose science. Indeed, Edelmann's historical analysis includes instances of Christian theologians, modern and contemporary, who have rigorously worked out the relation between faith and science from a self-critical point of view. Theologians like Aubrey Moore and more recently, Arthur Peacocke, provide an example for the author to support his point: that theology can give us illuminating perspectives to interpret the results of science at the same time that science can help tradition think about God in the light of new discoveries. Edelmann questions the idea that science and religion have different objects of knowledge,

and argues that a scholarly study of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in dialogue with science can make us appreciate (both practitioners and strangers) how close they actually are.

By showing that a fruitful dialogue with science has been possible with Abrahamic religions, and that it can be possible with Hinduism as well, Jonathan B. Edelman is not only contributing to the development of the

dialogue between science and religion, but also to the dialogue between religions. This book is definitely leaving a precedent for future attempts on building sturdy bridges between Hindu theologies and science.

Ana Laura Funes Maderey
University of Hawaii at Manoa

***Anthony deMello: The Happy Wanderer.* Bill deMello. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013. xxxvii + 264 pages.**

GROWING up, Anthony deMello's *Prayer of the Frog* was a bedtime favorite. This book of short *Aesop Fables*-type stories was simultaneously delightful and thought-provoking to an 8 year old. As a youngster, I came to know the work of Anthony deMello through my mother, a devout Catholic Goan for whom the late Jesuit was both superstar and best friend. It was with great delight, then, that I took the opportunity to review this book, written by Bill deMello, younger brother of Anthony deMello, hoping for some human insight into who Fr. deMello was beyond the mythical proportions of theological stardom endowed him by devotees.

Bill deMello's book *The Happy Wanderer* is divided into two distinct parts. The first of these is entitled 'The Journey to Sadhana'. In it, Bill deMello (the author) traces the deMello family background and narrates the story of Tony's life in great detail—from infancy onwards. deMello, being younger to Tony by a dozen years and having been only three years old when his elder brother left home to join the Jesuits, relies heavily on the memories of his elder sisters and on his own perception of his 'perfect big brother' in reconstructing the

narrative of Tony's early years. DeMello dons his ethnographer's hat readily, drawing on the accounts of several interlocutors to develop a picture of Tony as a young man journeying into the priesthood. Through correspondences with several Jesuits and former-Jesuits—some who knew Tony personally, and some who did not—deMello is able to paint an effective picture of Tony's years as a Jesuit novice and his early theological influences. He likewise conveys the impact that Tony's engagement with his faith had on those around him.

The detailed descriptions provided by several of Tony's peers from his years as a young priest in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) and its outskirts, impart a rather robust understanding of the circumstances and influences impacting Tony early in his Jesuit career; these would ultimately allow Tony to develop the rich theological and spiritual works for which he has become known. DeMello suggests that as a knowledge-hungry young man Tony was unable to simply rest on the laurels of the established Jesuit order. Rather, the instilled Jesuit love for learning and pursuit of knowledge would lead the young priest to