

Review

Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā and Images of the Hindu Tradition: The Song of the Lord, by Catherine A. Robinson. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006. x + 192 pp., £85 (hb). ISBN 0-415-346711.

Catherine Robinson sets out to explore the thesis 'that there is a strong relationship between the prominence of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the construction [or reification] of the Hindu tradition' (p. viii) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She does so by examining a number of commentaries on the text by figures that are identified as 'important' or 'influential'—'commentary' in this case being widely interpreted to include both random comments and full-blown exegesis. As its subtitle promises, a lengthy Introduction discusses 'The *Bhagavad-Gītā* and modernity'—the construction of 'Hinduism', 'religion' and 'scripture'. This could in itself function as a useful student primer to contemporary (sometimes over self-conscious) discussions about the legitimacy, or otherwise, of 'Hinduism' and 'religion' as categories worthy of academic investigation. Specifically, there is a clear summary of the discussion of the origins and historical development of 'Hinduism' as a category, taking the now familiar line that 'the decisive shift from a number of "Hindu religions" to the "Hindu religion" was associated with modern Western ideas' (p. 9). At the end of the Introduction, Robinson makes the modest claim that her book can, at least, be read 'as an exploration of what modern commentaries on the *Bhagavad-Gītā* reveal about modern views of the Hindu tradition' (p. 36). However, she also proposes that the *Gītā*, when treated as a 'Hindu scripture' has been largely instrumental in the creation of the 'religion' of 'Hinduism'. There are multiple interpretations of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and multiple images of the Hindu tradition, and the two are 'inextricably linked'. (The copious use of inverted commas—could 'Religious Studies' exist without them?—indicates the difficulties that twentieth-century theorizing has produced in some quarters for the academic discussion of 'religion'.)

The bulk of the volume considers how various groupings of commentators have viewed the *Gītā* and its relation to the Hindu tradition, and more actively how such commentaries or interpretations may have shaped 'images of the Hindu tradition' (which I take to mean how it is imagined). Robinson groups these interpreters and their approaches under six chapter headings, while admitting that there may be considerable overlap in some cases. 'Academic and scholarly writing' (Chapter 1) is represented by the differing views of Wilkins (the first translator of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* into a Western language), Max Müller, Monier-Williams, Rudolf Otto, and Zaehner. Chapter 2, which deals with 'Social and political activism', inevitably discusses the contrasting nationalisms of Tilak and Gandhi, as well as the changing perspectives of Aurobindo Ghose. Chapter 3, 'Christian theological and missionary critiques', is to a large degree devoted to the work of D. Griff and J. N. Farquhar. Chapter 4 considers the 'Universalist visions' of three Indian teachers who shared a broadly neo-Vedāntic perspective: Swami Vivekananda, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Swami Sivananda

Sarasvati. Chapter 5, 'Romantic and mystical Insights', groups together Thoreau (the Transcendentalist), the Theosophist Annie Besant, and Aldous Huxley (coiner of the neo-Vedāntic 'Perennial Philosophy'). The final thematic chapter (6) considers some contemporary (i.e. post World War II) teachers and movements, including ISKCON's founder, Swami Prabhupada, Krishna Prem (Ronald Nixon), Sri Chinmoy, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. A short 'Conclusion' trawls through some of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*'s appearances in English poetry, fiction and theatrical productions. These include Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, and, bizarrely but predictably, a fictional New Age recasting of Arjuna's dilemma as a golf match, which was subsequently made into a Hollywood film. Retellings in Indian storybooks and children's comics, as well as various TV and cinematic versions, are also mentioned, as are the ritual and legal uses to which the text has been put in the diaspora.

While there is nothing startlingly new in this book, it does provide a thorough investigation of an interesting topic. Put simply, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is, like many composite texts, inherently ambiguous; this opens it to multiple interpretations, which is surely one of the main reasons for its extraordinary success. Robinson seems to suggest as much in her conclusion, although she dresses it in the jargon of modernity and post-modernity as 'differentiation' and 'dedifferentiation'. In addition, she proposes that, since it is presented as Hinduism's scripture par excellence, the *Gītā*'s multivalence has had a significant impact on images of the Hindu tradition as a whole. In fact, she presents it as the primary vehicle of that imaging, or imagining.

The choice of commentators might, of course, have been different (Emerson rather than Thoreau, for instance), and as Robinson is well aware, certain areas of interest are hardly touched upon (e.g. translation as interpretation). But while not exhaustive—given the volume of modern commentarial literature, that would hardly be possible—this is nevertheless a thorough and diligently researched survey of some significant secondary material. It is clearly written, and should be very useful indeed for Religious Studies students and others looking for avenues of further research. It is to be hoped, therefore, that a paperback edition is issued soon, since the hardback price of this volume (£85) is just silly, and suggests a completely unjustified, and self-fulfilling pessimism—or is it loss of nerve?—on the part of the publisher in relation to the likely market for this book.

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