Hinduism in the Modern World


Editor(s): Brian A. Hatcher

Religions in the Modern World


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Review
Hinduism—aka Sanatana Dharma—is the oldest living religion. Such a long history is bound to have many struggles, adaptations, evolution, misunderstandings, conflicts, resolutions, and traditions. *Hinduism in the Modern World* is a mirror to all these, and more. While the editor and contributors of this volume do not claim that this work is comprehensive, which is almost impossible for any book to be on such a vast field, this book definitely provides a glimpse of the past and an idea of the attitude towards the study of Hinduism to be adopted in the present and the future. In his introduction editor Brian A. Hatcher presents the aim of the book to the readers “The book offers an opportunity to think about what it means to be Hindu, for those with some prior familiarity, to add greater complexity to what they already know about Hinduism” (1). Of course, *Hinduism in the Modern World* achieves much more than this.

Divided into five parts totaling eighteen chapters, this book covers geographical, colonial, diasporic, social, political, environmental, legal, media, and hermeneutic perspectives on Hinduism. The tensions inherent in the study and practice of the ancient Hindu religion becomes evident when Hatcher says that the “historical problem involves asking whether we can in fact tell the story of Hinduism as the continuous transmission of a set of truths and practices” (2). Clarifying that the various categories in academia “are of relatively recent origin” (5), Hatcher assures us that this “is not a book about ‘modern Hinduism,’ if by that phrase one means only those forms of Hinduism that show signs of emerging from a direct engagement with the modern west” (8).

This book emphasizes the urgency to study Hinduism in a critical manner while respecting the beliefs of its followers. In chapter 1—“Hinduism in South India”—Leela Prasad gives a picturesque description of South Indian temples and shows the importance of this “fuzzy network” of temples (18). In chapter 2—“Hinduism in North India”—Brian K Pennington argues “there are good reasons for talking about Hinduism in India today in terms of its northern and southern varieties” (33). He examines Hinduism “around three activist agendas: environmental, anticorruption, and Hindu nationalist” (37). He concludes “new forms [of Hinduism] are being actively produced by religious authorities and devotees alike” (45). In chapter 3, Hanna H. Kim talks of “Transnational Movements.” She analyses the workings of the movement called Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha [BAPS]. She feels that “global movements such as BAPS compel a reexamination of the migratory networks of modern religions and their efflorescence outside of their homeland in a colonial and postcolonial context” (60).

Discussions on the long history of a religion such as Hinduism are bound to encounter some misunderstandings along the way. For instance, in chapter 15 on “Public Hinduism and Hundutva,” Pralay Kanungo says “Thus the three colors of the Indian flag—saffron, green, and white—are meant to symbolize Hinduism, Islam, and other religions, respectively” (251). But, the true meaning of the Indian tricolor is different as given by the Government of India: “Saffron colour [sp] denotes
renunciation ... white in the centre [sp] is light ... green shows our relation to the soil” (S Radhakrishnan in *Flag Code of India*, Government of India, 2002).

Hatcher successfully achieves the “goal of this volume” to “open up and complicate the rich world of modern Hinduism” (309). He is confident that readers would be inspired to “visiting a Hindu temple ... reading ... Rammohan Roy or ... Swami Vivekananda, exploring ... Hindu iconography, or taking up the practice of yoga or meditation” (309). It is quite clear that this volume is likely to considerably affect the reader’s ideas on religion and Hinduism.

This book has engaging discussions that make it unputdownable to the diligent scholar. The language is crisp and clear. The editor has well accomplished the unenviable task of finding coherence through different standpoints. A nice feature of this book is that, at the end of each chapter, are given the sections “Questions for Discussion,” “Suggested Readings,” and “Bibliography.” Most chapters also contain a brief description of the books mentioned in “Suggested Readings.” This book covers almost all major areas of academic research on religion and could prove to be an inspiration for serious research on Hinduism.

**About the Reviewer(s):**
*Swami Narasimhananda* is the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*.

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**About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):**
*Brian A. Hatcher* is Packard Chair of Theology at Tufts University, where he is also Professor and Chair of the Department of Religion. He is the author of several monographs on Hindu reform movements in colonial Bengal, the dynamics of modern Hindu eclecticism, and the life and activities of the social reformer, Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar. In his other published work he has explored the transformation of Sanskrit learning in colonial Bengal, highlighted the world of vernacular intellectual life, and worked to understand contemporary Hinduism against the backdrop of colonial history and postcolonial theory.

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