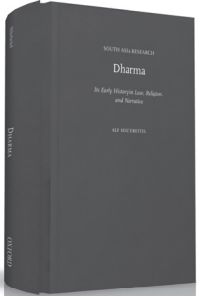


REVIEWS

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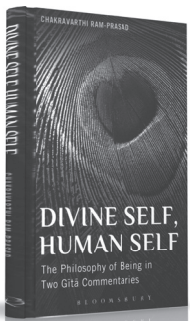


Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative Alf Hiltebeitel

Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York. Website: www.oup.com. 2011. xviii + 747 pp. \$ 78. HB. ISBN 9780195394238.

One of the main differences in the idea of religion in the West and that in India comes from the understanding or the lack thereof, of dharma. This book aims to give a better understanding of dharma through an extraordinarily exhaustive account of both the word and the concept through an incisive analysis of Vedic, Buddhist, Puranic, Smriti, and bhakti texts, and even some works of literature. This book is the result of ‘cumulative fruitful conversations carried out amicably over subjects of some controversy’ (xi). The author—a professor in the department of religion at the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences, Washington DC—has worked on this book with a feeling that he ‘should reread virtually everything on India’ he has ‘ever read as well as everything’ he has ‘written’ (3). With an exhaustive bibliography running over forty pages, this book is the authoritative reference on everything connected with ‘dharma’.

PB



Divine Self, Human Self: The Philosophy of Being in Two Gītā Commentaries

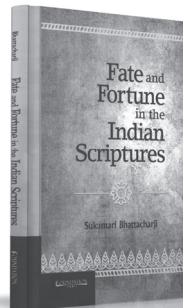
Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad

Bloomsbury Academic, 50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP. Website: www.bloomsbury.com. 2012. xii + 272 pp. £ 17.99. PB. ISBN 9781441139245.

The human self is divine and the divine Self manifests in humanity. Being and identity

have been complex issues leading to elaborate commentaries and glosses on various scriptures. The Bhagavadgita, in particular, has been commented on by numerous scholars, traditional and modern alike. This book attempts to unravel the ground of being and the divine Self, both from the perspective of Acharya Shankara and Ramanuja. The author tries to interpret their commentaries on the Gita to ‘develop two competing visions of the relationship between metaphysics and theology, and therefore of how one may relate inquiry to faith’ (xx). In this task, the author has been remarkably successful and he also gives us a wonderful comparative study of Shankara and Ramanuja. Anyone interested in these two thinkers should definitely read this volume.

PB



Fate and Fortune in the Indian Scriptures

Sukumari Bhattacharji

Foundation Books, Cambridge House, 4381/4 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002. Website: www.cambridge.org. 2014. vi + 321 pp. ₹ 895. HB. ISBN 9789382993889.

Why do people become lazy and fatalistic? Because they think that whatever happens in their lives is due to fate. Indians did not want people to become lazy or fatalistic and put the responsibility on the individual for every action one did—one faced the consequences of one’s good and bad actions, and one’s station of birth depended on one’s actions. This not only made a person responsible but also brought hope because if what one has done is the result of one’s previous actions it meant that one’s future could be moulded by oneself. This idea Swami Vivekananda preached and infused and continues to infuse tremendous faith and power into countless minds. But this point has been missed by the

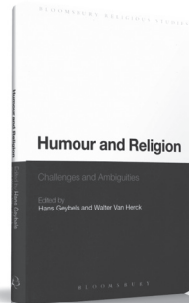
present book, the very beginning of which is on a discordant note. The author contemplated this work as a rebuttal to the objection she faced at a conference where she said 'that the theories of Karman and rebirth were two of the most vicious ever invented by man' (v).

The blind surrender to fate and fortune is indeed bad, but that comes largely due to a wrong understanding of the scriptures. The author laboriously goes through numerous texts and selects cautiously, passages that support her arguments. However, she could have shown the other perspective also where fate or fortune is proclaimed to be in the hands of a person. It is notable that almost all of the translations and works she cites are by authors from outside the Indian tradition, with a Semitic bearing on their thought. The author comes a bit too strongly and without sufficient background material, in brushing aside as inconsequential, years of thought and philosophising in the Indian tradition. Particularly the Mimamsa tradition and the concept of *apurva* is criticised: 'Meditation is treated like currency notes which can be encashed at will, deposited in safe custody for any length of time without increasing or diminishing; it can be lent or donated. But like money it is power and as power it can be used in an invisible spiritual bargaining with fate' (211). When meditation is being increasingly seen as a great solution to present-day problems, and when scientific studies are being conducted on this phenomenon, such a statement could have best been avoided.

The difference between Shruti, eternal wisdom, and Smriti, social codes relevant for a particular time, is not highlighted in this volume. The author quotes more from the Puranas, which are not authoritative texts. Using texts of different paradigms, the author considers it her mission to make the common person recognise 'the vested interests of the guardians of society in maintaining the socio-political and economic *status quo*, with threats of hell and baits of heaven' (244). However, no Eastern tradition gives a concrete validity to the existence of heaven and hell, and they are just some flavours in the religious stories and anecdotes, of which Puranas form a major part. Heaven, hell, fate, and fatalism are

pronouncedly Semitic concepts. Had the author presented a balanced view, this book had the potential to become a remarkable work.

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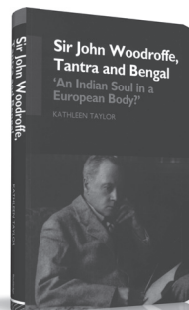
Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities

Edited by Hans Geybels and
Walter Van Herck

Bloomsbury Academic. 2012. xii + 272
pp. £ 28.99. PB. ISBN 9781441139245.

Religion has many a times been perceived as a sombre affair. Many traditions advocate donning a serious face during religious observances. What is the relation between humour and religion? This book makes an attempt to answer this question through a careful study of various religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and even some religious literature and plays. This anthology is divided into two parts: religious laughter and laughing at religion. Caricature of religion through cartoons and the consequent politics is also examined through an analysis of Greek history. That guilelessness and simplicity are core spiritual values and spirituality has a close connection with humour is well established through this work.

PB



Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: An Indian Soul in a European Body?

Kathleen Taylor

Routledge, 2 Park Square, Milton
Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14
4RN. Website: www.routledge.com.
2013. xvi + 319 pp. \$ 54.95. PB. ISBN
9780415749367.

Tantra is probably the most misunderstood spiritual discipline in the world. The principal reason for this is that the source texts are mostly inaccessible and the channelising of basic human desires almost always gives way to taking licence in the name of some spiritual or religious practice. This sublime spiritual discipline would have