

Aside from these provisos the work is a compelling read—well worth the effort. And I underscore the fact that it will require effort.

Herb Gröning

McGill University

---

*Dilemmas of Life and Death: Hindu Ethics in a North American Context.* By S. Cromwell Crawford. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995. ISBN 0-7914-2166-X. Pp. xi+233.

---

Crawford's book is an innovative comparative study of such contemporary ethical issues as abortion, suicide, euthanasia and the environment, from the perspectives of religion, morality and law. For each issue, Crawford provides a general and informative historical overview of the development of ethical ideals and beliefs in both the Western world (the Judeo-Christian tradition and secular modernity) and in the Hindu tradition. He gives both theological/philosophical and scientific interpretations of the various ethical dilemmas of life and death, and provides current case studies, particularly from North America.

Well-structured and smoothly flowing, this book makes accessible an important debate to those who are neither experts in ethics nor in Hinduism. In his courageous attempt to open an explicit dialogue, Crawford demonstrates how in issues of life and death one can benefit from moving away from the more absolutist ethical ideals found in North America. He finds that Hinduism has a more tolerant and understanding attitude towards relevant ethical issues, and shows how Hindu thought allows some leeway where there is a conflict between beliefs and interests. For example, in tracing the pro-life, pro-choice and constitutional debates on abortion in the United States, he discerns that, while Hindus believe life begins at conception, they allow room for abortion under certain circumstances such as rape.

There is considerable value in looking at other traditions for insights on contemporary ethical dilemmas in North America. However, one may question the plausibility of grafting ethical ideals from one world-view onto a radically different one. The Hindu ethical system is founded on the one unifying Hindu religious belief: the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsāra*). How can one then superimpose ethical ideals about life and death that flow from the Hindu religious world-view onto the Judeo-Christian world-view: one life with judgement after death? It is understandable that North Americans could gain insights from other traditions; yet Hindu ethical ideals are grounded on the extremely distinct world-view of *samsāra*.

In an attempt to demonstrate the ethical freedom provided in the Hindu tradition, Crawford gives examples of the accepted forms of suicide which he qualifies as "religious acts." However, these "religious acts" of self-mortification unto death and *sati*, which arise within the context of transmigration of the soul, differ fundamentally from the Western notion of suicide. There is thus an ethical hazard in superimposing a Western psychological category (i.e., suicide) onto Eastern practices of religious self-willed deaths, for they are different in nature and

origin. Indeed, one cannot legitimately consider the practice of *sati* as a form of suicide (as does Crawford), precisely because of its status as a religious act.

On the other hand, in some cases, as Crawford himself acknowledges, it is questionable whether the practice of *sati* is performed out of choice. The practice, although popularly revered as a virtuous act, is often the result of various social pressures for familial status, property rights, escape from the unjust maltreatment of widows, and so forth (as opposed to the Western notion of suicide as rooted in individual disturbance). Although there is no doubt a strong spiritual dimension to Hinduism (religion as a means to salvation), the tradition has other dimensions as well; for example, it serves as an instrument of social control with a variety of particular constraints. In fact, as in any traditional society, there is very little choice for the common person. Can this really be viewed as ethical openness about suicide?

Also questionable are Crawford's selective use and interpretation of religious texts (both Christian and Hindu) to support his argument. It is an admirable yet difficult task to discuss Hinduism as a whole because of the tradition's diversity—and, thus, its many inevitable contradictions. Just as there are written works which advocate the practice of *sati*, so there are others which challenge it.

Notwithstanding these critical reflections, the book is both provocative and stimulating, and is an important step in establishing an interface between divergent religious traditions.

Kamala Nayar

McGill University

---

***"Purāṇa Perennis": Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts.***  
Ed. Wendy Doniger. Albany: SUNY, 1993. ISBN 0-7914-1382-9. Pp. xii+331.

---

This book is a collection of nine articles written by scholars from North America, Europe, and India, on problems of meaning and interpretation with respect to the enormous corpus of Purāṇic literature. The authors attempt to discern various paradigms in the Purāṇas by looking at the "intertextual" relations between the various layers of this corpus—Purāṇas from the classical Sanskrit, regional, and sectarian traditions. Although the subject material is specialized, the authors succeed in making intelligible what they consider to be significant hermeneutical issues in Purāṇic literature.

*Purāṇa Perennis* is divided into three parts. The first part, "From Vedic and Epic to Purāṇa and Upapurāṇa," illuminates the fluidity of the oral tradition and the relation between the Vedic, Epic, and Purāṇic texts. The article by Laurie L. Patton, "The Transport Text: Purāṇic Trends in the *Bṛhaddevatā*," discerns the eclectic nature of the *Bṛhaddevatā* and shows how it has drawn from the Purāṇas. There are two articles—"Echoes of the *Mahābhārata*: Why is a Parrot the Narrator of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*?" and "The Scrapbook of Undeserved Salvation: The Kedāra Khaṇḍa of the *Skanda Purāṇa*"—by the editor, Wendy Doniger, a dominant figure in the field; however, these are not her most