Pakistani-Indian relationship. His deep desire to see better relations between Pakistan and India is obvious, and his prescriptions are sensible. They will surely provide a starting point for interesting and productive classroom discussion. I hope readers of India and Pakistan: Continued Conflict or Cooperation? will take Wolpert’s advice to heart and help move the conversation forward equipped with a better understanding of this topic.

THOMAS LAMONT teaches a senior elective on Modern Indian History at the Groton School in Groton, Massachusetts. During his sabbatical from Groton School in 2007, he taught at The Doon School in Dehradun, India. He is a member of Educators for Teaching India, an independent organization based in Boston that promotes the teaching of India and South Asia in American secondary and middle schools. He also teaches Modern Chinese History, International Relations, World History, and United States History. He has a BA in History from Harvard University and an MPhil in History from The University of Oxford.

Dharma

BY ALF HILTEBEITEL

HONOULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI’I PRESS, 2010

208 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0824834869, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Catherine Benton

Part of the University of Hawai’i series “Dimensions of Asian Spirituality,” Alf Hiltebeitel’s Dharma presents an enlightening discussion of dharma, a fundamental component of Hindu and Buddhist thinking. One of the goals of the “Dimensions of Asian Spirituality” series is to make available “short but comprehensive works [by distinguished scholars] on specific Asian . . . works devoted to the full articulation of a concept central to one or more of Asia’s spiritual traditions.” More specifically, this series aims to present this concept “in historical context for the non-specialist reader” and to create a forum for a scholar to present his or her “own views of [its] contemporary spiritual relevance . . . for global citizens of the twenty-first century.” Hiltebeitel’s Dharma meets these goals, providing an in-depth discussion of dharma using examples from the story literature that illustrate classical Hindu and Buddhist texts.

Integral to Hindu and Buddhist thinking, the word dharma expresses different but related meanings in these two traditions, and conveys a broad range of richly-textured concepts, even within each tradition. Dharmic (virtuous, principled) actions of various sorts can be traced to the Sanskrit root dhr, meaning to uphold or support, which the wonderfully poetic and imaginative Sanskrit language fleshes out in concepts as different as law (that which gives meaning to uphold or support, which the wonderfully poetic and imaginative Sanskrit language fleshes out in concepts as different as law (that which gives structure or support to order in a society) and an element of reality (that which upholds the component structure of reality).

Hiltebeitel takes on the enormous challenge of unraveling the colorful strands of dharma in several important texts of the South Asian Buddhist and Hindu traditions and presenting their multilayered resonances. Readers familiar with the Rgveda and the Chāndogya, Brhadāranyaka, and Katha Upanishads, or with the two Indian epics, the Ramāyana and the Mahābhārata (containing within it the well-known Bhagavad Gītā) will find many stories they recognize. On the Buddhist side, Hiltebeitel unpacks the third-century BCE dharma inscribed on Aśoka’s edict pillars, the dharma expounded in the early Buddhist Tripitaka, and the first-century dharma expressed in Aśvaghosa’s Buddhacarita.

Though dharma is not always easy to grasp for those of us not raised in a dharma-imbued society, Hiltebeitel’s organization of chapters around stories grounded in particular dharmas is helpful for those interested in this organizing principle as a way to better understand Hindu and Buddhist religious teachings. Because each chapter highlights dharma as a religious or philosophical construct, individual chapters work as discrete discussions that can be digested in any order.

Hiltebeitel explains in his opening chapter that this book is about dharma as a South Asian spirituality. Along with yoga and karma, dharma is one of a few terms that have come to emblematize Indian spirituality not only in the West but throughout Asia (4).

In terms of classroom use, given the richness and central importance of dharma within South Asian religious thinking, Dharma would be an excellent supplementary text for undergraduate courses exploring Hindu or Buddhist traditions. For instructors of these courses or anyone interested in the philosophical complexities of this concept and its relevance to twenty-first century ethical concerns, Dharma is a superb reference guide, intellectually stimulating and enjoyable.

NOTES


CATHERINE BENTON is Associate Professor and Chair of Religion and Asian Studies at Lake Forest College in Illinois, where she teaches courses in Asian religious traditions and literatures. She is the author of God of Desire, Tales of Kamadeva in Sanskrit Story Literature (SUNY Press, 2006) and is currently working on a study of women’s religious rituals at Sufi shrines in twenty-first century Maharashtra.