Book Reviews

Gavin Flood (ed), *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, pp 599. ISBN: 0631215352

In the world of scholarly publications the "companion" is a somewhat strange animal, hovering about in the ill-defined territory between encyclopedias, compendia and other reference works on one flank, and the intensive and sharply-focused monograph on the other. Here we have a specimen of the breed, one which, taken as a whole, is neither better nor worse than most of its kind.

Before considering how well this volume realises its avowed purposes let us take a quick conspectus of its contents. The volume is structured in four sections: "Theoretical Issues;" "Text and Tradition;" "Systematic Thought;" "Society, Politics and Nation." Of these the second is the most substantial, occupying nearly half of the *Companion.* In each section one finds essays loosely connected by the theme/subject signaled in the sectional heading. To give a few illustrative examples: "Orientalism" considered from two different vantage points; essays on textual traditions both major and minor, attending not only to the great Scriptures and commentaries but to regional literary streams and localized ritual practices; in the third and perhaps most interesting section, contributions on Indian sciences (language, maths, astrology and medicine) and on aspects of Hindu philosophy and theology; and, in the last section, the usual suspects — caste, gender, ethnicity, modernity, the so-called "reform" movements, nationalist ideologies — and their endless interactions. As is almost invariably the case in such compilations, the contributions are of variable quality, some being sharp, lively and engaging (David Smith's demolition of Ronald Inden's much-vaunted *Imagining India* is a case in point), whilst others plod along behind, earnest, dull and a bit soporific. The contributors are predominantly Anglo-American academics — from which simple fact derive both the strengths and limitations of this volume. (By way of an aside it might be noted that the several Asian contributors belong to the modern Western academic milieu rather than to the traditional world of India.) The primary accent is on the interpretation of textual sources whilst the significant omissions include Hindu art, architecture and iconography.

We are several times assured that *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* presents "the most recent scholarly thinking about Hinduism" by a range of the "best scholars" from around the world. The "newly commissioned essays" by these "distinguished authors" are presented in an "accessible style," addressed to undergraduates, scholars and general readers. Furthermore, we are told, these essays approach their various subjects in "a creative and forward-thinking" manner. I wouldn't quibble with any of these claims, although just what might be meant by "forward-thinking" has me slightly puzzled. Here indeed is a fair selection of "cutting edge" work by well-credentialed scholars, largely driven by those theoretical concerns which are so much in vogue in the Western academic world. In the analysis and exploration of various aspects of the "problematized" phenomena known as "Hinduism" the methods deployed by these scholars are also "up to date." The contributors (with a few exceptions) are intent on re-reading the Hindu

tradition within a conceptual framework which can loosely be described as post-modern. One is hardly surprised to find a good deal of the usual fare — the disavowal of earlier modes of scholarly inquiry, critiques of "essentialism" of various stripes, a preoccupation with gender and identity politics, the affirmation of "difference," scepticism about the self-understandings of Hindu practitioners, a tendency to "explain" religious phenomena in terms of various power formations and social functions. No doubt much of this work is useful, some of it even ground-breaking. Many of the essays rest on a foundation of rigorous and painstaking research, and the results are likely to command the attention of specialists in the various fields in which these scholars have carried out their labours. Students and teachers, as well as researchers, are likely to make profitable use of the *Companion*. I am less confident about its appeal to the general reader. Nor would this collection be an appropriate embarkation point for those starting out on the long, perplexing and endless journey entailed in understanding the Hindu tradition.

The considerable merits of the *Companion* notwithstanding, I found myself constantly irritated by, and worried about several fundamental assumptions which seem to be shared, to varying degree, by many (but by no means all) of the contributors, sometimes with a truly remarkable complacency. To state these as briefly and baldly as I can: Hinduism is best "explained" and "understood" as a congeries of historically-conditioned and regionally-specific socio-religious phenomena which are amenable to both empirical inquiry and to theoretical "deconstruction;" the conceptual apparatus, analytical tools and methodological procedures through which "Hinduism" might most profitably be approached are to be found in either historicist-cum-sociological modes of inquiry or in the labyrinthine repositories of contemporary "postmodernist" theory in its many variants — post-structuralist, post-colonial, feminist.

Readers who share these assumptions are likely to find a good deal of interest in this well-mounted production. But what if, insofar as possible, we were to treat Hinduism in its own terms — as a divinely-inspired tradition which, for all the human corruptions and the historical exigencies to which it has been susceptible, provides its adherents with a profound and timeless doctrine about the nature of Reality and furnishes spiritual methods whereby human beings may conform themselves to that Reality and thereby attain liberation? What if we were to understand "Hinduism" as the manifold application of a set of immutable principles to all aspects of life, private and public, individual and collective? What if we took as our guides the great saints and sages of the tradition itself? (What would Ramana Maharshi, perhaps the greatest Hindu figure of recent times, make of this volume? The Sage of Arunachala, the embodiment of all that it is most enduring in the Hindu tradition, is afforded but one fleeting reference in the entire volume, while Ramakrishna, the other indubitable saint of modern times and a figure of inestimable significance in the collision of tradition and modernity, is mentioned not at all!) What if we were to believe that we could learn more about Hinduism from a devout village peasant than we could glean from the collected works of the Parisian oracles, or indeed, from the most prodigious collection of sociological

data? What if we were to understand our task as learning *from* rather than *about* the Hindu tradition? Or, to pose a different, though not unrelated, kind of question: What if "Hinduism" is more rather than less than the sum of its parts? What if analysis were made subservient to synthesis? What if we were to believe that the "cutting edge" of contemporary academic scholarship is really a kind of shredding machine — one whose actual human effects are almost entirely destructive? What if we were to think that a profane and corrosive "scholarship," committed in the end to nothing more than information-based "knowledge" for its own sake (a shibboleth of modern academia), and governed by an historicist/empiricist/relativist epistemology, was quite inadequate to the task at hand? What if "Hinduism" can be understood by such methods no more than the wind can be caught in a net? What if we were to recognize that much contemporary theorizing about religion is irredeemably modernistic, Western, and relativistic, and thereby necessarily, though sometimes covertly, hostile to traditional religious understandings? It is to the editor's credit that this volume allows for a plurality of voices and viewpoints, and there *is* evidence here of some resistance to the prevailing intellectual fashions of our day. Nonetheless, the *general* tone of the *Companion,* and its accumulated effect, prompt me to raise these questions. If we were to take such questions seriously we might be less likely to take *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* at face value, and more likely to ask troubling questions about the substance, the purpose and the consequence of much that takes place in the contemporary Western academy, particularly in Religious Studies. In this context *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* might be seen as a symptom of a deep-seated malaise afflicting contemporary academia.

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Jerome I. Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac*, Aldershot, & Hants, Ashgate, 2003, pp 125. ISBN 0 7546 1679 7

The Binding (Hebrew: *akedah*) of Isaac refers to the story originating in Genesis 22 that tells of God ordering Abraham to take his son, Isaac, to the Land of Moriah and to sacrifice him on a mountain there. Abraham travels with Isaac for three days and together they ascend the mountain. Abraham does not reveal his intention until he binds him ready for the sacrifice and raises the knive. An angel calls out to him to desist (Abraham! Abraham!) and he is directed to find a ram caught in a nearby thicket and he sacrifices this animal in place of his son.

This story has been acclaimed as the most dramatic in the Hebrew Bible. Even before Christian times, and certainly since then, in Rabbinic and Patristic sources, there have been expansions on its theme. Gellman compares and contrasts the theological disquisition of Soren Kiergegaard on the topic with those of the Hasidic thinkers, expecially Rabbi Nachman of Breslav (1772-1810) and Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica (1802-1854). His purpose in so doing is to

develop his own contemporary reading of the text.

The interpretation of Rabbi Nachman is seen as a form of divine comedy. It is 'one, big joke' that Abraham's sacrifice of what is most dear to him should be considered as something important to God. And if that which is most dear to Abraham cannot make him close to God, then all the sacrifices of Israel offered by others will fail to do so. The *akedah* reveals the comic nature of divine service in Judaism.

Kierkegaard, in Gellman's opinion, writing about the *akedah* in his opus, *Fear and Trembling*, gives a Christian interpretation to the story that is opposed to the traditional understanding. Abraham, caught between the command of God and the dictates of common morality about murdering one's son, is subjected to fear and trembling. His struggle is within his own soul. Kiergegaard uses the story to develop his own idea of authenticity. Kierkegaard's authentic self is an atomic self, not socially defined, as it stands before God. Yet beneath all this there is a hidden Christian message for Kierkegaard. The author portrays Abraham as the Christ-figure in the story and his commentary depicts the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, even if it is under cover.

In commenting on Kierkegaard's Christian treatment of the story, Gellman refers to the discussion over the *akedah* in the Christian Scriptures. He cites authors who would see the later Patristic elaboration of the *akedah* as already being present in the Christian Scriptures without giving voice to those who have just as persistently argued for the opposite viewpoint. While this does not particularly affect his argument one way or the other, it is an unnecessary excursus into a contentious area.

Gellman wants to compare the Kierkegaardian notion of the 'teleological suspension of the ethical' with the idea of *averah lishmah* ("a sin for God's sake") as stated by Rabbi Mordecai Leiner. For Kierkegaard Abraham has to choose: to do what is ethical or to follow the command of God. The willingness to act despite the uncertainty means that the person moves from the ethical to faith. For Rabbi Leiner the crucial aspect of the *akedah* is that Abraham must resist thinking that there is a basis for a decision. He must give up certainty. He must transgress the word of God in the name of the will of God. To do so is to pass the test.

Gellman now goes further and constructs his own modern theology. In the first place he reflects on Sarah's reaction to the *akedah*. Next, he juxtaposes his own interpretation of the story:

> Building on Kierkegaard and the Rebbe of Izbica, I propose that the deepest contemporary meaning of the akedah revolves around the question of whether one is able to conceive of oneself as having been mistaken, of having misunderstood, or of having failed to comprehend all aspects of the context in which we live and act. (p. 113)

All but one chapter of the book have previously appeared as chapters or journal articles. They have been modified, but the material still reflects the particular slant of the original. This militates against a smooth presentation in this book. I found that I was reading a series of essays rather than a reasoned thesis.

There are topics and themes taken up in earlier chapters that simply vanish. They do not contribute to the final theological elaboration. Gellman's own contemporary reading ends up as being bipolar – suddenly introducing the Sarah viewpoint on the *akedah* and then reinterpreting Abraham's contrasting activity in the book of Genesis.

The book would only appeal to a very limited audience who could enjoy an uneven foray into Kierkegaardian and Hasidic speculation.

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David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times.* London and New York, Routledge, Polity, 2002 [2000], pp. xii + 188. ISBN 0-7456-1488-4.

This interesting monograph covers a great deal of material in, of necessity, a rather brief and general manner. Lyon's approach is sociological, but with a notable sympathy to the notion of "faith." He uses "religion" chiefly to refer to institutions, but explores spirituality and other religious manifestations that occur outside of institutions. Lyon treads a careful line between categorising certain phenomena as either "modern" or "postmodern." His book is dependent on the work of both scholars who affirm (Castells, Bauman), and scholars who deny (Hervieu-Leger, Giddens), the condition of postmodernity. He concentrates on the reshaping of modernity through the growth of consumerism and the development of communication and information technologies. Disneyland is examined as "a social and cultural symbol of our times. In particular, Disneyland is a trope for the democratization of culture, including religion" (p. 3).

Lyon acknowledges that "Disneyfication" is generally understood as a negative cultural process (along with "McDonaldisation"), but argues that "Disneyization" is a process occurring throughout western society. He makes use of Bryman's (1995) isolation of four elements in the process of Disneyization: theming, seen in restaurants and clubs such as Planet Hollywood and the Hard Rock Café; dedifferentiation of consumption, which is the "breaking down of conventional cultural differences between kinds of consumption and between consuming and other activities" (p. 5); merchandising, where increasingly the selection of brand-names contributes to identity formation; and emotional labour, so that Disney employees are "supposed to give the impression that they are having fun and not really working" (p. 6).

These concerns interleave with Lyon's own concern for the ways in which changes in the perception of authority, identity, time and space, have transformed western culture, and with it religion. He discusses various versions of the secularisation thesis, sticking fairly closely to Dobbelaere's formulation, which identifies laicization (the split between church and state), organizational change (within religious institutions), and secularisation of consciousness (the idea that Western moderns have "homeless minds," to quote Berger, Berger and Kellner), as

the key issues. Lyon also covers the rise of new religions and the New Age (Daniel Bell's "return of the sacred"), and concludes that redefining religion as a cultural resource makes it valuable again, rather than "a failing feature of a bygone era" (p. 33).

This part of the book draws heavily on the work of French sociologist Daniele Hervieu-Leger, whose work concentrates on the way that the "lines of memory" represented by religion continually repair and reform after breaking, and the ways in which "new meaning systems are being generated all the time, with more or less connection with traditional groups" (p. 43).

Chapter 5, "Shopping for a Self," focuses on the ways that modern people construct selves, from the branded clothing they wear to the pick and mix religious beliefs and values they espouse. Lyon affirms Bauman's assertion that consumer conduct is the basis of the coming "postmodern social circumstance" (p. 79). This argument feeds into a discussion of the de-institutionalization of religious beliefs evident in the present, and the recourse that moderns have to an internal locus of authority, which connects with an authentic self, which expresses personality rather than character (p. 93). These selves experience time differently as the pace of life speeds up; they defy age with surgery and plans for physical immortality; they defy space through telephones and internet connections which make the most distant people present. Lyon argues that these radical changes have actually changed people fundamentally, and have changed what can be authentically regarded as religious by such transformed people.

The book also deals with other relevant topics such as tensions between the global and the local, and the ways in which history is "recycled as nostalgia," and the future already exists as various simulations that can be experienced today (p. 121). The brevity of the study is to some extent balanced by the excellence of bibliography and notes, which suggest many avenues for further research. In conclusion, this is a very useful book for the teacher or student of contemporary Western religion and culture.

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Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, pp. x + 203. ISBN 0-631-23353-9

This book is part of Blackwells' Brief Histories of Religion series, which aims to provide "brief, accessible and lively accounts of key topics within theology and religion." McGrath has an attractive and clear writing style, and while the result is hardly exhaustive, most readers will discover within its covers all they had ever wished to know about heaven. The first two chapters deal specifically with the metaphors and images through which Christians have traditionally understood heaven, the New Jerusalem and the Garden of Paradise.

McGrath traces each image from Old Testament references, through the New Testament and the Church Fathers, to medieval and modern interpretations. He uses

literary extracts and visual images to demonstrate how the idea of heaven has captured the imagination of artists and poets. Many of these literary extracts (Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the medieval poem *Pearl*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*) would have been familiar to literate Christians in the past, but nowadays they are likely to be new, even to devout readers. As such, the inclusion of such excellent examples is one of the book's strengths.

Chapter Three shifts to the key doctrine of the atonement, and the Christian understanding of how one might be admitted to heaven. This involves the discussion of basic Christological concepts and a careful delineation of how concepts of the atonement have changed as historical circumstances alter: Catholicism has understood the institutional church as the gateway to salvation; Protestants have typically identified personal faith as the prerequisite; and the death of Jesus has been interpreted variously as the conquest of death, the enkindling of love, and as the payment required for the forgiveness of human sins.

Chapters Four to Six deal with the ways in which Christians experience intimations of heaven, and the particular benefits they anticipate which fuel the yearning for heaven. Nature is one thing that frequently strikes people as heavenly, as is the human experience of love and connectedness with family and friends. Chapter Five focuses on the emotional desire for reunion with deceased relatives and friends as a quality of the desire for heaven; the highly evocative materials discussed include Negro spirituals, those passionate songs of yearning born of slavery and human misery. Chapter Six, "Journey's End: Heaven as the goal of Christian Life," brings together many disparate ideas from theology that are relevant to the Christian's belief that s/he will enter Heaven.

In conclusion, this is a very readable and entertaining small book. Although theological and confessional in tone, it could be enjoyed by a non-believer because despite its brevity, it contains much useful information about the historical development of Christian doctrine and praxis regarding the concept of heaven.

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Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, xi+172 pp. ISBN 0631228152

McGrath is a leading English Christian Evangelical theologian. This perspective shapes his analysis of the past and expectations of the future. The book is easy to read and provides insight into the recent past and some challenging projections toward a future.

He begins with a review of the 20th century focussing on its failures — genocides, totalitarian secular regimes and what he refers to as the failure of nerve of Christianity. The chapter on the factors transforming Christianity examines the

impact of globalization, decline in mainline and state churches, and the rapid rise of Christianity in Africa, Latin America and South Korea.

The rest of the book turns to the future. However, the themes examined in the first chapters are not used to shape that view. He examines new ways of being church, but in a way that fails to see the past as a particular pact between the churches and Western democracies struck in the mid-19th century. Rather the developments of mega-churches in the United States is somehow seen as the new monasticism and a model for the future. Here the future fails to include the very areas that according to chapter 2 will dominate Christian reality in the 21st century. While he may be right in some ways about mega-churches in the United States, they are a bit romanticised and he fails to take seriously the extreme succession problems they face. Cell churches are the only image for the church in Asia.

Future challenges are seen as fundamentalism, conflict with Islam and the demise of ecumenism. But each of these was seen from the perspective of the old power centres of Christianity not the emerging centres. Denominationalism will be a thing of the past. The denominationalism he sees passing is that formed in the United States in the 19th century. Yes that is passing, but new divisions at least as strong as the class and ethnicity divides of the earlier denominational structures are emerging. These new divisions are not examined.

The book closes with a bleat about the passing of rational academic systematic theology. Yes that is passing. Enlightenment forms of Christianity are passing. But he fails to consider the rise of spirituality, mystical Christianity, meditation, and other forms of Christianity not familiar to or approved by evangelical Christianity.

Some clergy may find the book stimulating and provocative. Australians need to be careful, as usual, reading perspectives grounded elsewhere. Australian religious life is different and the future here will not be the same either.

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