Lamentation and Restoration

Laurie L. Patton

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1764

The Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies is a publication of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies. The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.
Lamentation and Restoration

Laurie L. Patton

In the light of the murder of George Floyd, Ahmed Aubury, Breonna Taylor, and others, I note the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies’ call to “a critical and moral self-reflexive examination of our membership and our intellectual work, looking within and without.” This seemed a particularly appropriate phrase for me to respond to, because I am the “other” of the SHCS’ membership list “Hindu, Christian, and other” – an Indologist who shares a textual journey with scholars of Hinduism and Christianity, but whose faith orientation is Jewish and Buddhist. As such I am a fellow traveler, and yet not fully ensconced in either Christian or Hindu traditions. In that sense, I am looking both “within and without.” So I think it is worth pondering, what would such a critical and moral self-reflexive examination look like, and how would it be different from other forms of critical examination that we do every day as scholars?

My first thought is, in the wake of current events that critical examination might include mourning and lamentation. The funeral of George Floyd was a moving experience for our nation and the world, and the words of Floyd’s family held up the possibilities of healing. Their words included both lamentation and a longing for something different. The Hebrew Bible—also embraced by the Christian tradition—expresses the art of lamentation—of losing God, of feeling deserted by God, and of railing against God’s absence. The Jewish liturgy performs the Amidah—which includes a prayer of mourning, and of loss, on a daily basis. The Vedic tradition also has forms of unfulfilled longing—in the angst of the poet praising Agni, the fire god, who feels that his words will not be good enough, and in the poet and sage Vasishtha’s anxiety that Varuna has judged him harshly and deserted him. These too were prescribed by the late Vedic text, the Rg Vidhana, to be recited when one had lost one’s way.

Both Vedic and Hebrew Bible traditions prescribe daily, regular, acts of mourning. And yet today, in the harsh glare of renewed anti-black violence in our country, we confront in genteel ways questions from white citizens like, “When are we going to stop talking about race?” The collective answer might be, “Never.” There is an obligation to narrate harm and loss that both Jewish and Hindu traditions express—narrate those stories as a form of healing, and a prelude to the hope that perhaps, someday, there could also be a song of celebration. The Mahabharata, in my view, is one such poem of

Laurie L. Patton is Professor of Religion and President of Middlebury. She is the author or editor of 10 scholarly books and 61 articles on early Indian religion, women and Sanskrit, and the public study of religion (most recently: *Who Owns Religion: Scholars and Their Publics in the Late 20th Century*, University of Chicago Press, 2019). She is also the author of three books of poetry (White Cloud Press, Station Hill Press) and translator of the *Bhagavad Gita* for Penguin Classics Series.

loss—whether you interpret it as a pyrrhic victory, or as a long poem of regret, or a meditation on the cost of victory. It is complex, dark, and intriguingly post-modern, yes; but it is also one that invites us, episode by episode, to consider the cost of violence of one people against another. It also has hints of the possibility of liberation—in the experience of Ekalavya, or Karna, whose rejection by social norms shape their lives and give them purpose. So, too, in the Hebrew Bible, we find figures such as the prophet Jeremiah, sitting by the city gates, undone by loss, particularly the loss of his vision of a just and good people. His life, too, is shaped by the disappearance of fairness and decency in the people of Israel.

In many ways, we have begun to do this work. Much of post-colonial scholarship focuses on exposing such oppression. Yet this fact leads to my second response to the question, “What would such reflection look like, both within and without?” While the substance of our work might have shifted, much of our scholarly practices remain rooted in reproducing the same patterns of silencing oppression. We exist, frequently, in a hierarchy without purpose, a hierarchy of harm. What if we used our collective sense of mourning—a deep sense of what intellectual and cultural resources we all have lost as a result of racism—to begin to heal our fields and sub-fields? What if creating more access and opportunities for people of color was not just an obligation, but a form of restoration?

Then our mourning would create mindfulness and intention to heal. Then Ekalavya would be not just an object of study (and yes, there are critiques of his behavior, too), but also an inspiration in his own right: his resolute will, his refusal of Drona’s refusal to teach him because he was an Adivasi, his courage and faithfulness to learning. With such mindfulness about our own scholarly structures, we would ask ourselves, every day, “How are we inadvertently remaining Dronas—whether it be caste, race, gender, disability, or some other form of forgetting the human?” And then our critical reflection would begin with: “How can we learn what Ekalavya and others have to teach us instead?”