Dominic Goodall *Hindu Scriptures*

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Hindu Scriptures, edited by Dominic Goodall, comes attractively packaged and offers “new translations” by the editor. This package contains a fairly extensive Introduction, followed by Notes on the Translations, and A Guide to Pronunciation (51 pages). The remaining 411 pages consists largely of the translations, along with a Glossary, Suggestions for Further Readings, and a final page of Acknowledgements. Goodall devotes nearly 300 pages to selected translations from the Rg Veda, the Atharva Veda, and the Upanishads, with a fairly comprehensive translation of the Bhagavad-Gita. The last three selections of the translations deal with less commonly known texts, such as selections from the Yajnavalkya-Smrti, from the Kirana-Tantra, and from the Bhagavata-Purana. In all, Hindu Scriptures contains a diverse set of texts from the early Vedic period to about the 13th Century AD. In the introduction, Goodall notes that two previously published anthologies carry the title of Hindu Scriptures (McNichol, 1938) and (Zaehner, 1966), and he hopes his current offering may “be considered worthy of inclusion in the list of the Hundred Best Books of that title.”

Goodall’s Introduction is of some value. His discussion of the selected texts is fairly reasonable, logical, and probably helpful to those unfamiliar with Hindu literature. I state “probably helpful” because it strikes me as slightly pedantic and saturated with esoteric technical terminology, for an anthology aimed at general public consumption. His inclusion of Hindu (Sanskrit) terms tends to obfuscate the general message. Despite such flaws, the Introduction may well constitute the most precious portion of this publication.

The Rg Veda is so vast and of such vital significance to what developed later in Hindu thought that one wonders why Goodall included only twelve hymns from this corpus. While the hymns selected identify some of the major deities such as Varuna, Indra, Agni, and so forth, the seventeen pages in this section of the
anthology fail to capture very much of the essence of the Rg Veda in terms of its broad range of intellectual concerns.

As for Goodall’s selections from the Atharva Veda, the four hymns he includes reveal nothing at all to reinforce his comments in the Introduction. Here he notes: “Magical charms, imprecations, amulets, pleas for self-protection and for the destruction of enemies in fact make up the bulk of that [Atharva Veda] collection” (xiii). Goodall’s four selections all entail fairly lengthy odes dealing with “Primal Man” that completely neglect matters vital to the basic spirit of the Atharva Veda.

The Upanishads represent a critical stage of Hindu intellectual development. The metaphysical speculations contained in these texts provoked both the Buddhist and the Jain systems, and of course inspired later Hindu philosophy. Goodall offers translations of six different Upanishads. The translations constitute about 160 pages in all. They reasonably articulate the fundamentals of Upanishadic thought. Certainly Goodall is to be commended for his judicious selection as regards these texts. Alas, what he offers is readily available in other standard anthologies as well as more comprehensive translations of the Upanishads. Thus at base, Goodall provides nothing fresh or intrinsically new as regards this set of texts.

Goodall also offers a complete translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, which constitutes ninety pages of this anthology. This text, which is a part of the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, is one of the most respected items in all of Hindu literature. One would expect to find this in any anthology of Hindu Scriptures. Goodall’s inclusion of this text in his anthology represents good judgment. Yet, alas, the version offered here is not an original translation and therefore nothing new or distinctive is involved.

Thus we turn to the final three portions of this text to discover what sort of “original” materials Goodall offers. At least these final selections contain textual material that Goodall personally rendered into English. He provides selections from Chapters I and III of the Yajnavalkya-Smrti, for a total of forty-two pages. The Introduction suggests the Laws of Manu may be more prestigious (and better known) but the Yajnavalkya-Smrti was chosen.
because it: “is a concise work and one that is more systematically ordered by theme”. What follows is the statement: “Most of the works included in this anthology have been selected in order to trace the emergence and development of doctrines of theology, soteriology and cosmology. The Yajnavalkya-Smrti has no bearing on these, but addresses another side of Indian religiosity.” It is concerned with correct practice/behavior rather than correct opinion/ideology. And what Goodall offers here is a wooden translation that at best might evoke modest interest in a dedicated scholar of Sanskrit or an anthropologist researching Hindu daily ritual practices. It only tangentially provides materials of contextual harmony with the preceding portions of the anthology. Certainly the Yajnavalkya-Smrti is NOT the sort of general reading material one might readily assign to students taking a course in Hinduism.

The Kirana-Tantra represents quite another genre of Hindu literature. In the Introduction, Goodall devoted some seven pages to describing this text. His treatment of Tantric literature in general is quite helpful. His reason for selecting the Kirana-Tantra is that “essential doctrines are gathered together and set forth succinctly in its first few chapters”. The material intrinsically is interesting reading, set in a rather traditional Indian dialogue format. Goodall’s translation is scholarly, with abundant notes and citations. The Kirana-Tantra offers metaphysical speculations that harmonize well with the selections from the Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita.

The final text, the Bhagavata-Purana, represents yet another genre of Hindu literature. Evidently the Purana texts were composed for a more secular audience and deal with such matters as cosmology, the genealogies of gods and heros, and perhaps what might loosely be treated as “mythology”. Goodall offers them as “a vehicle for sectarian religion”. He selected the Bhagavata-Purana because it “illustnates a much more developed form of devotionalism than that found in the Gita.” The text is again in dialogue format that makes for easy reading, although Goodall renders the translation in a suitably scholarly manner with abundant notes and citations.
What I find most dismaying about *Hindu Scriptures* is that only ninety-one pages out of the 411 total (for the translations) seem to be Goodall’s personal contribution to the anthology. The bulk of the documents are actually “borrowed” translations from other sources. Of the ninety odd pages that can be attributed directly to the editor/author as evidence of his scholarship, nearly half (the *Yajnavalkya-Smrti*) are rendered in a somewhat pedantic style that offers little that is enlightening. His Introduction is fairly good but falls short in terms of providing a fresh, original, and informative approach to these “gems” of Hindu vision.

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