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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

THE main theme of this year's issue, "Aesthetic Theory and Practice in Hindu and Christian Experience," takes a theological approach to the Hindu-Christian encounter that proceeds in a different direction than the more traditional attention to comparing doctrines. Reflection on aesthetic theory as presented in these essays proves useful in making sensory experience a starting point for Hindu-Christian comparison of religious experience.

In the first essay Michelle Voss Roberts describes how the ancient Indian *rasa* theory, which elucidated the capability of art to arouse emotional states, eventually led Hindu theologians to reflect on how such experiences can be interpreted as tastes of the divine. Since, as she says, religious experience is rarely pure and unmediated, aesthetic theory "offers a way to talk about experience because it illuminates the relationship of the physical and particular aspects of religious experience to its transcendent dimensions." Voss Roberts compares the Hindu philosopher Abhinavagupta's (950-1020 CE) teaching on aestheticism with that of the contemporary Indian Christian artist Jyoti Sahi (b. 1944). Abhinavagupta teaches that under certain conditions the intense experience of reading or contemplating a work of art can lead to a pure self-forgetful experience of aesthetic relishing characterized by deep peace, detachment, and desirelessness, which also gives a taste of the tranquil bliss of the true self. In turning to Sahi Voss Roberts notes a tension in Christian aesthetic discourse, not unlike that of the Hindu theoreticians, between the purpose of art as a (mere) inner-worldly enjoyment given

to the senses versus the purpose of art as leading to a theological insight that would transcend and leave behind sensory experience. For Sahi, art is a contemplative practice or yoga, both in the process of creating a work of art as well as by the impact of the completed work on the experience of another person. In addition, Sahi, unlike Abhinavagupta, reflects on the at times complementary impulses of Hindu and Christian art, the former moving inward, and the latter outward. Sahi also notes the value of art not only to express the particular beauty of the divine, but also its capacity to display the suffering of humanity, in particular the suffering of Christ, whose cross is the central Christian symbol. Voss Roberts concludes that "an aesthetic framework for Hindu-Christian studies makes room for diverse experiences within dialogue. Not only peace and love, but also compassion, prophetic fury, and other common emotions can become the basis for understanding and solidarity."

Patrick Beldio's "The Androgynous Visual Piety of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and St. Clare and St. Francis" compares and contrasts two different aesthetic uses of the "fusing androgyne" as theorized by Mircea Eliade and Wendy Doniger, which for Eliade symbolizes the "mystery of wholeness" in spiritual practice. Instead of relying solely on textual evidence, this article keys on behavioral evidence associated with visual culture, art and architecture, as well as fashion of the Integral Yoga of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and the spiritual practice of Clare and Francis of Assisi. As Beldio shows, both of these practices as lived

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by their founders used these aesthetic forms as means for spiritual growth towards an androgynous ideal for human fulfillment. Further, an androgynous image of God in human form (Kṛṣṇa for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and Jesus for Clare and Francis) informed their understandings and focused their sacred gaze, both of which can be described as a non-sectarian way of seeing the unity of all life.

In the third and final essay Katherine Zubko notes how the essays of Voss Roberts and Beldio share the conviction of a “mutual symbiosis” between aesthetics and religious thought. Aesthetic engagement is not reducible to being a mere subservient expression of ideas and concepts, which would be regarded as primary. Rather form and meaning inform and shape each other. “The aesthetic space,” she writes, “is one of dynamism, potentiality and co-existence in ways that provoke insights, challenge categories of thought, and point towards the ambiguities of religious expression and embodied experience trying to literally make sense of divinity/sacrality in relation to humanity.” Zubko raises questions in regard to the essays of Voss Roberts and Beldio. How, for example, do *śānta* (peace) and *śṛṅgāra* (the erotic *rasa*) inform each other in the works of Abhinavagupta and Sahi, and, further, what role might *adbhuta* (the *rasa* of wonder) play here? “How,” she asks, “does the *rasa* of wonder that sensorially is receptive to the religious

experiences framed primarily by *śānta* and *śṛṅgāra* shape the formation of a grammar of hospitality to our own scholarly inquiries in Hindu-Christian Studies?”

In regards to the essay by Beldio, Zubko observes that the same dynamics of *śānta* and *śṛṅgāra* are operative in Integral Yoga. She would like to hear how the engagement of devotees with the paintings and drawings of Huta has evolved over time in the process of yogic integration. As to Francis and Clare and the splitting and fusing of androgyny, she wonders about the impact of these aesthetic expressions on practitioners and devotees. How do such categories invite people into relationship with gurus and saints? How, by contrast, might some disciples be unintentionally left out by these images and shared spaces? And, finally, she asks, how does the model of splitting or fusing potentially inform Hindu-Christian interaction and scholarship? Along with placing Hindu and Christian material side-by-side through clean and orderly comparison, can we also find value in the “apparent fusings of Hindu and Christian practices and ideas in more undifferentiated spaces that help inform our understanding?” And, finally, she asks, how do each of these two models offer insight into an “aesthetics of hospitality” in a Hindu-Christian framework?

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