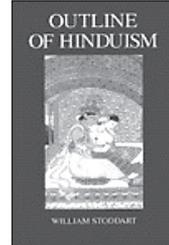


Outline of Hinduism

By William Stoddart

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Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos



“There is no religion higher than Truth.” (Satyān nāsti paro dharmah)

- Maxim of the Maharajas of Benares

This veritable “hidden treasure” has gone virtually unnoticed amidst the numerous works on Hindu spirituality. A characteristic of the contemporary human psyche is that it repeatedly favors *quantity* at the expense of *quality*. Nonetheless, this phenomenon becomes clear when viewed in relationship to a much larger symptom that is interconnected with the systematic obscuration of spirituality or “intellectual regress” of the historical cycle known in the Hindu tradition as the *Kali-Yuga* or “Dark Age”—underscoring the “signs of the times”..

Stoddart begins with the fundamentals, which are essentially the same across the religious traditions whether one is speaking about Hinduism or any other sapiential tradition:

In terms of etymology, religion is that which binds, specifically, that which binds man to God.... In the first place, religion is a *doctrine* of unity.... In the second place, religion is a *method* of union.... Whatever they may be called, these two components are always present.... Doctrine, or theory, concerns the mind; method, or practice, concerns the will. Religion, to be itself, must always engage both mind and will.

The most important single point about religion is that it is not man-made. Religion is not invented by man, but revealed by God. Divine revelation is a *sine qua non*; without it, there is no religion, only man-made ideology, in which no sacramental or salvational element is present.

Stoddart is “a master of synthesis”, and this signature method of distillation permeates the text. He successfully illuminates the rudiments of whatever topic he is drawing on, always utilizing as few words as possible to present the essential keys needed to adequately comprehend the subject at hand. This synthetic ability derives from Stoddart’s mastery of the *philosophia perennis* or perennial philosophy that illuminates the universal metaphysics at the heart of each revealed and orthodox (doctrinally pure) spiritual tradition—“*Sages call the One Reality by many names.*” (Rig Veda, I, 164, 46.) Amid the oldest living esotericism, the Hindu tradition and the youngest living esotericism within Islam known as Sufism there is an identical underlying metaphysic: “The science of Sufism and the science of Vedānta are one”, declared Dārā Shukūh (1615-1659), the son of the Mughal emperor Shāh Jahān (1592-1666).

Though a book cannot capture the breadth and depth of an entire tradition, the text presents a balanced understanding of Hinduism as demonstrating both the *apophatic* and ineffable quality of the Absolute, as well as the *cataphatic* quality that affirms the Divine, within the Hindu tradition or *sanātana dharma* (eternal religion). In this work readers will be guided through the multifaceted anthropology of the Hindu *dharma* articulating its mythology, metaphysics, cosmology and spirituality. The author expounds upon matters that will challenge the very edifice of the modern and postmodern mind in order to clarify the lost sense of the transpersonal that was traditionally a norm. Topics include: The Place of Hinduism Amongst the Religions of the World, Hindu Pantheon, The Incarnations (*Avatāras*) of Vishnu, Masculine (*Purusba*) and Feminine (*Prakriti*) Principles, The Five Levels of Reality, The Four Castes (*varna*), The Three Spiritual Ways (*mārgas*), Yoga and Its Branches, The Hindu Scriptures, The Six Points of View (*darshanas*), The Four Ages (*yugas*), The Four Stages in Life (*āshramas*), Transmigration or Reincarnation, Classical Sages and Saints, Modern Sages and Saints and Holy Cities, Holy Rivers, Pilgrimage Points.

Contrary to the contemporary outlook, the caste system (*varna dharma*) is not intended to be an apparatus of imposed collective tyranny by the elite *brahmins*, nor a means of exploitation of the lower castes for their indulgence, nor is it an outdated mode of government or temporal power. That said, it needs to be remembered that in tradition-

ally ordered societies the temporal power was always subject to the spiritual authority.

The Universal Man or *Purusha* embodies the four main castes (*varna*) as articulated in Purusha-Sūkta, Rig-Veda, X, 90:

The Brahmin was his mouth;	(Brāhmana)
From his arms was made the Ruler;	(Rājanya)
his thighs were the Industrious;	(Vaishya)
from his feet was born the Servant.	(Shūdra)

The caste system embodies integral principles of social harmony which are not only extrinsic but intrinsic, that is, inseparable from the spiritual domain itself and its ordering of the cosmos according to the tripartite divisions reflected in the human microcosm of Spirit/Intellect, soul and body. The impacts of colonialism and its materialist effects on the caste system and the ancient traditions in India cannot be downplayed:

[R]eligion originates in revelation, is handed down by tradition, and is preserved by orthodoxy. In Hinduism, the principal means whereby the revelation (both in its timeless essence and in its many outward branches) is handed down and preserved is intimately linked with the social institution known as the caste system. It is ironic that it is this, more than almost anything else, that is misunderstood and abhorred in the modern [and postmodern] West; nothing is more vigorously anathematized by sociologists and journalists alike. Yet besides its function of preservation and transmission, the caste system is the very principle of Hindu social harmony. Caste and traditional Hindu society are virtually one and the same thing.

Though the caste system can be defended in this manner, it would be unrealistic not to underscore the present-day abuses of it within the Indian culture. These exemplify the prevailing ignorance (*avidyā*) or transgressions of the *sanātana dharma* (the “Perennial Law” or “Primordial Norm”). There are many examples in the mass media demonstrating the oppressive apparatus of the caste system, particularly in relation to the role of women who are depicted as being inherently discriminated against, treated unfairly or degraded. Traditional societies recognize the reality of different human vocations based on fundamental distinctions in human typology (reflecting the three *gunas* “cosmic tendencies” or “qualities” of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* that determine

individual attitudes and propensities). These different vocations, for example, pertaining to the role of women or sub-divisions of caste (*jātis*) are not meant to be interpreted as arbitrary inequity yet they have come to be so identified due to the militant secularism of the times. There are also allegations that Hindu scriptures (*śāstras*) look down upon women because they cannot perform their spiritual rites or sacrifices without the husband being present. Yet it is not emphasized that a similar restriction applies to men, who are also barred from performing their spiritual rites without their wives being present.

Marriage in the Hindu tradition is perceived as a spiritual union for the practice of *dharmā* and all the extravagances that have become a norm in the present era do not hold legitimacy according to the Hindu scriptures (*śāstras*). This also applies to the physical brutalities, causing many fatalities, with regard to the custom of dowry. The sacred texts and spiritual authorities remind us that these are modern perversions, contrary to spiritual life that implicitly honors human dignity, diversity, freedom of difference and subjective reality *in divinis*. In order to emphasize the auspicious role of women in the Hindu tradition we offer the following words from the Mānava-Dharma-Shāstra, II, 145: “*One mother is more venerable than a thousand fathers.*” And we cannot fail to notice the integral femininity that is disclosed through the significance of *Mabāsbakti* or the Divine Essence and correspondingly *Shakti* who presides over universal manifestation appearing under Her different forms such as Lakshmī, Durgā or Kali.¹ Śrī Rāmākrishna (1836-1886), a spiritual luminary, who recognized the transcendent unity of religions observed, “He who has realized God...perceives clearly that women are but so many aspects of the Divine Mother. He worships them all as the Mother Herself.”²

¹ For a traditional and orthodox point of view (*darshana*) of the caste system (*varna dharmā*) and Hindu tradition altogether see the following work by a providential representative of the *sanātana dharmā*, the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi, *Introduction to Hindu Dharma: Illustrated*, ed. Michael Oren Fitzgerald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008); See also Sister Nivedita, *The Web of Indian Life* (Calcuta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989); Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, “Book Review - Introduction to Hindu Dharma”, *Sopbia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 2009), pp. 151-158.

² Śrī Rāmākrishna, “The Master and Vijay Goswami,” in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 168.

In contradistinction to the caste system, we have a systematic disintegration under the guise of modernism, of scientism, secularism, equalitarianism and progress. The perennial wisdom of the ages or *yugas* is contained in the following passage from the *Vishnu Purāna* dating back to the 3rd century A.D. that outlines verbatim the desacralized epoch of today, with an impressive precision:

Riches and piety will diminish daily, until the world will be completely corrupted. In those days it will be wealth that confers distinction, passion will be the sole reason for union between the sexes, lies will be the only method for success in business, and women will be merely the objects of sensual gratification. The earth will be valued only for its mineral treasures, dishonesty will be the universal means of subsistence, a simple ablution will be regarded as sufficient purification....

The observance of castes, laws, and institutions will no longer be in force in the Dark Age [*Kali-Yuga* or the final phase of the temporal cycle], and the ceremonies prescribed by the Vedas will be neglected. Women will obey only their whims and will be infatuated with pleasure.... Men of all kinds will presumptuously regard themselves as the equals of *brahmīns*.... The *vaishyas* will abandon agriculture and commerce and will earn their living by servitude or by the exercise of mechanical professions.... The path of the Vedas having been abandoned, and man having been led astray from orthodoxy, iniquity will prevail and the length of human life will diminish in consequence.... Then men will cease worshiping Vishnu, the Lord of sacrifice, Creator and Lord of all things, and they will say: "Of what authority are the Vedas? Who are the Gods and the *brahmīns*? What use is purification with water?" The dominant caste will be that of *shūdras*.... Man, deprived of reason and subject to every infirmity of body and mind, will daily commit sins: everything which is impure, vicious, and calculated to afflict the human race will make its appearance in the Dark Age.

Yet, not all is lost during the epochs of forgetfulness, for the mercy and dispensations of the Absolute are never absent; restorers of the Primordial Tradition and the One-and-Only Truth are sent in every age as described in the Bhagavad-Gītā, IV, 7-8:

Whenever the Law is forgotten,
Whenever anarchy prevails,
I incarnate Myself.

In every age I come back;

to deliver the righteous,
to destroy the wicked,
to establish the Law.

By the identification with our transpersonal essence we can realize who and what we truly are beyond the appearances of ignorance (*avidyā*), illusion (*māyā*) or the “divine play” (*līlā*):

Lead me from the unreal to the Real;
Lead me from darkness to Light;
Lead me from death to Immortality.

(Bṛihadāranyaka Upaniṣad, I, 3, 27)

Outline of Hinduism offers readers an invaluable entry-point into the vast and complex dimensions of the Hindu *dharmā*. As the leading authority on world religions, Professor Huston Smith (1919-2016), noted in his endorsement of this text: “In this book we find an astonishing amount of information compressed into an incredibly small compass. Reading it made me regretful that I retired for a second time—this time from the University of California—at the close of 1992. This volume would have made a nice supplement to the readings I usually assign.” We agree completely with the above observations regarding this book which will provide pointers to what is both the transcendent and immanent in Hindu metaphysics and the unanimous sapiential tradition—“The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21)—“*I am seated in the hearts of all.*” (Bhagavad-Gītā, XV, 15.)