

BOOK REVIEW

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***The Norton Anthology of World Religions: Hinduism.* Wendy Doniger (ed.). Series edited by Jack Miles. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2015. P.p.753 + xxxii. ISBN 978-0-393-91259-9.**

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This volume sees Wendy Doniger take the opportunity to bring together a number of important Hindu texts and comment upon the traditions from which they emerged. The chronological and thematic lay out of the volume emphasises the continuity and interdependence of the corpus. Doniger accounts for the evolution of a hugely diverse set of traditions from the Vedic to the classical then later to the medieval, modern and contemporary whilst taking in to consideration the influences of external factors such as the Muslim and British Colonial presence. From the outset, there was sufficient warning to the reader that they could not expect to encounter the Sanskrit canon of the religious elites alone; readers are afforded the important opportunity to engage with the oral and the vernacular, the devotional and as well as the sacrificial, the female and the male, the establishment and the anti-establishment, if indeed such binary relationships ever truly existed in this context. As such this volume attempts to highlight the complex and the inextricable nature of beliefs and practices that characterise what is now commonly designated Hinduism.

I was personally somewhat relieved to find that whilst sufficient time was given over to the development of Vedic thought from the sacred knowledge of the Rig Veda to the renunciation of the Upanisads the themes that were highlighted in the classical and epic periods were well placed and laid the textual foundation of a number of important philosophical and practical considerations. I was left in no doubt as to the central importance of dharma in the development of classical thought which was vividly expounded in the sections selected from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Of particular importance was the discourse concerning the nature of action and karma,

which in many respects widened the context of the volume and illustrated the efforts of Brahmanic religious elite to deal effectively with the welter of religious views and ideas that competed for authority in India at that time. In this way, the segue into the diverse realm of the vernacular was smoothed and the concerns that characterise this life and the next could be more readily contextualised.

From here Doniger provides a brief account of the nature of the ascendant pantheon of deities in the Puranas and lays the foundations for the emergence of what could arguably be considered the most important period of development in Indian religious thought and practice. The movement away from the Sanskrit to the vernacular along with the emergence of Bhakti devotional movements in India is illustrated as comprehensively as it could be when considering the limitations of publication space. For those who have not yet encountered the worlds of the Alvar and the Nayanmars, the Vaishnavas and the Shaivites, Doniger's account provides a sound introduction to the nature of their religious quest and the context within which their religious journeys took place.

For myself, however, the consequent section on the Bhakti devotional practice and belief in Northern India with the introduction of Hindi was particularly interesting, with the poetry of the Bhaktas from a variety of traditions and theistic positions a hugely welcome addition to this volume which served to highlight the rich religious diversity of the region at the time. Furthermore, the inclusion of such poets as Kabir, Tulsidas and Mira Bai recognised the intellectual qualities of those who transcended religious, gender and social boundaries and, it could be suggested, set the foundations for the age of religious, social and even political reformation that would come later. Furthermore, the inclusion of the writings of the Bengali bhakta's will also provide a sound contextualisation for students of contemporary forms of Hinduism, especially those interested in the development of Hinduism in the West. Finally, the concluding sections, as well as providing an overview of the literature of the twentieth century also concern themselves with the development of modern Hinduism and beginnings of low caste and tribal consciousness. Doniger sheds light, albeit limited, on the lived day-to-day concerns of those on the margins of Brahmanic Hindu society and the way that they relate to mainstream religious authority, the cosmos and the realms of the deities.

To conclude, this volume goes some way to providing an accessible and well organised survey of some of the more important themes and issues that characterise the vast ocean of Hindu literature. I was impressed by Doniger's concern with providing a contextualising framework around each entry and her use of language is as always imaginative and enlivening. Whilst I fully acknowledge the monumental nature of addressing the entire corpus of Hindu literature, I felt that there should have been a more in depth treatment of the Dharmasastras, especially when one considers their importance in the colonial period as well as the intellectual and religious body of literature that both the age of reform and the emergence of low caste consciousness employed to bring about the beginnings of social and religious change in

India. I would suggest that to gain the most benefit from this publication, a reasonable acquaintance with the methodologies in the study of religion in relation to Indian religions generally and the study of Hinduism in particular would be beneficial. In respect of this, I found the ideas that underpinned the general introduction were sound but such arguments have been better articulated elsewhere and it was overly long. Overall, however this volume should serve as a useful resource for those students who are seeking to underpin their research and studies with a solid intellectual and textual foundation.