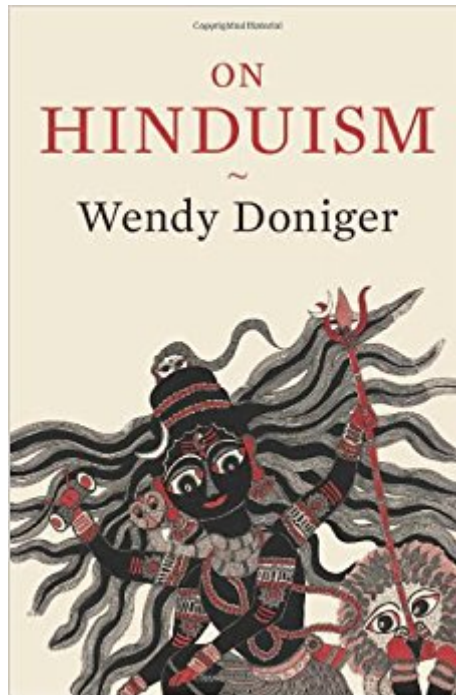




The book was found

On Hinduism



Synopsis

In this magisterial volume of essays, Wendy Doniger enhances our understanding of the ancient and complex religion to which she has devoted herself for half a century. This series of interconnected essays and lectures surveys the most critically important and hotly contested issues in Hinduism over 3,500 years, from the ancient time of the Vedas to the present day. The essays contemplate the nature of Hinduism; Hindu concepts of divinity; attitudes concerning gender, control, and desire; the question of reality and illusion; and the impermanent and the eternal in the two great Sanskrit epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Among the questions Doniger considers are: Are Hindus monotheists or polytheists? How can atheists be Hindu, and how can unrepentant Hindu sinners find salvation? Why have Hindus devoted so much attention to the psychology of addiction? What does the significance of dogs and cows tell us about Hinduism? How have Hindu concepts of death, rebirth, and karma changed over the course of history? How and why does a pluralistic faith, remarkable for its intellectual tolerance, foster religious intolerance? Doniger concludes with four concise autobiographical essays in which she reflects on her lifetime of scholarship, Hindu criticism of her work, and the influence of Hinduism on her own philosophy of life. *On Hinduism* is the culmination of over forty years of scholarship from a renowned expert on one of the world's great faiths.

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Customer Reviews

"For anyone seeking a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Hinduism, this book is a must read." --Publishers Weekly
"Clear and direct this will stand as a reliable resource to return to"

frequently." --Library Journal"On Hinduism is a treat. For those who already know and admire Wendy Doniger's work, this is a handy (if hefty) compendium of many of her essays.... For those who are reading her for the first time, the book is a marvellous introduction to the multiple ways that Hinduism can be approached and understood through the stories that it tells.... In short, the book is a winner on all counts." --Livemint"Doniger really is a surprising writer. When you are not busy being astounded by her knowledge of the religion and its history, you are left wondering at the beautiful stories she culls out from ancient Hindu texts, and the unexpected connections she draws between pieces which appear centuries apart from each other. But the picture she paints is always complete, and the analysis she draws always fulfilling." --The Sunday Indian"These lively essays, flowing from Wendy Doniger's decades-long encounter with Hinduism, show us what can happen when an extraordinary mind takes up an even more extraordinary subject. The constant freshness of her insights, the remarkable range of her reading, her eye for gender, and her unrivalled ability to enter and enact a story-all this is revealed over and over as we turn these pages. A collection to honor and celebrate." --John Stratton Hawley, author of *The Memory of Love: Surdas Sings to Krishna*"This is a wonderful book, written with the grace and humor we have come to expect from Professor Doniger. There is an energy to the writing that carries the reader along. The book succeeds in presenting the complex and contentious range of cultural forms we call 'Hinduism' in a way that explains their complexity while identifying their uniting features. This book is a treat and pleasure to read." --Gavin Flood, Professor of Hindu Studies and Comparative Religion, Oxford University

Wendy Doniger is the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago and the author of over 30 books, most recently *The Hindus: An Alternative History*.

Highly recommended

Enlightening.

This is it!

Ms. Doniger's book provided me a great historical overview of Hinduism. I have lived in Hyderabad India for almost one year and will be here for another year. I enjoy exploring the religious diversity of

India but it is very confusing. As a westerner, I came here assuming that I could grasp and categorize what I would see. Her book helped me to understand that is not possible. Indeed, I have come to realize that India is chaos and that it includes its religious expressions and practices. I gave her 4 stars rather than 5 in as much as a University of Chicago graduate (AB '78 majoring in Early Christian Literature and New Testament) who studied with Jonathan Z Smith, Robert Grant, Langdon Gilkey, Bernard McGinn among others there in the Divinity School, I was slightly disappointed that I did not come away with a stronger understanding of Hinduism's anthropomorphic expressions.

Very interesting

This book is a waste of time. There are so many better books written by Indologists who actually know what they write about, who actually can understand Sanskrit, and who actually can manage to publish a book without hundreds of errors. See also the excellent review of Vishal Agarwal which is very detailed and meticulous (google it, and there is also a review from Vishal Agarwal on this site).Doniger has been criticized for her scholarship by Koenraad Elst, Michael Witzel, Nicholas Kazanas, Vishal Agarwal, Kalavai Venkat, Michel Danino, Stuart Sovatsky and in the book "Invading the Sacred" and the book "Academic Hinduphobia". Her use of psychoanalysis has also been criticized as being not appropriate to explain Dharmic cultures, and as largely pseudoscience (which it is).For introductions to Hinduism, I recommend Alain Danielou, David Frawley, Will Durant (Our Oriental Heritage) or Klostermaiers's *Hinduism: A Beginner's Guide* (Beginner's Guides), or for a more scholarly work R.C. Majumdar, and Ram Swarup for essays on Hinduism.

EDIT: all page references in this review are to the Hardbound version (ISBN 9780199360079)This is a long review of a long book. The review quotes the book relatively more than most reviews would. If your intent is to get my take on it and skip the details, scroll down to the bottom for the Cliff Notes version.It was a very difficult task to write a review of On Hinduism. The first challenge is that it is not really a book *On Hinduism* it is a collection of 43 essays from among 140 essays the author has published on Hinduism. These 43 have been selected and arranged in five broad themes. So the flow of the book, if there is one, is what the author intended to achieve. While extensively cross referenced, sometimes the essays simply stand out, unconnected with anything else in the rest of the book.The second challenge is that this book is inherently conflicted. As explained in the Introduction (pp xi): *On Hinduism* "I had written all my other books for an

American audience, primarily for my students. This was one reason why I was totally blindsided by the passionate Hindu response to my book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*: it hadn't occurred to me that Hindus would read it. I was therefore pleasantly surprised, at first that Hindus read *The Hindus*, but appalled that some of them read it so confrontationally... But now, for the first time, I designed a book specifically for an Indian audience. So, the essays have been edited to remove terms that an Indian audience would be puzzled by (pop culture references), but they allude often to Western mythologies (primarily Greco-Roman) and many times, explicitly to Freud (e.g. *Shadows of the Ramayana*: pp 530, *Sacrifice and substitution* pp 209 etc.) As I read through it, I often had to assume that a primarily Indian audience would just 'get' a concept being discussed in the text. As I will explain later, this was not always easy. The third challenge is that the essays make extensive references to often very obscure texts, translations and writings. Even the easier ones, such as the laws of Manu, often make references to sanskrit verses that do not match the original text. For example, in *Why should a Brahmin...* deconstructing the Laws of Manu, the essay references 4.147-9; 9.3 of Manu (pp 260). Trouble is, the references translated on this page are actually to 5.147-9, not 4. Annoying, but keeps the reviewer on his toes. This is not an isolated occurrence either. There are enough of these that as I read the book, I was constantly checking the essay on Ramayana refers to an entirely different chapter of the Valmiki Ramayana than the reference given in the book (pp: 525 R 2.71.13 should be 2.77.13) The last challenge is one of Sanskrit. The author makes it clear that unless otherwise stated all are her own translations (pp xi, footnote) including from her own translations of the Rig Veda. But in the very first essay, the quote of the Rig Veda [1.164.46] gets it wrong: it should be 'ekam sad viprA bahudhA vadanti', not 'bahu vadanti'. The difference is subtle but the change in meaning is profound. I encountered more of this where the essay summarizes a certain set of verses but a literal reading of the text might be equally supportive of a different summary. (Examples further down). As a result of the challenges, I ended up reading the book several times the first time to notice some broad patterns, the second to give more form to these patterns and the remaining to isolate examples and build discussions around them. The essays are at their analytical best when dealing with (relatively) neutral subjects such as "Are Hindus Polytheistic" or "Saguna and Nirguna images of the deity". Since they are addressed to an Indian audience, the idea is a sense of 'look how cool your religion is'. This is somewhat supported by the author's public statements. (See this video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1ioaY5OY_g advance to about 1:01.43). But some of the essays get extremely esoteric and inside baseball-ish, directly

contradicting idea that the target audience for this was Indians. The following is from *Sacrifice and Substitution* 209: “In this view, sacrifice is defined not in relation to other forms of self-death, but rather in relation to other forms of murder (homicide as well as deicide); and in either case it is by virtue of the substitute that sacrifice is set apart from i.e., made ‘sacred’ in relation to these other, ‘profane’ killings. Girard, in *Violence and the Sacred*, speaks of a ‘double substitution’ in the ritual. Following Freud, Girard places substitution at the very center of sacrifice and sees violence (repressed and expressed) as the key to the ritual.

With all the above caveats and challenges, I am picking on two essays to summarize my review of these are my (somewhat) arbitrary choices, ones that I felt would best illustrate my observations in the review.

“Death and rebirth in Hinduism”

Few topics are central to Hinduism as the notion of birth, death and re-birth. But the first sentence of the essay is this: “There are many different approaches to death and rebirth in the Hindu tradition, offering many different non-solutions to the insoluble problem, many different ways the square peg of the fact of death cannot be fitted into the round hole of human rationality.” (pp 87) One wonders why ‘the fact of death’ and ‘rationality’ are at odds with each other. The human body is made up of perishable substances which perish and we die. This is as rational as rational gets. But perhaps there is a more subtle meaning here. The Vedic quote that we begin with is “Deliver me from death, not from immortality.” Expanding on this, Ms Doniger writes: “By ‘immortality’ the ancient sages meant not a literal eternity of life but rather a full lifespan, reckoned as a hundred years.” The referenced Vedic quote in its original is “mrtyOr mukshlyamAmrtAt.” This is traditionally translated as “deliver me (mukshlyam) from death (mrtyOr) by giving me (mA) (divine) nectar (amrtAt).” The ancient sages did not merely mean a long life (considered a lower or obvious meaning). They also clearly meant ‘deliver me from death (and birth) for ever, from the cycle of Samsara’. The text glosses over this rather central thrust of the verse which is repeated elsewhere as “asatOmAsat gamaya.... mrtyOr mAmrtam gamaya.” There is no square peg and round hole, yet. Having described the Rig Veda approach to death, Ms Doniger previews the Upanishads with the words “But these are at best but the early, murky stirrings of a doctrine of rebirth that will become clear only in the Brahmanas and Upanishads.” She then describes the Brahmanas as “The fear of death and the obsessive search for rituals that can overcome it is the central concern of the Brahmanas.” (pp 89). This is a very poor

reading of the Brahmanas. In most contexts, *mṛtyo* = *mṛtyu* = "overcoming death" simply means the elimination of the cycle of birth and death. This is a widely accepted reading of "mṛtyo mukshi" which introduces the concept of moksha in the Rig Veda. Further describing the Upanishads, Ms Doniger writes "The Upanishads reverse the Rig Vedic equation of death with chaos, life with order and state instead that life (sex, birth, one damn thing after another) is chaos, a dream, or rather a nightmare while death (or final release from life, moksha) is order, a dreamless sleep, or an awakening (pp 90). This is quite terrible. It is perhaps telling (to go all Freudian) that the first thing she states as 'life' is sex, even before birth. Then there is the notion of equating death with moksha, albeit loosely. This finds no support anywhere in the canonical works (Vedas or Upanishads). For a book that has over a hundred references for some essays, she offers no evidence that anyone, anywhere equates death with moksha or that death (mṛtyu) is 'dreamless sleep' (susupti). The essay recounts a conversation from the Chandogya Upanishad and starts with "A king asks a young man named Gautama (no relation to Buddha) if he knows...." (pp 90). [This is just wrong. Gautama is the father; the young man's name is Svetaketu. (svetaketurhAruNEyah 'Svetaketu, grandson of Aruna...' CU 5.3.1). Gautama appears in the text only after his son confronts him with "how come you told me I was educated and yet I did not know the answers? Gautama says "obviously, I did not know the answers either" (CU 5.3.5-6).] As part of the conversation, two successive questions are (1) "Do you know about the separation of the two paths, the path of the Gods and the path of the fathers?" "No" "Do you know how the world (of heaven) over there does not get filled up?" "No" "But the text makes no reference to heaven. It merely says "vettha yathA sau lOkO na sampUryat" meaning "why that world is never filled" "Sri Sankara, makes it clear in his commentary that the reference is to "pitṛlOkā" (land of the fathers, more generally, ancestors) since that is where people come back from. The mistranslations continue: in the next question, Ms Doniger translates 'puruṣavacas' (literally) as "human voice" "The correct translation is "known as Man" (or "said to be Man") (Monier Williams). This is central to the story since the rest of the explanation is all about why water, the fifth oblation (pañcamyaḥ utAvāpāh) is described as the nature of Man (puruṣavacas o bhavanti). The essay continues: "The Socratic routine goes on for some time until, eventually, the king tells the boy the answers" "This is wrong as well.

First off, the king does not tell the boy, the king tells the father, Gautama. Next, there is no further Socratic routine after the question on water. The father (Sage Gautama) pays his respect to the king, the king offers him a boon and Gautama declines saying "Let such things that belong to the world of men stay with you. Speak to me the same speech you spoke to my boy" (yAmEva kumArasyAnte vAcam). The king apologizes because he is caught in a bind as he has promised a boon and the ask is for knowledge that is heretofore restricted to kshatriyas but now is forced to divulge to a Brahmana. And then he launches into the explanation. Ms Doniger explains what happens to people who die with various karma to their accounts (pp 91) "But those whose behavior here is stinking will, in general, find a stinking womb, the womb of a dog or the womb of a hog or the womb of an Untouchable." The word 'Untouchable' is not found in the text. The word in use is a 'caNDAla' who is an outcast. In fact, there is no word for Untouchable in sanskrit. Describing karma, Ms Doniger avers "This transfer (of karma between persons) may take place intentionally or unintentionally: the dharma texts say that if someone lets a guest depart unfed, the guest will take away the host's good karma and leave behind his own bad karma" and refers to Manu 3.100 and 4.201. This was intriguing since one of the fundamental tenets of karma is its very root: "karta; kArayati; kartum iti karma". He who performs the action gets the fruit of that action. You cannot eat and satisfy your neighbor's hunger. Going to the text, verse 3:100: "sarvam sukrtam AdaTe brAhmaNO anarchitO vasan" "All merits are withdrawn from (Adatta or Atta) he who fails to honor (anarchitO) a Brahmana who stays with him (vasan). This is completely consistent with the idea that the karta (the person who fails to honor the Brahmana) reaps the karma of the benefits being withdrawn from him. Nowhere does the text say that the Brahmana 'takes away' the benefits. At this point, it is clear that Ms Doniger's translations are weak at best, and self-serving at worst. Mixing up father and son (Gautama and Svetaketu), translating caNDAla into 'untouchable', creating a 'take away' where none exists are all part of a pattern of mistranslations that repeats all over the book. By her own admission, "Real Sanskritists, on two continents, have been known to turn and leave a room when I entered it (Introduction pp ix) "It is easy to see why. "Shadows of the Ramayana" (pp 523 - 536) The premise of the essay is that all the major characters in the Ramayana have 'doubles'; shadows that indulge in behaviors that the main characters cannot engage in. to quote, "These illusory characters are, ironically, more flesh and blood, as we would say, more complex and nuanced than the human characters that they mirror; or rather

added to those original characters they provide the nuances of ambiguity and ambivalence that constitute the depth and substance of the total character composed of the original plus the shadow. (pp 524) Shorter premise: the characters are too perfect, so Superman must have a hidden (evil) twin somewhere. First up: Manthara, the hunchback for Kaikeyi. Ms Doniger states this is validated by the fact that “Kaikeyi herself is absolved of all her evil by having it displaced on to the old hunchback Manthara, a servant who corrupts Kaikeyi and forces her, against Kaikeyi’s better judgment to act as she does. Shatrugna puns on Manthara’s name saying that it was she who churned up (manth) for them the ocean of grief in which Kaikeyi was a sea serpent (R 2.71.13) It is not 2.71.13 but 2.77.13, but let’s stop counting the missed references. This thesis does not stand up to scrutiny. When Bharata returns to Ayodhya, finds his brother exiled and his father dead, he does not look for shadows to blame instead of his mother Kaikeyi. He lights into her using language that a virtuous son should never use: accuses her of having come to destroy the Ikshvaku race (kulasya tvam abhAvAya 2.73.4), calls her a malevolent woman (pApadarshini 2.73.5) calls her a sinner (pApe 2.73.11). Bharata is beside himself with sorrow that his brothers and sister-in-law have been exiled on his account and puts the blame squarely on the shoulders of his mother, Kaikeyi. As the crown-prince, he even orders her out of the kingdom (rAjyAt bhramSasva kaikeyi nrsimhE dustacAriNI 2.74.2) and curses her to lament his death (mA mrtam rudatl bhava 2.74.2). The broader point is, for the one verse Ms Doniger cites as evidence for the shadow theory, there are two dozen verses that say that Bharata and Shatrugna, Kaikeyi’s sons, held her squarely responsible. Ms Doniger continues:

“On the other hand, when Shatrugna drags Manthra around he yells curses at Kaikeyi. In this text even the shadows have shadows. This makes no sense. Manthra is Kaikeyi’s shadow and Kaikeyi is Manthra’s. But they get yelled at independently anyway. Manthra is almost killed and Kaikeyi is roundly abused. Anyway, it is all proof that they are each other’s shadows. Q.E.D. Next up Rama and Lakshmana. “Turning now to human doubles, we have seen that all four brothers are fragments of a single person, incarnations of Vishnu. We have seen no such thing. In any case, we cannot see any such thing because, according to legend, Lakshmana is an avatara of Adhi Sesha, the celestial snake that is the guardian of Vishnu in Vaikunta. As Adi Sesha, Lakshmana takes his duties very seriously. He is the protector of the Lord. He even makes a guest appearance in Vamana Avatara: he starts hissing in anger as he mistakes the cheering crowd as having hostile intentions on his Lord. When Lakshmana chafes at the injustice that is being visited on Rama, it is Rama who calms him down: Dharma is the highest Truth and the

highest dharma is a father's word (2.21.40) so stop being a Kshatriya (seeking vengeance) and follow my lead (2.21.43) Ms Doniger continues: "On the other hand, the text suggests that Rama is the human avatar who often forgets he is God. He might fear that his brother Lakshmana could become another sort of double, that he could replace Rama as protector and spouse. A man's fear of being cuckolded by his younger brother is endemic to South Asia culture; the niyoga or levirate that allows a widow to conceive a child by her dead husband's brother makes the lawmaker Manu very nervous (Manu 9.60). [it is 9.59, not 9.60] This is jaw-droppingly bad scholarship. There is no text anywhere in Ramayana that even remotely suggests that Rama feared being 'cuckolded'. In any case, he tries very hard to actually leave Sita and Lakshmana behind as he goes to the forest. (2.28-2.31; four chapters) While in the forest he goes after Maricha the demon in the form of a golden deer specifically leaving Lakshmana in charge of Sita's safety. The reference to Manu is also foolish since Manu is talking about consensual (appointed) relationship for the express purpose of having a child. In the previous verse 9.58, Manu warns that the only time the younger brother may even approach his widowed sister-in-law is when following a misfortune (death of older brother). The essay continues to push this theme, calling the Kamasutra to aid which 'warns that a woman who marries the oldest of several brothers is likely to commit adultery with one of them (pp 525)'. So, Ms Doniger concludes, 'It is not surprising to find this theme reflected in this culture's best-known and loved epic (Ibid)'. Never mind that Valmiki lived several centuries before Vatsyayana. Ms Doniger is determined to see a theme where there is clearly none. There is no 'there' there. The bad scholarship continues to get worse as Ms Doniger pushes her theme further: "The tension between the two brothers is a significant motivation for the plot. What is the tension? The author posits that when Rama leaves after Mareecha, this tension becomes manifest. When Mareecha fakes his distress pretending Rama is in mortal danger, Sita is distraught. She asks Lakshmana to rush to his brother's rescue. Lakshmana, who has been placed on guard (so much for the fear of being cuckolded!) is reluctant to leave, suspecting a trick. Sita then accuses Lakshmana of wanting her for himself. Lakshmana is hurt and in obedience to Sita, leaves. Sita is captured by Ravana. But in all this, there is no evidence of tension between the brothers. When Lakshmana meets up with Rama, it is Rama who is upset that Lakshmana is not by Sita's side. When Lakshmana reports Sita's harsh words and says 'I came away in anger' (krODAt rakta IOcanAh prasphuramANa Osta 3.59.20) "with reddened eyes and trembling lips", Rama chides him, saying "you have done wrong O gentle one (saumya)". The lesson here is that a noble person will not let the angry words of

another delude him into abandoning dharma. If they do, then bad things will result. The whole theory of tension between the brothers, especially centered in a fear of being cuckolded is laughable and finds no support anywhere. Ms Doniger doubles down and posits a shadow between Rama and Bharata with Vali and Sugreeva. She comes up with another theory that Rama is somehow unconsciously resentful of Bharata for usurping his throne and therefore kills Vali who has usurped Sugriva's throne. *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*“Rama is driven to this unethical act because of the rage and resentment he should feel toward his brother and father, but does not, is expressed for him by his monkey double *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ â œ* the deposed monkey king Sugriva *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ â œ* and vented by Rama on that double's enemy, Valin(sic) who doubles for Rama's brother and father (pp 529) *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*. I actually laughed out loud when I read this. Valmiki spends thirty entire chapters describing Bharata's desperate attempts to find Rama and return the throne to him (2.82 *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ â œ* 2.112). The next three chapters describe how, having failed to persuade Rama to return, Bharata goes back with his brother's sandals on his head. Bharata reports the encounter to Sage Bharadvaja who asks him if he was able to persuade Rama: *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*“(ayOdhyAm eva gaCami grhlTvA pAdukeshubE 2-113-14) *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*“Carrying the auspicious sandals (of my brother), I am returning to Ayodhya *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*. In another chapter (2-115), Valmiki describes how Bharata, reluctant to sit on the throne, decamps to a village and asks the ministers to hold the state canopy over the sandals because *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*“the wooden sandals of my noble brother, who is my Guru, have established dharma over this kingdom *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*• (abhyAm rAgyE sTiTau Darmah pAdukABByAmgurOr mama 2-114-96). Some usurper! Does Rama feel resentment toward his brother as he kills Vali? Again the text explicitly tells us otherwise. Explaining himself to the dying Vali, Rama points out that Bharata's dominion covers the Kishkinda forest and he, Rama is bound by duty to enforce the law (mete out punishment) (4.18.24-25) calling Bharata 'he who is ruling sensibly and adhering to Dharma' (prAgya DarmENa pAlayan BaraTa (4.18-24)). Rama even goes as far to declare that he is merely carrying out his brother's orders (4.18.25) (BaraTa AdESAm viDim krtvA). Ms Doniger herself acknowledges that she is stretching this parallel way beyond credibility: *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*“If we try to hang on to this parallel, it is a pretty messy parallel (pp 528) *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*•, but puts it out there anyway! Why does she do this? We will let her explain: *ĀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ Å*“But it does not mirror that life exactly; it is a mythological transformation, taking the pieces and rearranging them to make a slightly different pattern, as the framework does, according to Freud. Freud (in *The Interpretation of Dreams*) and Ernest Jones after him (in *On the Nightmare*) wrote about the ways in which animals often replace, in dreams, people towards whom the dreamer has a strong, dangerous, inadmissible and therefore repressed emotions (emphasis

mine)“Thus Rama’s cultural role as the perfect son and brother prevents him from expressing his resentment of his brother and father, and so the monkeys do it for him. In the magical world of the monkey forest, Rama’s unconscious mind is set free to take the revenge that the conscious mind does not allow him in the world of humans.” That passage encapsulates the entire essay: Ms Doniger cannot believe Rama is a perfect human being. Freud says there is no such thing, therefore, his actions (and of Lakshmana and Sita and Bharata and Ravana and Kumbhakarna) should be ‘properly’ interpreted through a Freudian lens. On that note, it is time to wind up the review (Cliff notes version starts here) The collection of essays over the years offers more insight into Ms Doniger’s evolution as an Indologist than as an authentic description of Hinduism. It is easy to see, based on just the examples above, that some of the more interesting interpretations of Hindu epics and concepts are more fanciful than factual. It is also clear that there is a Freudian undercurrent in all the analysis and interpretations. There is nothing covert about this influence, the author acknowledges it openly. Of the 43 essays, 10 are explicitly about sex. Another 12 are somewhat about sex – the topics are benign but the interpretations are sexual. Nineteen essays cover perceived oppressors (always Brahmins) and the oppressed (animals, women, dalits). Eight are on other topics (polytheism, Nirguna Ramayana etc). (The numbers add up to more than 43 because some essays are in multiple categories). The thrust is quite clear. It is also evident that Ms Doniger’s Sanskrit skills are quite weak. In her public speeches, it is obvious that she has not mastered the diction or learned to pronounce words properly. The book offers plenty of evidence that her ability to translate is also suspect. Ms Doniger appears to have completed some courses in Sanskrit at Harvard where she has been taught Sanskrit from a text book and the ability to find other translations. The essays rely way too much on secondary sources. In the Introduction, she states that she spent a year in India. It appears to have been a lost opportunity. For someone who is so keen on India, she could have sought out the greats who were alive at that time – the Shankaracharyas, the residents of Ramanashram or the monastic order of Ramakrishna. Ms Doniger does not seem to have reached out to western authors like Paul Brunton who could have given her great insights. Instead she seems to have visited Konark, Khajuraho and such parts (as Seinfeld would say.. not that there is...). But all the available evidence points to a focus on the fringes of Hindu practice (the legend of Sita? Really?). Ms Doniger’s ‘On Hinduism’ is exactly what it says: Ms Doniger on Hinduism; not actual Hindus or Hindu texts on Hinduism. With the overemphasis on Freud, the mistranslations, the literal analysis of mythology in a Freudian framework, the book fails at both her stated goals: it neither illustrates Hinduism for a western

audience, nor does it illuminate Hinduism for a Hindu audience. It most closely resembles another myth from India: the svarga created for King Trisankhu by Sage Viswamitra. Illusory projections from a bright mind that has no basis in reality that ends up pissing off more people than it pleases. One last word on the reviewers who have turned in glowing reviews: they seem to have been taken in by the quantity assuming the quality had to be there. Or, not knowing Sanskrit themselves they have been bedazzled by her seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of original Sanskrit texts. The examples I have cited are but some of the more egregious ones. The essays have lots more of the same kinds of mistranslations and unsupportable assertions and an inordinate focus on sex / lust etc. In one sense I am quite grateful for Ms Doniger having produced this work - I am able to look at her complete body of work and state with confidence: this empress is wearing no clothes.

It is a pioneering work. It spans about two millennia of evolution of the diverse but connected faiths of the people living in India. Author Wendy Doniger has a most engaging style that blends wit with scholarship while keeping away from thrusting her personal opinion. It is tempting to give the book all the five points but for its reluctance to discuss the socio-political changes that might have had resulted in course changes in religious ideas. I doubt if Shankar could successfully reinvoke Hindu orthodoxy towards the end of the first millennium if Islamic attacks hadn't begun in the eighth century.

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