



2017

Book Review: *Ramana Maharishi: Interpretations of His Enlightenment*

Edward T. Ulrich
University of St. Thomas

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



Part of the [Hindu Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ulrich, Edward T. (2017) "Book Review: *Ramana Maharishi: Interpretations of His Enlightenment*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 30, Article 17.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1669>

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.

Abhishiktananda's life. Friesen wrote prior studies of what he calls the "Christian theosophical tradition," which includes figures like Jacob Boehme, Franz von Baader, and Herman Dooyeweerd. Friesen argues that this tradition could have provided Abhishiktananda with the answers he needed. He believes that this tradition does a much better job of holding in balance seeming oppositions, such as non-duality and the reality of the world. In a similar vein, Friesen likewise states that Ramanuja's theology could have eased Abhishiktananda's struggles.

One could challenge Friesen's suggestions. Abhishiktananda was torn between a spirituality that called him to plunge into pure consciousness beyond name and form, and one that called him to identify with the concrete roles and identities of a Catholic priest and monk. The core of his problem was existential rather than intellectual. His problem was that of learning to live in both worlds. He experimented

with a variety of intellectual resolutions throughout his two decades in India, but felt that they did not speak to his situation. In places, he suggested that it is not a matter of finding a better resolution, but that the intellect simply cannot bridge these two different worlds. One instead should simply hold onto both, living with the tension between them.

Friesen's book is a comprehensive study with an engaging thesis. It should be an essential component of the library of an Abhishiktananda scholar. In addition, the way Friesen maps out a variety of positions under categories like "transcendence" and "non-duality" is helpful. Many potential readers would appreciate these clarifications, in addition to the insight that they may gain into Abhishiktananda's thought.

Edward T. Ulrich
University of St. Thomas

***Ramana Maharishi: Interpretations of His Enlightenment.* By J. Glenn Friesen.
Calgary: Aevum Books, 2015, 312 pages.**

TWO highly revered Hindu figures of the modern era were Ramakrishna Paramahansa in north India, and Ramana Maharishi in south India. Many scholars have written on written on Ramakrishna, due to his role in the Bengal Renaissance, and due to the intriguing nature of his visionary experiences. In comparison, very little scholarly material on Ramana has been produced in the West. An important exception is Andrew Fort's 1998 study, *Jivanmukti in Transformation*. J. Glenn Friesen's *Ramana Maharishi* breaks further ground.

According to the classic account, Ramana originally had had minimal knowledge of spiritual and religious topics. However, one day, as an adolescent, he had a sudden fear of death. He imagined himself dying, and by retreating within himself, he found that there was nothing to fear, for he discovered that there is something within that does not die. According to the classic account, he was thus enlightened, lost all interest in his home life and school life, and ran away to the temple and holy mountain at Tiruvannamalai. There he gradually acquired a reputation as a holy man. For the sake of the

126 Book Reviews

many visitors who came to see him, some followers established the Ramanashram. Although not, reportedly, having had knowledge of Advaita prior to his enlightenment, when he later encountered ideas of it found in books, he stated that his experience was consistent with those experiences. Thereby, Ramana came to be taken as a twentieth century exemplar of Advaita.

This account serves to support a particular world-view. His Advaita, presumably, was based on direct experience, not on knowledge gained from books. Given the modern world's trust in experience and empirical method, fostered by modern science, this is an account with a potential to persuade people to accept an Advaitic worldview. Friesen attempts to dismantle this and other aspects of the classic account of Ramana. His main method is the examination and comparison of the large numbers of English language biographical materials.

In the second chapter, after giving the classic account of Ramana in the first, Friesen critically examines Ramana's enlightenment. Rather than accepting the idea that it was based on direct experience alone, Friesen argues that, to some degree, the experience was constructed by expectations he probably had. Evidence that he cites are the inspiration that Ramana drew from the *Periyapurana*, that his uncle was a *saṃnyāsin*, and that his father practiced meditation. Friesen also calls into question the definitive and lasting nature of that enlightenment experience, citing an account that Ramana prayed at the Sri Meenakshi temple in Madurai that that experience would become permanent (27-29).

The third chapter focuses on the biographical accounts of Frank Humphrey's and

B. V. Narasimha Iyer's, which are among the earliest English language accounts. The fourth focuses on Paul Brunton's account of his meeting with Ramana in *A Search in Secret India*. This story sparked a lot of interest in Ramana in the West. A celebrated aspect of the account is that Brunton came to Ramana with many questions, that Ramana remained silent, and that through the silence Brunton's questions fell away and he was satisfied. Friesen calls into question this account. He relies on what he refers to as an "independent account of this visit," and Brunton's later statement that he used Ramana as a "peg" for his own ideas. In fact, on the basis of further evidence, Friesen argues that Ramana, who was celebrated and remembered for his silent way of teaching, adopted this way of teaching only after having read Brunton's account (70-77).

Friesen addresses many other issues. For instance, he argues that Ramana's key disciple, Ganapati Sastri, fashioned an image of Ramana according to his own ideas. In addition, by showing Christian and tantric influences on Ramana, Friesen questions Ramana's standing as a pure sage of Advaita. He further questions Ramana's reputation as a pure sage of Advaita by showing that his stance on ethics and his emphasis on personal experience were inconsistent with traditional Advaita.

One can raise some questions about Friesen's analysis of the traditional accounts of Ramana. First, there is the Hindu defense of Ramana on these issues, which would be that Ramana presented different faces to different people, giving them different teachings according to what was appropriate for their spiritual development. Second, one might wonder to what degree classical Advaita, to which Friesen compares Ramana, was ever a

homogenous tradition, unvarying in its approach to ethics and impregnable to other influences.

Friesen's *Ramana Maharishi* has a wealth of information, the main point of which is to dismantle the classic account of Ramana. The reader would like to know, in addition to understanding what he was not, what was he? What can one say with confidence about Ramana? Friesen's goal is to clear the ground for such a study, stating that he hopes the current

book "will assist in understanding his experience, and in understanding in what way Ramana can continue [to] be a model for us for enlightenment" (296). This book belongs in the libraries of those interested in twentieth century expressions of Advaita Vedanta, popular Hindu figures, and Hindu-Christian dialogue.

Edward T. Ulrich
University of St. Thomas

***The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print.* By Charu Gupta. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016, 352 pages.**

CHARU Gupta frames her book as an auto-critique of her first monograph, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community* (2002), in which she examined similar topics—gender, nationalism, and popular Hindi print culture in colonial North India. In her present work, she seeks to illumine the interrelatedness of caste and gender in the construction of images of Dalits in popular Hindi print culture. Concentrating on print and visual culture produced within the first half of the twentieth century, Gupta guides the reader through a series of journal articles and editorials, cartoons, vernacular histories, newspaper archives, popular literature, and self-published pamphlets. In these, she traces the sequential development of a series of discourses surrounding Dalit women's identity. Her intersectional approach and focus on vernacular print sources highlights the erasures of individual identity and agency inherent in Dalits' representations in upper-caste Hindi publications and in official textual archives. Gupta draws inspiration from recent scholarship by Dalit feminists and Black

feminists in the US, including bell hooks, Anita Bharti, and Vimal Thorat. Her interventional approach to rereading the historical record to resituate non-elite groups alongside the hegemonic models that often exclude them also fits into a collection of earlier studies by Karin Kapadia, Mahua Sarkar, and others.

As Gupta notes, in the upper-case reformist-nationalist Hindi literature of the early twentieth century, representations of Dalit women as "vamps"—coalescing around notions of impurity, evil, and sexual danger—gave way to more sympathetic images of the bodily suffering of Dalit women under the harsh labor and frequent sexual exploitation encountered in their caste-based dispensation. In both cases, however, Gupta points out that these representations emphasized Dalit women's status outside of the ideals of upper-caste Hindu domesticity. Even in reformist caste critiques, the foregrounded descriptions of Dalit women's anguished, victimized bodies created iconographies of suffering that both homogenized lived experiences and often