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Editor's Introduction

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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 
thought 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
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” (lîlā), 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 Lalleśvara 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 Lalleśvara 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 Lalleśvara 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 Lalleśvara 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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