Obituary: Gerhard Oberhammer

by Marion Rastelli, Marcus Schmücker, and Himal Trikha[*]

Gerhard Oberhammer, Emeritus Full Professor of Indology at the University of Vienna and Full Member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, passed away on 22 December 2025 in his native city of Innsbruck, Austria, at the age of 96, after a long and productive life.

Gerhard Oberhammer was born on 18 June 1929 in Innsbruck, where he attended primary school and the Akademisches Gymnasium. At the age of twelve, a chemical experiment he conducted together with a classmate resulted in an explosion that injured both of his eyes. Several operations were required, and his eyesight remained impaired for the rest of his life.

In 1949, Oberhammer began studying German philology, history, and philosophy at the *University of Innsbruck*, but soon changed his field to comparative linguistics under Hermann Ammann. His main focus was Sanskrit; he also learned Arabic and Hebrew to pursue the study of the "philosophies of all peoples."[1] Concurrently, he attended philosophy seminars of Simon Moser and Karl Rahner at the Faculty of Theology. In 1950/51, Oberhammer spent a year abroad at the *Sorbonne* in Paris, where he studied Indology under Jean Filliozat and Louis Renou. His first article, published in 1953, was already devoted to an Indological topic.[2] In 1954, he received his doctorate

[*] The authors would like to thank Cynthia Peck-Kubaczek for suggesting various stylistic corrections of the English manuscript.

1 "Das Tiroler Porträt. Der Indologe Gerhard Oberhammer. Nach einem Interview von Wolfgang Pfaundler." *Das Fenster. Tiroler Kulturzeitschrift* 44 (1988) 4352–4365, quote p. 4254: "die Philosophie aller Völker."

2 "Zur Beziehung von Feuer und Prāṇa in den vedischen Upaniṣaden." Unless otherwise indicated, bibliographical details for the mentioned publications can be found in the bibliography or supplements noted below p. 8.

in Innsbruck under Richard Strohal with a dissertation on epistemological metaphysics in Plotinus.[3]

After completing his studies, Oberhammer worked from 1955 to 1961 as a research assistant at the Institute of Indology at the *University of Vienna* under Erich Frauwallner. During this period, from 1957 to 1959, he spent time in India as a research scholar at the Sanskrit Department of the *University of Madras*, where he studied texts from various Indian philosophical traditions under Venkataraman Raghavan. From 1961 to 1964, Oberhammer held the position of Wetenschappelijk Hoofdambtenaar (roughly equivalent to an associate professor or senior lecturer) at the Instituut voor Oosterse Talen of *Utrecht University*, where he taught Indian philosophy. While in the Netherlands, he also met his future wife, Magdalena Geurts; they married in 1964, and in 1973 their daughter Maria Barbara was born.

In 1964, Oberhammer was appointed associate professor and director of the Institute of Indology at the University of Vienna, succeeding Frauwallner. In 1967, he was promoted to full professor of Indology, a position he held until his retirement in 1997. From 1983 to 1987, he also served as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Vienna. At the *Austrian Academy of Sciences*, Oberhammer directed the Commission for the Languages and Cultures of South Asia from 1983, founded by Frauwallner in 1956, and from 1986, the newly established Research Unit for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia. In 1991, these two bodies were merged into the Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia, which Oberhammer headed until his retirement in 1997.

Oberhammer's scholarly work focused primarily on the history of philosophy in the Brahmanical traditions, the religious history of Hinduism, and the hermeneutics of religion.

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[3] *Die Erkenntnismetaphysik im Gesamtzusammenhang plotinischen Denkens*, available at: https://ulb-digital.uibk.ac.at/urn/urn:nbn:at:at-ubi:2-53426, last accessed 12 February 2026.

In the area of history of philosophy, Oberhammer initially built on the Indological focus established by his predecessor Frauwallner[4] through studies on the epistemology and logic of early Sāṅkhya and Nyāya. In early articles such as "The Authorship of the Ṣaṣṭitantra" (1960) and "On the Sources in Jayanta Bhaṭṭa and Uddyotakara" (1962), he contributed to the historical analysis of these traditions of Indian thought, and he returned to these themes repeatedly throughout his career. His "Beitrag zu den Vāda-Traditionen Indiens" (1963) and "Gedanken zur historischen Darstellung indischer Logik" (1964) culminated in the three volumes of the *Begriffswörterbuch zur altindischen Dialektik, Erkenntnislehre und Methodologie*, a dictionary of technical terms in early Indian philosophical scholasticism (1991–2006).

Alongside the philological-historical methods applied in this field, Oberhammer was inspired by Frauwallner to use also an additional methodological approach: the systematic investigation of the "inner form" of a text—an interpretive mode of reading guided by philosophical insight yet firmly grounded in philology.[5] This method was characteristic of Oberhammer's scholarship, and we, as his students, were likewise held to it in his seminars. Once a text had been philologically clarified and historically situated through our reading together, we could invariably expect the question: "What does this mean? What is the author seeking to convey with these words?" He constantly strove to discern the central philosophical idea on the basis of the translated text and an analysis of the author's conceptual and logical argumentation. This orientation toward the whole defined Oberhammer's scholarly approach and served as a unifying motif throughout his publications. In research on Indian philosophy in the narrower sense, this method proved fruitful in numerous studies on the soteriology of Yoga, Nyāya, and Vedānta.

"Gott, Urbild der emanzipierten Existenz im Yoga des Patañjali" (1964) is the first of Oberhammer's studies devoted both to the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* and to yogic

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4 Erich Frauwallner: "Geschichte und Aufgaben der Wiener Indologie." *Anzeiger der phil.-hist. Klasse der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 10 (1961), pp. 77–95.

5 Gerhard Oberhammer: "Erich Frauwallner (28.12.1898–5.7.1974)." *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens und Archiv für indische Philosophie* 20 (1976), pp. 5–17; see p. 7 on the method to arrive at the "inner form".

practices in other traditions. In the monograph *Strukturen yogischer Meditation: Untersuchungen zur Spiritualität des Yoga* (1977), yogic meditation is situated within the soteriological context of an experience of transcendence. Against the background of historically and philologically reconstructed sections on Sāṅkhya-oriented yoga, theistic yoga, and the forms of yoga discussed in the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, Oberhammer proposes understanding yogic meditation "as a spiritual reality that the practitioner consciously brings into relation with the ultimate meaning of human existence."[6]

The two articles "Pakṣilasvāmin's Introduction to his *Nyāyabhāṣya*" (1964) and "Der frühe Nyāya: Bemerkungen zur inneren Gestalt seines Denkens" (1992) likewise exemplify Oberhammer's scholarly achievement. They show that he not only helped shape the conceptual history of Nyāya's logical-dialectical categories, but also developed an interpretive framework for its soteriological promise. Particularly noteworthy in this context is the monograph *Wahrheit und Transzendenz: Ein Beitrag zur Spiritualität des Nyāya* (1984), which Oberhammer situates within the trajectory of his earlier Yoga study by seeking to grasp the spirituality discernible in early Nyāya texts "beyond tracing its concrete historical form, as the realization of the human being's actual orientation toward transcendence".[7]

In his study of Vedānta—particularly its soteriology—Oberhammer contributed to the interpretation of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, for example in his article "Śaṅkaras Lehre von der Emanzipation zu Lebzeiten" (1995), but devoted more substantial attention to Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. His early article "Zur Theorie der Schlussfolgerung bei Parāśarabhaṭṭa" (1968) was followed by his first monograph, *Yāmunamunis Interpretation von Brahmasūtram 2,2,42–45* (1971). He then published *Parāśarabhaṭṭas Tattvaratnākara* (1979), the first of nine volumes in the series *Materialien zur Geschichte der Rāmānuja-Schule*. From the first volume, Oberhammer introduced a methodological innovation for research on the school: he reconstructed Parāśarabhaṭṭa's writings largely from the fragmentary quotations preserved in texts by later authors. In

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6 Ibid., p. 2: "als eine geistige Realität zu verstehen, die vom Übenden in eine bewusste Beziehung zur letzten Sinngebung des menschlichen Daseins gesetzt wird."

7 Ibid. p. 3: "über das Nachzeichnen ihrer konkreten historischen Gestalt hinaus als Vollzug der tatsächlichen Transzendenzbezogenheit des Menschen."

the series' third volume, a comparable method was applied to the writings of Yādava-prakāśa. The subsequent volumes of the series addressed central theological themes of the tradition, including the doctrine of God as the inner controller, the theology of the Goddess, conceptions of liberation and post-mortem existence, and the key concept of seeking refuge in God, central to religious practice. These themes were analyzed in detail through the works of previously little-studied representatives of the school—Rāmānuja's successors, including Nārāyaṇārya, Varadaguru, Meghanādārisūri, Veṅkaṭanātha—whose works were then reconstructed with regard to their conceptual and historical development.

Oberhammer was among the first Western scholars to recognize and systematically investigate the close historical connections between Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and the religious tradition of Pāñcarātra. These insights later found expression in the conference volume *On the Mutual Influences and Relationship of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and Pāñcarātra* (2007).

Particular attention is to be given to Oberhammer's investigations into the historical formation of religious traditions, especially with regard to their self-understanding, claims to authoritative transmission, and interactions with other traditions. Oberhammer's hypotheses concerning the concept of tradition (in *Vedism and Hinduism*, 1997) and the relational configuration of Brahmanical-orthodox, Tantric, and Pāñcarātra traditions (in *Miscellanea to the Phenomenon of Tantra*, 1998) are particularly noteworthy. The systematic investigation of these topics took place within the long-term project of the *Tāntrikābhidhānakośa* (begun in 1993), a dictionary of the terminology of Hindu Tantras, including those of the Pāñcarātra, conceived in five volumes. Oberhammer initiated this project together with the French scholars Hélène Brunner and André Padoux; it continues to receive contributions from international specialists today.

A central feature of Oberhammer's scholarship was his steadfast openness to interdisciplinary dialogue between Indology and the philosophy and theology of the Judeo-Christian traditions. Inspired by the profound transformations within the Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and its newly articulated orientation toward other religions, in 1966 Oberhammer founded—supported by his teacher and lifelong intellectual influence, Karl Rahner, as well as by Cardinal Franz

König—the Sammlung de Nobili, named after the Jesuit missionary Roberto Nobili, who was active in India. Still today, this research initiative continues to pursue the goal of establishing a scholarly, critically informed foundation for dialogue among the world's religions, particularly between Christianity and Hinduism.

In addition to maintaining a library and producing the series *Publications of the de Nobili Research Library*, the initiative also led to a series of symposia focused on encounters between India's religious traditions and the Christian intellectual world. Oberhammer played a central role in organizing several of these interdisciplinary symposia, thereby fostering exchange among specialists in Indology, theology, and philosophy—an exchange that also served as the basis for the development of his own philosophical discourse. The point of departure for this discourse lay in fundamental philosophical patterns elaborated by Karl Rahner in his theological work. Oberhammer transformed these patterns by releasing them from their specifically Christian-theological framework and making them applicable to the study of religion within the Indian traditions. On this basis, he developed what he initially termed a "transcendental hermeneutics of religious traditions," later simplified to "religious hermeneutics." By "hermeneutics" he did not mean textual exegesis, but the fundamental act of existential understanding, in which the human being interprets self and reality in light of an ultimate meaning. By "transcendental" he referred to the conditions of possibility of this understanding—an original openness in the human being, through which the world, meaning, and reality become accessible in the first place.

More concretely, the symposia initiated by Oberhammer addressed fundamental questions of human existence—transcendence, meaning, death, and religious validity—bringing together phenomenological, religious-hermeneutical, and cross-traditional perspectives without being bound by doctrinal constraints. Notable results of this line of thought are the conference volumes *Im Tod gewinnt der Mensch sein Selbst* (1995), which addresses death, resurrection, and emancipation in interreligious comparison, and *Glaubensgewissheit und Wahrheit in religiöser Tradition* (2008), which explores questions of religious truth and certainty from both Christian and Hindu perspectives.

Alongside his theoretical reflections on encounters between different religious traditions, Oberhammer's efforts to put these ideas into practice were evident in his work

at the *Katholische Hochschule St. Gabriel* in Mödling. In 1991, he played a decisive role in the establishment of the Institute for the Theology of Religions, directed by Pater Andreas Bsteh, which provided a framework—particularly for Catholic and Protestant theologians—for deepening interdisciplinary dialogue and exploring Christianity's relationships with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.

Oberhammer's scholarly achievements were acknowledged in his election to membership in numerous learned societies. In addition to serving as a Full Member of the *Austrian Academy of Sciences*, he was, among other distinctions, a corresponding member of the German Academic Society for Theology, the *Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie*, a member of *Academia Europaea*, and an honorary member of the *Société Asiatique*.

With two Festschriften published on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday, Oberhammer was accorded recognition from within Indology[8] as well as from theological and philosophical circles.[9] A further Festschrift for his ninetieth birthday reflects the importance Oberhammer had, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, for scholars at the Department of Indology of the Institute of Oriental Philology at *Jagiellonian University* in Kraków, Poland. This contact began when several members of the Kraków department were invited to participate in the Eighth World Sanskrit Conference, held in Vienna in 1990. More than two decades of close scholarly exchange followed this first encounter—an exchange that Oberhammer himself found exceptionally fruitful and that greatly benefited his Kraków colleagues.[10]

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[8] Roque Mesquita and Chlodwig Werba (eds.): *Orbis Indicus. Gerhardo Oberhammer lustrum XIII. exigenti ab amicis discipulisque oblatus = Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens und Archiv für indische Philosophie* 38 (1994).

[9] Francis X. D'Sa and Roque Mesquita (eds.): *Hermeneutics of Encounter. Essays in Honour of Gerhard Oberhammer on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday.* (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library 20). Vienna 1994.

[10] Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and Ewa Dębicka-Borek (eds.): *gurum upapadyāmahe* – The Volume Dedicated to Professor Gerhard Oberhammer on the Occasion of His 90th Birthday. *Cracow Indological Studies* 21.1 (2019); for the appreciation of Oberhammer's role see in particular pp. v–vii.

Much of this exchange with Kraków took place after Oberhammer's retirement, completing the decades of his scholarly activity, during which he worked tirelessly to support his colleagues and students. Many of his colleagues recall his consistent and genuine interest in their work, his intellectual curiosity, and his personal warmth. In each of his fields of research, he was a pioneer who opened up new avenues and brought new connections into view, inspiring others to rethink the intellectual encounter between India and Europe. With Gerhard Oberhammer, we have lost an outstanding scholar and devoted teacher, a person of great vision as well as generosity of spirit.

Bibliography and Supplements

The latest published collected bibliography of Gerhard Oberhammer is found in the following:

– Utz Podzeit (ed.): *Gerhard Oberhammer. Ausgewählte Kleine Schriften*. (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library 33). Vienna 2007.

Since that publication, a collection of his publications were translated into Russian:

– Pskhu, R. V. (ed.), Gerhard Oberhammer: indolog i filosof [Герхард Оберхаммер: индолог и философ]. Moscow 2019.

Oberhammer has also been listed as editor of the *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* (vols. 51–53) and as series editor of the *Publications of the De Nobili Research Library* (vols. 34–39 and Occasional Papers 7–10). In addition, he published the following:

– Gerhard Oberhammer and Marion Rastelli (eds): *On the Mutual Influences and Relationship of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and Pāñcarātra.* (Studies in Hinduism 4, Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens 54, SbÖAW, phil.-hist. Kl. 756). Vienna 2007, 325p.

– "Introductory Remarks." In Oberhammer/Rastelli 2007, pp. 35–36.

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– *Der Ātmā als Subjekt in der Theologie Rāmānujas.* (Materialien zur Geschichte der Rāmānuja-Schule 9, Veröffentlichungen zu den Sprachen und Kulturen Südasiens 39, SbÖAW, phil.-hist. Kl. 778). Vienna 2008, 161p.

– Gerhard Oberhammer und Marcus Schmücker (eds): *Glaubensgewissheit und Wahrheit in religiöser Tradition. Arbeitsdokumentation eines Symposiums*. (Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens 60, SbÖAW, phil.-hist. Kl. 775). Vienna 2008, 349p.

– “Glaubenserfahrung als Wahrheit und Gewissheit in religiöser Tradition.” In Oberhammer/Schmücker 2008, pp. 9–25.

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– “Das vergessene Geheimnis der menschlichen Liebe. Versuch einer Annäherung.” *Cracow Indological Studies* 12 (2010), pp. 17–50.

– “The Forgotten Secret of Human Love. An Attempt of an Approach.” *Cracow Indological Studies* 12 (2010), pp. 51–81.

– “Im Angesicht des Anderen. Rāmānujas Śaraṇāgatigadyam. Ein wichtiger Text viṣṇuitischer Religionstradition.” *Cracow Indological Studies* 12 (2010), pp. 261–297.

– Gerhard Oberhammer und Marcus Schmücker (eds): *Die Relationalität des Subjektes im Kontext der Religionshermeneutik. Arbeitsdokumentation eines Symposiums.* (Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens 70, SbÖAW, phil.-hist. Kl. 816). Vienna 2011, 351p.

– “Der Ort, an dem sich Gott ereignet.” In Oberhammer/Schmücker 2011, pp. 19–44.

– *Monistische Gotteslehre und Spiritualität Vāmandattas. Ein religionshermeneutischer Versuch.* (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library: Occasional Papers 9). Vienna 2016, 74p. (out of print). 2. verbesserte Auflage, Vienna, 76p.

– “On the Dialectic of Language and Mysticism in Vāmanadatta’s Saṃvitprakāśa.” In: *Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. Changing Forms and the Becoming of a Deity in Indian Religious Traditions.* Ed. by Marcus Schmücker. (Veröffentlichungen zu den Sprachen und Kulturen Südasiens 40, SbÖAW, phil.-hist. Kl. 934). Vienna 2023, pp. 257-277.

– *Meghanādārisūris Lehre vom jīvaḥ als Subjekt des Erkennens. Eine begrifflich kritische Reflexion der überlieferten Lehre.* (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library: Occasional Papers 10). Vienna 2023, 51p.

– “Debate on the Nature of the Goddess in the Rāmānuja School”. In: *Conceptualizing Categories. Texts and Context in Indian Philosophy. Festschrift in Honor of Professor Shashi Prabha Kumar.* Ed. by Purushottama Bilimoria et al. Berlin forthcoming.