HINDU BOOK REVIEW
Category : June 1989
Published by Anonymous on Jun. 01, 1989

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Hindu Ethics

Purity, Abortion, Euthanasia

Authors: Coward, Lipner, Young State Univ. of New York Press pb $10.95 139 pages

"Modern Western approaches to India, and in particular to Hinduism, have focused on metaphysics at the expense of ethics. As a result. Westerners have often tended to see Hinduism as concerned with the esoteric, the otherworldly, the mystical and thus as having a blind eye when it comes to the ethical issues of daily life." So begins Harold G. Coward - author of one of the three chapters in this book - in the introduction. His correct assessment truly applies to Hindus themselves as well. Consciousness of Hinduism has awakened, yes, but the Hindu conscience, which is represented by a large dimension of our scriptural texts, needs more stirring.

In this light, Hindu Ethics is welcome, well-executed and recommended reading. The three scholars who each wrote a chapter didn't have rejuvenating our sense of ethics in mind. Their intent, as indicated by the subjects of abortion and euthanasia, is to highlight the history of Hindu thought on topics that are of real and very volatile concern today. While the West is deeply tangled in the religious and civil ethics of abortion and euthanasia, India too is on the verge of entering this thicket. There is already a drive among Indian doctors to harvest organs from people who are brain dead - heartbeat and breathing persist but the higher brain functions of self-consciousness and thought are gone.

Hindu Ethics successfully draws on the insights of eastern culture to help define the difficult issues facing religion and society. As these same dilemmas were viewed long ago in India, this book offers for both Hindu and non-Hindu readers a fine tabulation of scriptural perspective. We are guided from very early Rig Veda wisdom through to medieval texts with long pauses often in the epic Mahabharata and the dharma shastras.

The discussions of abortion and euthanasia are very useful though occasionally flawed when the authors are too adventuresome with their personal conclusions. Euthanasia in the Hindu context does not apply to modern "mercy-killing" performed by a doctor or third party in the case of terminal or suffering illness. It refers to a self-inflicted suicide associated with the very old who are unable to meet certain daily rituals and with wounded warriors and old yogis. Essentially, both abortion and suicide were forbidden by the primary scriptures as forms of killing. Later scripture, written by brahmin law-framers, went against the Vedic injunctions and permitted the above forms of suicide. Still later scripture reversed the brahminical lenience.

A Bridge of Dreams

Author: Sara Ann Levinsky Inner Traditions pb $12.95

585 pages

The bridge spanned from Calcutta, India to an adobe ashram in the Sierra Madre Mountains above Los Angeles, California. The dreams were dreamt by Swami Paramananda, a renegade Ramakrishna Order monk who established three spiritual centers in America from 1909 to 1940, the year he collapsed and died of heart failure. His dreams lived on in the reality of the ashrams which still run today as bastions of Vedanta universalism.

Bridge of Dreams is a biographical feast, at once fatality rich in detail and presented with saucy, strong narrative. That it is set mainly in America, where several Ramakrishna monks met high-voltage karmic tests and turned on each

other or burned themselves out, makes it a realistic chronicle of roller-coaster spiritual life. According to the author, all the conversations related are actual, drawn from notes disciples had made over the decades.

Swami Paramananda was a spiritual waif - his face was angelically boyish even when his hair turned grey. In the midst of incredible adversity - fire and flood that ravaged the California ashram, a close woman disciple, a nun, who left and spread rumors in L.A. of sexual misconduct at the ashram, another nun who was to become his successor agonized and left for over two years, financial debacles - he remained boyishly optimistic and even recklessly enthusiastic. To him, it was all part of continually lilting yourself up into spiritual awareness; fall down, get up, keep up.

He came to America to assist Swami Abhedananda in Boston. As a matter of coincidence or whatever, Abhedananda ended up leaving the Ramakrishna Mission to teach on his own and Paramananda a little later unofficially divorced himself from the Mission and Order. He started his own center in Boston, refused to staff it with Ramakrishna monks, choosing instead to surround himself with women he formed into a monastic community. This includes his niece, Gayatri Devi, the present leader. And so this adventure splendidly unravels.

Mother Meera

Author: Adilakshmi Mother Meera Publications pb $12.95

Contact: Jeff Cox. 26 Spruce Lane 161 pages

Ithica. MY 14850 USA

This short, sweet book is an unabashed announcement of the presence of the Divine Mother on earth in the human form of Meera, an Indian woman in her late twenties who now lives in Thalhiem, Germany. Meera is a self-proclaimed avatar,

an incarnation, and those Hindus who recognize avatars - most Saivite and Shakta schools do not - will enjoy and perhaps find a teacher through this book which is part biography, part question/answer and part testimony of Meera devotees. As the book relates, Meera was discovered by her uncle in India, who brought her to the Aurobindo Ashram. Here she claimed psychic communication with Shri Aurobindo and announced her mission of purifying man's consciousness through channeling the supreme light that will spiritually transform mankind. Meera is ecumenical.

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