

Z: 188/40,4

Sep. 2001

Ha.....

HISTORY OF
RELIGIONS

CONTENTS

May 2001

Volume 40, Number 4



- 311 THE CENTER OF THE WORLD AND THE ORIGINS OF LIFE
Bruce Lincoln
- 327 TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF HERESY, ORTHODOXY AND *Doxa*
Jacques Berlinerblau
- 352 RITUAL AS ACCUSATION AND ATROCITY: SATANIC RITUAL ABUSE,
GNOSTIC LIBERTINISM, AND PRIMAL MURDERS
David Frankfurter
- BOOK REVIEWS
- 381 Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on
Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age* BRUCE
MCCLELLAND
- 384 James DiCenso, *The Other Freud: Religion, Culture and
Psychoanalysis* CELIA BRICKMAN
- 387 Thomas Oberlies, *Die Religion des Rgveda. Erster Teil: Das
religiöse System des Rgveda* STEPHANIE W. JAMISON
- 390 Malcolm McLean, *Devoted to the Goddess: The Life and Work of
Ramprasad* CLINTON B. SEELY
- 393 Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Hitler's Priestess: Savitri Devi, the
Hindu-Aryan Myth, and Neo-Nazism* STEFAN ARVIDSSON
- 396 Robin Rinehart, *One Lifetime, Many Lives: The Experience of
Modern Hindu Hagiography* JEFFREY J. KRIPAL

Die Religion des Rgveda. Erster Teil: Das religiöse System des Rgveda. By THOMAS OBERLIES. Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, vol. 26 Vienna: Sammlung De Nobili, 1998. Pp. xiv+632.

India's oldest text, the Rig Veda (hereafter RV), is also, arguably, its most enigmatic. Despite centuries of scholarly scrutiny in both the Indian and the Western tradition, deep puzzlement and fundamental disagreement about many Rig Vedic-questions remain, from the most niggling ("What does this word mean?") to the most global ("What religious beliefs and practices are reflected in this text?"). The problem lies not merely in the early date and the chronological isolation of the text, but also in the deliberately obscure rhetoric of the hymns and their

disparate character: 1,028 separate hymns composed by numerous poets over a wide geographical and temporal domain. It is a brave author who names his book “the religious *system* of the Rig Veda” (emphasis added), even if only in subtitle.

This massive work is, in fact, the first of three projected volumes (the second of which has already appeared), and it is both an immensely impressive book and a somewhat disappointing one. The author is a well-known scholar who has written extensively about early Indian philosophy and religion. He has a philological insider’s detailed knowledge of the problems of the text, which is essential for any more general statement about its meaning and purpose, and he appears to have read almost every piece of secondary literature about it: the 140 pages of bibliography are alone probably worth the price of the volume. His discussions of particular issues are invariably thoughtful, stimulating, and balanced, and he regularly situates Rig Vedic problems in the context of religious studies in general.

Wherein the disappointment? To begin with, the book, or at least its first volume, is not what its title promises; that is, it is not a general treatment of Rig Vedic religion, organized systematically, and it is quite definitely not for the Rig Vedic novice—far too much background knowledge is assumed. An overview of that background would be extremely welcome; the older syntheses of Vedic religion, like Oldenberg’s and Keith’s,¹ are much too dated to be used reliably by anyone who does not already know where they have been superseded. Moreover, those works treated the whole of Vedic religion, not the particular character of Rig Vedic religion, and one of the most compelling questions in current Vedic studies is how much of the much better described middle Vedic religious system we can (and cannot) read back into the earlier period.

The book instead starts with a very particular question, and it is the task of answering this very particular question that drives the structure and presentation of the book as a whole, even in covering topics ostensibly distant from it. The question: The ninth book (of the ten into which the RV is divided) consists of 114 hymns dedicated to Soma Pavamāna (“Self-purified Soma”), the divinized ritual drink that is the offering in the most solemn Vedic rituals. This Rig Vedic soma collection is curious in several regards: it is the only book dedicated to a single divinity, and the soma hymns therein are monotonously stereotyped in subject matter and vocabulary, focusing on a very few episodes in the ritual preparation of the soma drink though clothed in the most elaborate imagery and elevated diction. The book under review sets out to analyze this set of hymns stylistically, to seek an internal logic to their composition, to explain the restricted focus of the events described, and to account for their richness of imagery, but it does so in a remarkably oblique way, by sketching the whole of Rig Vedic religion (as envisaged by the author) in its relation to the soma hymns.

In other words, every other topic treated in the book ultimately bears on the question of the compositional style of the soma hymns. This can have a skewing effect on the structure of the book as a whole. Especially in the early chapters, the

¹ H. Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda*, 1st ed. (Stuttgart and Berlin: J. G. Cotta’sche, 1894). Subsequent editions were published in 1917, 1923, and 1927. A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Vedas and Upanishads*, 2 vols., Harvard Oriental Series, nos. 31, 32 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925).

author presents what appear to be systematic treatments of general topics: the Rig Vedic pantheon (pp. 174–265), the rituals (pp. 269–316), cosmogony (pp. 363–90). Yet, for example, in the list of gods treated in the pantheon (including fairly minor ones like Trita, who merits five pages), one misses a section on Agni, deified fire, who is the recipient of more Rig Vedic hymns than any other god save Indra, approximately one-fifth of the entire text. The author explains that discussion of Agni must be postponed until volume 3 (and in fact gives some notion later in this first volume [pp. 347 ff., see below] of where he thinks Agni fits), but any work that purports to present “the system” of Rig Vedic religion and cannot significantly incorporate Agni into some four hundred pages of discussion of this system seems to me out of balance.

However, for the reader willing to overlook what it is not and accept it for what it is, the book provides many rewards. The author attempts not so much to describe “the religious system” of the RV as to create one, in other words, to bring into harmony many seemingly unrelated or discordant pieces of data in an overarching schema and in turn to relate this religious schema to the presumed sociopolitical structures of the Rig Vedic people(s). This is a bold and ambitious program, and its contours take shape rather slowly in the course of the book.

Briefly and reductively put (this is mostly found on pp. 345 ff.), the RV has not one religion but three, each associated with different deities and practices: (1) the Āditya-religion, centered on the group of gods collectively known by this name, especially Varuṇa and Mitra, and appropriate to and practiced during times of peace, (2) the Indra (-Marut) religion, centered on the warrior god Indra and appropriate to times of war, and (3) the Agni-religion, centered on the practices at the domestic hearth and mediating between the other two temporally and functionally restricted ones.

This first volume of the three concentrates on the Indra religion, whose cultic focus is the soma sacrifice. During this ritual, soma the offering is “transubstantiated” into Soma the god at exactly those moments in the ritual preparation that the Soma Pavamāna hymns so repetitively describe. This transubstantiation in turn brings about the epiphany of Indra, who drinks the soma and whose presence is necessary for victory in the contests between rivals within the society and against enemies outside it. Here at last we reach the answer to the question with which the book begins—why the soma hymns are the way they are—after a most circuitous journey.

Though I would hesitate to call the three entities he identifies separate “religions,” there is much to admire in the author’s construction of this system (or set of interlocking subsystems), with which he can account for many of the traditional cruxes in Rig Vedic studies (e.g., the puzzling relations, neither wholly hostile nor wholly benign, between the divinities called devas and those called asuras). However, I would put the emphasis in my last sentence on “construction.” I am not at all convinced that the RV presents us with anything so tidy and systematic or that we should expect such a geographically and temporally diverse text (Oberlies himself estimates it was composed over six hundred years! [p. 158]) to do so.

In fact, I am a bit dubious about the methods used to construct the system, however hallowed by scholarly tradition. The standard method, also used by Oberlies, is to collect citations from various hymns bearing (or appearing to bear—such is the uncertain nature of the text) on a particular question, to try to find a common

conceptual basis for these citations, and to explain apparent contradictions. There is certainly nothing either novel or controversial in such a method, but I am not sure that it is a particularly useful one for the RV. For one thing, it assumes that there actually exists a common conceptual basis. And more important, it ignores one fundamental aspect of the Rig Vedic worldview (here I am myself guilty of assuming a common conceptual basis, I realize) namely, the power of the word, through the thought and verbal skill of the poets, not merely to mirror but to create and control “reality.” For this reason, the way to figure out what the RV (or some part of it) means is to examine in detail *how* it means, how the thought unfolds and is verbally embodied. A more fruitful approach to the Rig Vedic belief system than the assembling of decontextualized citations is found in Brereton’s recent dazzling exegesis² of the famous Rig Vedic hymn 10.129, with its striking opening enigma often translated “there was neither being nor non-being then.” Brereton undertakes a close reading of the hymn, word by word, verse by verse, and shows that the verbal development of the thought sequentially through the hymn is itself the message. The poem “means” by dynamically becoming a poem, not through static statements about this belief or that. In other words, what all of the RV shares may be not a unified vision of the cosmos, the forces at play in it, and humans’ relation to them (i.e., a “religious system”) but a shared sense of how to explore the many different possible visions of these matters through imaginative poetic activity.

Despite the reservations just expressed about both approach and results, I am fully conscious of Oberlies’s achievement in this volume, in wringing sense and system out of a text that gets harder and more puzzling for me the more I read it. This book is neither for the fainthearted nor for the uninitiated, but it amply repays the attentive reader with a wealth of stimulating discussions on every aspect of Rig Vedic studies, an explosion of ideas I cannot do justice to in a review this short. No one interested in this period in the religious history of India can afford to ignore this book.

STEPHANIE W. JAMISON

Harvard University