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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

THE publication of Michelle Voss Roberts' *Dualities: A Theology of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) has been welcomed by many scholars in the field of Hindu-Christian studies as one of the best books in comparative theology to have appeared in recent years. In it the author focuses on what she calls "the metaphysics of difference and differences between metaphysical systems in the world's religions," through which she seeks to open "new routes through the discourse surrounding dualism, duality, and relation" (xix). She reexamines issues about duality and relation by drawing on the work of Lalleśvarī, a fourteenth century Hindu of the Kashmir Śaiva tradition, and Mechthild of Magdeburg, a thirteenth century beguine Christian. With her analysis and comparison of the thought of these two women Voss Roberts compellingly dismantles widely held clichés about Christianity's essential "dualistic" teaching and Hinduism's inevitable monism. The author argues for an understanding of reality that occupies a richer and more multi-faceted ontological position than that of the two simple extremes of dualism and monism.

Lance Nelson praises Voss Roberts' book for having advanced theological and ethical discussion, involving as it does attention to wide-ranging feminist, ecological, and social justice concerns. He also lauds the author's argument that we can glean important theological insights by turning away from official male-dominated theology and authority and by turning our gaze instead to the thought of marginalized religious women. But he wonders whether Lalleśvarī's theology, with its focus on *tattvas*, is perhaps more indebted to the male-dominated tradition she inherited than Voss Roberts acknowledges. Likewise he suggests that Voss Roberts overemphasizes Lalleśvarī's metaphor of "fluidity" as expressive of divine nature, because the

metaphor is in fact only infrequently employed by Lalleśvarī and not always used by her in a positive sense. But overall Nelson regards the book as an important contribution to comparative theology.

Laurel Schneider lauds the valuable distinction Voss Roberts makes between "duality" and "dualism." "Duality" is a mode of differentiation that "need not ossify into opposition, especially not into the insidious forms of oppressive dualist hierarchy that characterize patriarchalist gender formations and colonialist racial formations." Nor should multiplicity and differentiation be reduced to dualism's absolute opposition; differentiations can in fact occur in many modes, revealing themselves at times as interconnectedness or "irreducible inexchangeability." But Schneider also challenges the assumption of both Lalleśvarī and Mechthild that God and world have an unchanging ontological status independent of their awareness by the human subject. She speaks of the need to recognize "an even more thoroughgoing relationality in reality than these writers seem to entertain," an even deeper connection of subject and object than is acknowledged by the two medieval women. She advocates "an even deeper sense of flow, a co-creative and co-constitutive dimension to the divine-world duality." God is not simply God independent of the human awareness of God.

Brad Bannon observes a striking difference between the comparative method of Voss Roberts and that of Francis Clooney. The former plunges into immediate comparisons of Lalleśvarī and Mechthild rather than treating each of the women exhaustively before comparison begins. This runs the danger of not allowing the reader to be as deeply affected, even conformed, by the texts of the two women. He adds, though, that her book is a significant contribution in its fusing of

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constructive theology and comparative theology. He admires Voss Roberts' ability to find resources in these authors to respond to contemporary questions, while also hearing the questions that these authors continue to pose to us. He himself reflects further on the metaphors of "tide" and "play" (*līlā*), teasing out new meanings, thereby seeking to contribute to Voss Roberts' use of the term "fluidity."

Francis Clooney likewise praises *Dualities* for its originality and breadth in taking on difficult poetic texts far removed from us in time and culture and allowing them to speak to us in new and prophetic ways on questions of spirituality, theology, environmentalism, and gender. He then goes on to raise a number of critical questions: To what degree are our moral and immoral inclinations really grounded in specific epistemologies and ontologies? Does one kind of perception of the nature of being, for instance "fluidity," inevitably lead to more virtuous activity than another? Also, what prompted the comparison of Lalleśvarī and Mechthild in the first place? Was it an interest in pressing contemporary issues that were then tested out by recourse to the writings of two medieval thinkers or did the reading of Lalleśvarī and Mechthild come first, leading to a discovery of common themes that might throw light on present day realities? Further, did the main issues of the book arise primarily out of one religious setting more than another? And to what extent does Voss Roberts see her book as a *Christian* contribution to Hindu-Christian studies? Does she, in fact, align herself with one religious tradition more than the other? If the author sees herself as at home in the Christian tradition she might reflect more on what she understands the implications of her work to be for Christian theology.

Michelle Voss Roberts responds with gratitude to her reviewers for having pushed her to think more deeply about her work in comparative theology. In answer to Clooney's query she answers that exposure

to the texts of Lalleśvarī and Mechthild came before her constructive agenda, especially when she noticed how prominently issues of fluidity figured in the writings of the two women. But she also concedes that her feminist concerns predisposed her to take up the reading of the two women in the first place. As to her own religious commitments Voss Roberts professes a fluid understanding of Christian identity, one that is also rooted strongly in Hindu praxis and thought. She adds that her book was written for a largely Christian audience, an orientation influenced by her own Christian upbringing.

In reply to the questions of Nelson the author acknowledges that although both Lalleśvarī and Mechthild are products of their home traditions they do remain largely marginal figures. She does not think, however, in contrast to Schneider's reference to Native North American discourse, that either of the two women would go so far as to say that people are capable of altering the relational structure of reality. In answer to Bannon's call to a "comparative theology of play" Voss Roberts expresses concern that the theologian must avoid trivializing or ignoring human suffering when attempting to incorporate suffering into a ludic vision of reality.

All these essays are substantive and insightful. I have only given a few of their main points. As Voss Roberts states, the work of comparative theology, ever engaging new voices in dialogue, is never finished.

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