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Reviews

Defining Hinduism: A Reader, edited by J. E. Llewellyn. London: Equinox Publishing, 2005. x + 227 pp., £17.99. ISBN 1-904768-73-3 (pb).

Defining the term 'Hinduism' has become a hotly contested issue with repercussions well beyond Indology or Religious Studies. There is a political dimension to the debate since it is in part a question of 'who speaks for Hinduism?' in the context of increasing right-wing Hindu nationalism. The editor brings together in this book nine previously published articles of the decade 1991–2001, 'some of the most important and interesting examples of the growing literature' on the problem. These are divided into four sections, each prefaced with a short summary by the editor, while in his introduction he delineates various themes of the debate. His aim being 'to provide a way into the conversation', with true post-modern humility he refuses to 'have the last word'. 'If I could escape my own biases, to step outside of the history that conditions the thinking of everyone else, then I could issue the final verdict... But that is obviously not possible' (p. 12).

The question not only concerns the term 'Hinduism' but also 'the thing to which the term refers': whether it is singular or plural or indeed non-existent. Most of the writers here agree on its diversity, its nature as an 'umbrella', its difference from more monolithic notions of 'religion'. They diverge over how much unity is to be perceived within the diversity of 'religions' or 'sects' covered by the 'umbrella': over whether the disparity is sufficient to make the singular term 'Hinduism' meaningless, or whether there is a 'community of discourse' stretching over time. Each writer's emphasis seems to be conditioned in part by the degree to which s/he is concerned with political and social rather than historical or textual issues.

The first section contains articles by Wilhelm Halbfass and Julius Lipner, both with a classical textual focus but presenting different emphases. Halbfass points to the Vedas as 'the focal point of Hindu self-understanding', even though this 'is oriented around a projection or fiction of the Veda', with the role of the Brahmans and the notion of *dharma* also providing key elements of continuity, although Halbfass like others writes of 'unity within diversity'. Julius Lipner emphasizes the diversity. Using the analogy of the banyan tree, which has 'no obvious botanic center', so too Hinduism is 'polycentric'. In this it is not unique, since all religious traditions are 'extrinsically and intrinsically plural'; within Hinduism, Ramanuja's 'Body-of-God' theology provides a paradigm for this 'multicentrality'.

The second section contains two articles with a historical focus on the pre-colonial period. David Lorenzen engages with the deconstructionist theorists. Although the term 'Hindu' originally had a geographical meaning, the 'religious sense...has long coexisted and overlapped with an ethnic and geographical sense' (p. 57). The 'standard model' of Hinduism presented by Monier Williams in 1877 displays a high degree of consistency over time, and its essential features are present in the work of earlier, pre-

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colonial, European observers. While pre-colonial 'Hindu' identity was predicated on the Muslim 'other', vernacular texts reveal awareness of two distinct systems expressed in doctrinal as well as ritual terms. Will Sweetman focuses on early missionaries' accounts of the 'heathen' religion(s) they encountered, demonstrating how knowledge was derived from local informants. From 'what Indians themselves reported' Ziegenbalg, for example, 'formed a view of Indian religion as a collection of different religious groupings characterized by...degrees of affinity with one another' (p. 95). So by yet another route we return to the 'unity in diversity' perceived by other contributors.

The third section presents two scholars who are frequently cited in other articles in the collection. Brian K. Smith and Eric Frykenberg deal with the crucial historical period of colonial and independent India. Smith would seem to have changed his position in this 1998 essay, since he is quoted by Lorenzen (p. 55) among those who say that Hinduism was 'invented' or 'imagined' by the British. Here, however, he concludes: 'Perhaps the time has finally come...not to abandon the concept of "Hinduism" but to refine and define it as a religion among and comparable to others' (p. 122). The latter point is his main thrust: to get away from descriptions of Hinduism as an exotic exception to the norm among 'religions', all of whose contours are indeed 'constructed', but authentically, by their own theological authorities, in the case of Hinduism mainly by the Brahmans, however 'self-serving' their enterprise may have been.

Frykenberg is the only contributor in this volume to argue unequivocally that Hinduism was a British colonial invention, or that 'Hindu' meaning 'native to India' could be used of Muslims. Before the Raj, no unified religion existed, only castes, each with their own set of beliefs and ritual practices. 'In a continent so highly pluralistic' a constructed unitary Hinduism helped to reinforce a 'single huge overarching political order' (p. 136). This politicized Hinduism of the nineteenth century has been appropriated by modern nationalistic groups and transformed into something 'different from anything India has previously known', a new 'syndicated Hinduism', distinct and reified, which has acquired an 'exclusivistic...even imperialistic' character (p. 142).

Three essays in the last section, by Mary Searle-Chatterjee, Gail Omvedt, and Timothy Fitzgerald, concern social grouping rather than history or ideology. Searle-Chatterjee writes here about the Hindu diaspora in Britain. Like Fitzgerald, she contests the usefulness of the category 'religion' to characterize minority groups, and the 'world religions' paradigm that goes with it. This has misled some into naïve idealizing of Hindu nationalist groups in Britain. 'If Religious Studies specialists wish to study religious practice in contemporary society, they will have to take on board... wider social and political awareness', she concludes (p. 166). Gail Omvedt deals with 'dalit visions' and hers is the essay which focuses most strongly on caste and oppression. '(B)ehind the image of flexibility and diversity is a hard core of an assertion of dominance' (p. 168). Some dalit movements 'define "Hinduism" itself as an oppressive class/caste/patriarchal force' (p. 170).

In the final essay Timothy Fitzgerald seems to find no problem with the coherence of 'Hinduism' but questions whether 'religion' is a useful concept by which to categorize it. He would substitute four other analytic terms: ritual, politics, soteriology and economics. He acknowledges in an endnote that some may find his own categories equally problematic but contends that 'as I have defined them (they) do not carry the same degree of ideological baggage' (p. 201). The reader may agree or disagree with this contention, but his article is a useful discussion of another term that has come under intense academic scrutiny.

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The debate over 'Hinduism' has arisen in the context of the current politics of the subcontinent which have necessitated careful thinking through of academic categories and their impact on actual social realities. This book provides a very useful summary of the consequent academic debate and its conclusions.

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Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion, by Geoffrey Samuel. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005 x +393 pp., £60.00. ISBN 0-7546-5280-7 (hb).

This edited collection of articles by Geoffrey Samuel contains work that spans from 1982 to 2001, with five previously unpublished articles and ten chapters that are revisions of previously published works. Following a couple of introductory chapters, the work is divided into three main parts, Historical, Religion in Contemporary Asia, and Buddhism and other Western Religions. Between them, the chapters represent a significant contribution to the study of Tantric Buddhism, both within Tibet and globally, and they suggest connections to scholarship within Buddhist studies more broadly. A number of these papers refer to and develop arguments outlined in Samuel's books *Mind, Body and Culture: Anthropology and the Biological Interface* (1990), and *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (1993). *Tantric Revisionings* (2005) can therefore be used as a companion volume to these books. However, the ideas in each chapter are clearly explained, with reference to previous scholarship in relevant areas, so that the book could easily stand in its own right as an introduction to Samuel's thought and, therefore, may be useful to undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Historical. The book contains some provocative propositions. For example, in chapter 2, Samuel argues that despite Tibet's strong associations with Tantric Buddhism, its state structure is rather unlike what one would expect from a Tantric country, the features of which are better exemplified by Newar and Balinese societies (pp. 29-30, 218). This is because the role of the *lama* in Tibet is unique in that *lama*s employ magical powers while at the same time being central to state and religious structures. However, Samuel cautions against exaggerating the powers or coherence of the state in Tibet, pointing to a fairly widespread geographical distribution of power between various monastic institutions, for example. This theme is developed in chapter 3, where he discusses problems in applying Gramsci's notion of ideological hegemony to de-centralized pre-industrial states (p. 53) and explores the work of Ray (1995), Tambiah (1976, 1984) and Carrithers (1983) to contrast the Thai association of urban monasticism and the hegemonic order with the more fragmented Tibetan picture (pp. 54-55). In chapter 4, Samuel explores ways in which Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet can be understood as 'shamanic' – using an extended and theoretical definition of shamanism that focuses on transformation in consciousness and argues that these features are Indic in origin (pp. 74, 77). This chapter also traces developments in Tantric Buddhism that include the influence of Saivite material and the darker, more horrific images and practices, noting that 'the confrontation with the powers of destruction, and with death itself, is a very widespread component of how one becomes a shaman in many different

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