

BOOK REVIEWS

Problems of Mysticism

by Nils Bjorn Kvastad

Norway: Scientilla Press, 1980

This book contains a collection of essays, many previously published, which deal with most of the issues of central concern to philosophers of mysticism. After an initial discussion of definitions of mysticism, and the appropriate methodology for a scientific study of it, it deals with the relationship of mysticism and logic, ethics, the meaning of life, religion, God, pantheism, art, and life after death. As such, it provides a useful overview of the main areas of philosophical contention that still exist in the academic study of mysticism.

It is perhaps a little unfair to criticize in 1986 a volume published in 1980. But there have nevertheless been significant developments in the study of mysticism which, to some extent, vitiate the useful synthesis which this book might have provided at the time of its original publication. Thus, for example, the definition of mysticism provided is a revised version of that of W.T. Stace. The emphasis on the unitary and unifying aspects of mystical experience in Stace's and Kvastad's work has, to a significant extent, been placed under challenge by the work of Steven Katz. And the onus of proof is currently upon those who, like myself, would wish to argue for an undifferentiated unity as the core of mystical experience.

Similarly, in the light of Katz's epistemology of mysticism, there is a drift away from the assumption of the unanimity of mystical experience (which is left open by Kvastad) to a recognition that there are numerous varieties of mystical experience, the multiplicity thereof being dependent on the religious framework which the mystic brings to his or her experience.

The above criticisms are not intended to imply that the cogency of Kvastad's attempt to ground a scientific account of mysticism in a general synthesis should be judged in the light of current academic fashions on matters mystical. There are methodological problems sufficiently serious in the Katzian paradigm to allow the continued quest for an analysis of mysticism such as Kvastad undertakes, and to see a value in his thematic approach. Kvastad's aim remains a proper one, and his synthesis an instructive one. It is to be regretted that, six years on, his work may not have the impact it may once have deserved.

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Womanguides. Readings Toward A Feminist Theology

by Rosemary Radford Ruether
Beacon Press, Boston, 1985, pp.274

Rosemary Radford Ruether is about the most prolific, and one of the most prominent of American feminist theologians. She has sound insights and wide reading; her books are the product of her interaction with that reading, rather than of a distinctive outlook of her own. Her strength is in the opening up of new perspectives; her weakness a certain barrenness of application.

Womanguides comes out of one of her best ideas yet: the need for a new canon of scripture to replace a Christian Bible that is patriarchal through and through. She writes:

A collection of texts is the accumulated heritage of a people's reflection on its experience in the light of questions of ultimate meaning and value. The texts provide norms for judging good and evil, truth and falsehood, for judging what is of God/ess and what is spurious and demonic.

Feminist theology cannot be done from the existing base of the Christian Bible. The Old and New Testaments have been shaped in their formation, their transmission, and, finally, their canonization to sacralize patriarchy. They may preserve, between the lines, memories of women's experience. But in their present form and intention they are designed to erase women's existence as subjects and to mention women only as objects of male definition. In these texts the norm for women is absence and silence. Whether praised for their compliance or admonished for their 'disobedience', women remain in these texts 'the other'. Their own point of view, their own experience, their own being as human subjects is never at the center. They appear, if at all, at the margin. Mostly, they do not appear at all. Even their absence and silence are not noted since, for women in patriarchy, absence and silence are normative (pp.ix-x).

She agrees, however, that this book is not yet the new canon, simply a resource for doing feminist theology. It is an anthology of materials from the Ancient Near East, Jewish and Christian tradition, and modern writers, grouped thematically under headings such as Gender Imagery for Goddess; Redeemer/Redemptrix; Foremothers of Woman Church; with her own comments added to each section.

The novelty of the enterprise is no doubt the reason why she has not been able to achieve anything like a new scripture, having the resonance, the enduring quality, the power of acting as a reminder of what frees and heals. The passages on the Ancient Near Eastern mother goddess are interesting, but imply a theology which Ruether

does not herself hold and which most feminist theologians reject — the substitution of a female for a male deity, without the recognition that a god in sexed human form is simply an image that can lead to idolatry. A better way forward would be to recover the second commandment, as a basis for the revision of God language.

A new scripture should surely come out of this new age, when women are experiencing the break up of old social patterns, and are speaking for the first time of their own sense of belonging to all the structures of human society, rather than to one of its sub-groupings. The book does have some modern pieces, including a delightful Jewish feminist midrash on Lilith and Eve, but it does not include some that are capable of becoming classics, such as Dorothy Sayers' "The Human-Not-Quite-Human". Perhaps there should be space also for reasoned theological arguments about the way the old male oriented religion should be adapted, as the New Testament adapted the Old. The vast mass of feminist theology that has come out in the last twenty years could well be used towards a new collection and a new discipline, matristics.

Womanguides, however, fulfils the aim that the compiler has settled for — a useful resource for courses in feminist theology.

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Karma and Creativity

By Christopher Chapple

Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986
188pp. with Appendices, Notes, Bibliography, Glossary, and
Index of Sanskrit terms, and General Index

The concept of Karma has of late received considerable philosophical and anthropological attention.¹ The work under review continues the trend, though more modestly. For one thing, it is not as voluminous as the other recent works on the subject; for another, it represents not the harvest of many minds assembled in an editorial barn but the crop of a single author ploughing his own field.

The central merit of this book lies in its focusing on an issue which is vital to the question of Karma but which seems to have been comparatively neglected in the more voluminous works, namely, that one strand in the Indic self-understanding of Karma emphasizes its voluntaristic and determinative aspect rather than its fatalistic and predetermined aspect.² The point needs to be made carefully, for even the more deterministic versions of the doctrine allow for spiritual growth³ (for otherwise spiritual teaching is rendered meaningless)

and even one of its most extreme versions in the Niyativāda of Gosāla ultimately allowed liberation.⁴ The merit of the work under review thus consists in not merely re-affirming the primacy of action in the spiritual realm but also in the realm of worldly action. The first point is established by drawing on the idealistic strand of Indian thought which encourages the supposition that "through the creative power of the mind, the world of action is constructed, through the pacification of mind, the fixed reality of things melts" (p.55). The fact of the matter is "that action is preceded by thought. If one's thoughts are pure then one's actions are pure" (p.44). The second point is established by drawing on the Mahābhārata and the Yogavāsīṣṭha. Though the latter is a philosophical rather than a martial text and therefore less liable to uphold action, the fact is that it contains one of the more celebrated passages in Hindu literature advocating the supremacy of human endeavour over fate. In view of this obvious arrangement of the material the book could as well have been called Creativity and Karma!

The book arrests to a certain extent the fatalistic tendency on the part of modern scholarship to confuse Karma with fatalism, perhaps the result of the Karma of the scholars of the previous century whose interpretation has even found its way into the very definition of the word as used in English (p.2). The material presented by the book, however, is an illustrative and not exhaustive representation of the voluntaristic interpretation of Karma in both the Hindu, and inasmuch the author has also taken Buddhist texts into consideration, the Indic religious tradition. For instance, from the Hindu side, even the Mahābhārata could have been mined for more ore. Thus Bhīṣma says in the Santiparva: "I consider personal effort to be above all: belief in fate makes man dull". The voluntarism of the epic in that parva proves contagious, for Bhīṣma even declares that it is the king whose actions decide the nature of the age i.e. whether it is going to be the golden age, the silver age etc., and not vice versa. Even the Advaitic Pañcadaśī asserts: "Good in man is transformed into effort" and if the Smṛti literature makes more concessions to fate, it insists that human effort is required for its fruition (Yājñavalkya-smṛti 1.351). One need hardly refer to popular literature such as the Hitopadeśa to reinforce the point. But in view of the emphasis on Karma as creative power, it is surprising that the author does not refer to the concept of ārambhadhātu in Buddhism and anantavīrya in Jainism. But then pioneers can hardly be expected to go all the way.

Apart from the remedial reading the book provides on Karma, it offers insightful comments on certain other matters. Those who are puzzled by the coexistence of the martial passages in the Ṛgveda alongside statements implying religious tolerance (e.g., 1.164.46) are offered the view that it was this strife which "ultimately led to an unparalleled tolerance of diverse points of view" (p.11). The discussion of tapas and yajña is refreshing (p.12ff); the distinction in the sādhanas

of Sāṅkhya and Yoga is perceptively recognised (p.37). The chapterwise epigrammatic summation of the Gītā (pp.88-90) is incisive and the comparison of Rāma, Arjuna and Buddha is apposite (p.66,70,90,93). At some points, however, some statements seem suspect. The author's translation of Īśvarapraṇidhāna as "devotion to one who remains forever uninvolved in Prakṛti" obscures the theistic nature of the concept; the author also seems to overinterpret Brhadāranyaka (IV.4.5) as indicating that "karma or action has a direct effect on present life" (p.17) though it remains a possibility; and the author trails off without completing the discussion of samādhis in Yoga. After the savitarka and savicāra variety have been mentioned, sānanda and sāsmita are omitted. Gārgī is twice erroneously identified as the wife of Yājñavalkya (p.18,21) and although the author reflects a widely held view that Rāmānuja allows for only post-mortem liberation it may be worth noting that in his system, one form of prapatti "described as 'resignation in extreme distress' (ārta-prapatti) . . . is believed to bring deliverance immediately".⁵

Though it is perhaps in the interest of accuracy that these doubtful points be mentioned, they have little bearing on the fundamental perspective of the book which rescues from comparative oblivion that strand in the Indian religious tradition for which the doctrine of Karma is a fervent call to vigorous action and not a philosophical rationalization of defeatist resignation.

(Ed.)

Notes

1. See W.D. O'Flaherty, ed., *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); C.F. Keyes and E.V. Daniel, eds, *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Ronald W. Neufeldt, ed., *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments* (Albany: State University of New York, 1986).
2. The existing works acknowledge it with no more than a nod (Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, ed., op.cit., p.24) or as a modern development (Ronald W. Neufeldt, ed., op.cit., Chapters 1-3).
3. M. Hiriyanna, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948) pp.48-49.
4. Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition* Vol.1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) pp.39-40.
5. M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (Bombay: Blackie and Son, 1983) p.413. It is also worth noting that while Nyāya etc., do not allow Jīvanmukti in theory, in practise they could be seen as coming close to believing in at least an analogous state (ibid., p.266).