

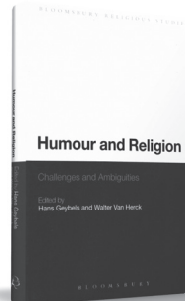
present book, the very beginning of which is on a discordant note. The author contemplated this work as a rebuttal to the objection she faced at a conference where she said 'that the theories of Karman and rebirth were two of the most vicious ever invented by man' (v).

The blind surrender to fate and fortune is indeed bad, but that comes largely due to a wrong understanding of the scriptures. The author laboriously goes through numerous texts and selects cautiously, passages that support her arguments. However, she could have shown the other perspective also where fate or fortune is proclaimed to be in the hands of a person. It is notable that almost all of the translations and works she cites are by authors from outside the Indian tradition, with a Semitic bearing on their thought. The author comes a bit too strongly and without sufficient background material, in brushing aside as inconsequential, years of thought and philosophising in the Indian tradition. Particularly the Mimamsa tradition and the concept of *apurva* is criticised: 'Meditation is treated like currency notes which can be encashed at will, deposited in safe custody for any length of time without increasing or diminishing; it can be lent or donated. But like money it is power and as power it can be used in an invisible spiritual bargaining with fate' (211). When meditation is being increasingly seen as a great solution to present-day problems, and when scientific studies are being conducted on this phenomenon, such a statement could have best been avoided.

The difference between Shruti, eternal wisdom, and Smriti, social codes relevant for a particular time, is not highlighted in this volume. The author quotes more from the Puranas, which are not authoritative texts. Using texts of different paradigms, the author considers it her mission to make the common person recognise 'the vested interests of the guardians of society in maintaining the socio-political and economic *status quo*, with threats of hell and baits of heaven' (244). However, no Eastern tradition gives a concrete validity to the existence of heaven and hell, and they are just some flavours in the religious stories and anecdotes, of which Puranas form a major part. Heaven, hell, fate, and fatalism are

pronouncedly Semitic concepts. Had the author presented a balanced view, this book had the potential to become a remarkable work.

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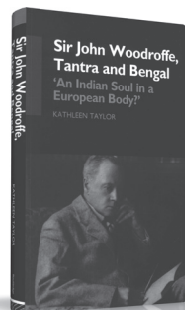
Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities

Edited by Hans Geybels and
Walter Van Herck

Bloomsbury Academic. 2012. xii + 272
pp. £ 28.99. PB. ISBN 9781441139245.

Religion has many a times been perceived as a sombre affair. Many traditions advocate donning a serious face during religious observances. What is the relation between humour and religion? This book makes an attempt to answer this question through a careful study of various religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and even some religious literature and plays. This anthology is divided into two parts: religious laughter and laughing at religion. Caricature of religion through cartoons and the consequent politics is also examined through an analysis of Greek history. That guilelessness and simplicity are core spiritual values and spirituality has a close connection with humour is well established through this work.

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Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: An Indian Soul in a European Body?

Kathleen Taylor

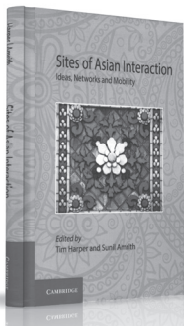
Routledge, 2 Park Square, Milton
Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14
4RN. Website: www.routledge.com.
2013. xvi + 319 pp. \$ 54.95. PB. ISBN
9780415749367.

Tantra is probably the most misunderstood spiritual discipline in the world. The principal reason for this is that the source texts are mostly inaccessible and the channelising of basic human desires almost always gives way to taking licence in the name of some spiritual or religious practice. This sublime spiritual discipline would have

remained shrouded in mystery but for the pioneering work of Sir John Woodroffe aka Arthur Avalon, who gave us clear English translations of many Tantric texts. He spent a lifetime in the systematic presentation and exposition of the basic tenets of Tantra, in a time when India, the birthplace of this discipline, was still a slave nation, considered by the West as a land of magic tricks and savage customs.

Sir John Woodroffe was a judge in the High Court of Calcutta. Though belonging to the ruling race, he imbibed the Indian ethos, which led M P Pandit to call him 'truly an Indian Soul in a European body' (vi). He learnt various Sanskrit texts, including those of Tantra, under the tutelage of his friend, Atal Bihari Ghose. The result of the doctoral work of the author, this volume reflects well her painstaking efforts of the investigative trail into the life of Sir John Woodroffe. This book gives a concise yet overall view of the large and multifarious canvas of the personality that Woodroffe was. Including rare photographs, facsimiles of letters and notes, an elaborate bibliography and index, this book fills a void by fulfilling the long-felt need of a good biography of a soul, who preferred to remain anonymous and speak to the world only through this writings under his pen name, Arthur Avalon.

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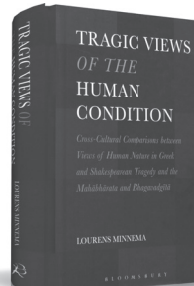
**Sites of Asian Interaction:
Ideas, Networks and Mobility**
Edited by Tim Harper and
Sunil Amrith

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge House, 4381/4 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002. Website: www.cambridge.org. 2014. viii + 254 pp. ₹ 795. HB. ISBN 9781107082083.

Transnational encounters are a daily occurrence today. This book explores different inter-Asian interactions and tries to situate them as various paths of communication of ideas and ethos across Asia and studies 'how they are reshaped by myriad encounters along the way' (vii). A collection of essays originally published in a special issue of *Modern Asia Studies* in March 2012, this volume comprises the interactions of various

cultures including Singapore, Ladakh, Penang, and Istanbul. It also traces interactions over the sea and between various religious spaces. Businesses or inter-Asian joint-ventures are also included. Edited by professors of history, this book is a welcome addition to the scarce literature on transnational interactions within Asia.

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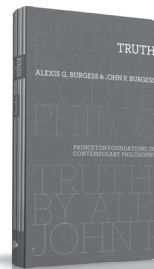
**Tragic Views of the Human
Condition**

Lourens Minnema

Bloomsbury Academic. 2013. xii + 572 pp. £ 227.99. HB. ISBN 9781441194244.

This is an extraordinary work of comparative literature studying the depiction of human tragedies from the Eastern and Western perspectives. The author takes the Mahabharata and the Bhagavadgita as samples of the Eastern stand on tragedy and compares it with the Greek and Shakespearean literature. This in-depth analysis shows that the very meaning of the word 'tragedy' changes considerably between these cultures. The narrative, artistic, communicative, social, political, literary, cultural, martial, psychological, ethical, and religious aspects of tragedy are dealt with. The thoroughness of the work is simply amazing and invites the reader to look at tragedy from an informed perspective. This book is a handy reference for all students of comparative literature.

PB



Truth

Alexis G Burgess and
John P Burgess

Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540, USA. Website: www.press.princeton.edu. 2011. xiv + 158 pp. \$ 19.95. PB. ISBN 9780691163673.

Truth and its various connotations have always intrigued us. Professors of philosophy, the authors have done a succinct and critical analysis of some theories of truth: deflationism, indeterminacy, insolubility, realism, and antirealism.