

Renunciation in Hinduism: A Medieval Debate. By PATRICK OLIVELLE.
2 vols. Vienna: Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, 1986–87.
Pp. 156, 193.

Patrick Olivelle eloquently underlines the connection between orthodoxy—here, *Advaita* and *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*—and orthopraxis in his study of the *Vedāntic* controversy over the establishment of *liṅga*, the proper symbolic emblems of a renouncer. Through the examination of this topic, Olivelle additionally elucidates the nature of debate as a form of written discourse used by the *Vedānta* philosophers in their efforts to delineate a *liṅgadharmā*.

Renunciation in Hinduism opens with a provocative discussion of the role of debate as both format for and content of the *Advaita* and *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta* texts translated therein. Olivelle illustrates how, because both schools base their arguments on the same textual traditions, their debate also relates to issues of textual authenticity, the concept of the Vedic Canon, and the role of hermeneutics in debate. Significantly, he also points out how the particular debate in question, which centers on the limited issues of emblem, indeed relates to the more central debate between the rival schools concerning who was capable of attaining *mokṣa*.

Following a brief description of the texts on which he bases his discussion and the translation of which makes up the bulk of this book, the author outlines a “History of the Controversy” by way of highlighting the background behind the three main “emblems” of a renouncer—the sacrificial cord (*yajñopavīta*), the topknot (*śikhā*), and staff (*daṇḍa*)—and outlining the position of each of the two debating schools on the necessity and implications of wearing or abandoning these three *liṅga* for a renunciant. Olivelle closes this section by briefly relating the debate over these three *liṅga* to the wider and highly significant controversy over the renouncer’s place within dharma.

The fourth section is interstitial by way of closing out Olivelle’s own remarks and preparing the reader for the primary texts to follow by returning to the subject of the debate itself, outlining the traditional strategies, techniques, and goals of each interpreter of *śruti* and *smṛti* as they pertain to the *Advaita* and *Viśiṣṭādvaita texts*, which make up the rest of volume 1 and all of volume 2.

Although *Renunciation in Hinduism* is a two volume work, it in fact represents a short (59-page) monograph followed by some 224 pages of careful, cogent translations from *Vedānta* texts, many never before translated. And it is, in the first place, with its brevity, with what is *not* said, rather than with what is said, that one takes issue in this work. The dissonance between its title, which suggests a study of significant scope and wide appeal within the historical study of religions, and the actuality of a short work with a narrow focus frustrates the generalist who comes to the book primarily in

search of exegesis, comment, and conclusion, rather than translation. Further, this air of dissonance, or here, disjunction, is heightened by the fact that, although we are afforded a context for the debate reflected in the texts included, as well as an explanation of the hermeneutics involved in this type of text, in the last analysis we face these texts alone, with nary an exegetical comment to bring us back to the author's own thesis. Indeed, it is with this realm of the relation of these texts to Olivelle's book as a whole that we must be critical. In volume 1, section 2, "Description of the Texts," he ably identifies the texts according to author, date, and manuscript information, but nowhere does Olivelle explain what criteria were employed to select these texts, other than the obvious yet questionable criteria of never before having been translated. Although considerable craft and expertise were at hand in Olivelle's translations themselves, the wider issue of choosing texts, to which historians of religions of this generation have become increasingly sensitive, is neglected. For the specialist, the one and one-half volumes of translations may be unearthened treasure; for the generalist, they remain disappointingly "unpacked."

The scholarly work that remains is replete with ideas that *do* relate to some basic issues in the field and that Olivelle, however subtly, brings out. Some of these are themes that, I feel, lie at the heart of what is so compelling about the study of religion and, in particular, of Hinduism—for example, the ever-present tension within Hinduism between orthopraxis, renunciation, and the monkeywrench of *mokṣa*. Olivelle teases the reader with the recognition of the relation of his debate to these issues, but dwells unnecessarily long on less compelling discussions such as the symbolism and controversy relating to the renouncer's staff (nineteen out of fifty-nine pages devoted to this subject), while relegating a potentially significant discussion of the relationship of dharma and renunciation to only three pages. There are numerous times when, faced with a choice between describing the details of *līṅga* and relating it to wider issues within *Vedānta*, Hinduism, or the study of religion, Olivelle opts for the straight and narrow, contrary to what his title suggests. Yet, paradoxically, within this more confined agenda, the reader perceives an unclear or perhaps dual focus; Olivelle succinctly delineates the history and significance of the renouncer's basic emblems and outlines the positions taken by *Advaita* and *Viśiṣṭādvaita* philosophers from approximately A.D. 700–1500 on the maintenance or abandonment of such *līṅga*. In addition, he addresses the subject of debate as not only an oral but especially as a written form of philosophical discourse during this period and expertly explains the polemical hermeneutics employed by the authors of the texts that are translated in this two-volume work. But saddled with a dual focus in a very brief work, Olivelle falls short of capturing the reader with a decisive thesis and conclusive argumentation. What is lacking is a clear statement of purpose and, especially, a sense of balance in both treatment and emphasis between central and subsidiary discussions. The general audience may be left desiring more *and* less than Olivelle has delivered, so that a more complete discussion of the texts included might lead the author to some strong conclusive remarks, and

some of the provocative themes so briefly noted might be pursued. However, for the specialist, Olivelle has provided an insightful monograph and an impressive collection of newly translated *Vedānta* texts.

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History of Religions
29,3(1990), pp.292-294