

BOOK REVIEWS

Cheever Mackenzie Brown,

God as Mother: A Feminine Theology in India,

Vermont: Claude Stark & Co., 1974, 264+xvii pp., \$ 15.00

Many Hindu thinkers, teachers and writers from at least the early Christian centuries have deeply involved themselves with the problem of the feminine and masculine dimensions of ultimate reality. This attempt to come to terms with the bi-sexual nature of reality meets the claim of today's society for an equality of rights between men and women, and particularly for a new respect for womanhood. In his study of the *Brahmavaivarta Purāna*, a Sanskrit text that assumed its present shape perhaps as late as the 15th century A. D., C. Mackenzie Brown arouses an appreciation for a feminine theology.

The book is divided into four parts under the following headings: "Cultural, Historical and Theological background"; "The Kṛṣṇaite Theological framework"; "The Theology of Rādhā as Prakṛti"; "Some final considerations on the *Brahmavaivarta Purāna*".

Part A treats of certain preliminary matters: the nature and role of Purānic literature in general within Hindu culture, the history and background of the *Brahmavaivarta Purāna*, and the theological strands found within the Purāna. The Purānas, which number eighteen, are an easier form of truth, adapted to the conditions of class and world age. They represent, then, an interpretation or classification of the Sruti, revealing the eternal, immutable truth in a comprehensible form to all mankind in its changing, historical, situation. The *Brahmavaivarta* is one of these Purānas, maybe the latest. It is divided into four sections or "khāndas" (Brahmā, Prakṛti, Ganesa, Kṛṣṇajānma) and has incorporated the views of many schools and sects; thus it has utilized and reinterpreted and perhaps revitalized the tradition. In some respects it is misleading to speak of a theology of *Brahmavaivarta*. But at the same time we must acknowledge in it the presence of a number of theological strands: the popular, with its common or worldly understanding of the legends and rituals; the Tantric, with its view of the Absolute as a union of

male and female principle of the universe; the Saivite, with its devotional practices and sympathy towards Siva; and, finally, the vaiṣṇavite-Ṛṣṇaite theology, which embraces all the above theological strands.

One of the primary concerns of the study of these strands is to illuminate the transition from a masculine theology to a feminine theology as it appears in *Brahmavaivarta Purāna*. This is the objective of the two main parts B and C, dealing with the theologies of Ṛṣṇa and Rādhā, respectively. It is in fact in Part B that the author develops in extent the Ṛṣṇaite strand. Ṛṣṇa is presented in his relationship with the other gods, and among them he appears as the Supreme Lord. He is also presented in his supreme aspect as the “nirguna (without attributes)” and in his creative aspect as “saguna” (endowed with attributes). In the world he is both cause and effect, and in his relation to man he is the Self of all.

Such a description of the identity and activity of Ṛṣṇa turns man towards the divinity. Hence the necessity of a supreme devotion which is conceived in the *Brahmavaivarta Purāna* primarily in terms of “Bhakti”, that leads to “Mukti” or Liberation. This, in fact, attains the power or condition of God, the same world of God, the form of God, the presence of God, the sameness with God, and the emergence, dissolution or oneness with God.

The author comes, then, to the third and definitely the most original and creative part of his book: the doctrine of Ṛṣṇa in relation to Prakṛti or the theology of Rādhā. At first Prakṛti was not really endowed with a distinctive personality or individuality. She had no concrete image or form, and almost no “history”, i.e., no specific stories or legends in which she, as a distinctive being, could play a role. Her personality, to the extent that it did exist, was borrowed as it were from the goddesses with whom she was identified. But this fact also allowed her to transcend in a sense the other goddesses. Thus a common conception of *Brahmavaivarta Purāna* is that Prakṛti is the One female principle of the universe and in close relation to the Supreme Reality, being herself the generative power of the Supreme, the activating energy of the substance, the ultimate support of Ṛṣṇa himself. Practically what was traditionally referred to Ṛṣṇa is now referred to Prakṛti with a strong tendency to raise her to equality with, if not superiority to Ṛṣṇa.

Prakṛti's significance, however, lies not so much in her ultimate ontological status, but in her dynamic aspect. In this con-

nection she plays two main roles: cosmogonic and redemptive. The cosmogonic role of Prakṛti implies a divisional manifestation of the goddess and a creation by copulation. "Divisional manifestation" means that at the first stage Prakṛti was identified with a multitude of other goddesses; that at the second stage Kṛṣṇa is shown as the source of creation or emanation of all the goddesses; that at the third stage Rādhā arises to a prominent role among the goddesses; and that finally Kṛṣṇa is replaced by Prakṛti often identified with Rādhā, as the immediate source of all the goddesses. The copulative cosmogony took over the ancient themes of the androgyny, the egg, the cosmic elements, and Brahma's creative activity, and restructured them according to the principle of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa's love-making. In this process, a new dimension is added to the theology of Rādhā, with important consequences for devotional and soteriological views.

In fact, in her redemptive activity, Prakṛti or Rādhā plays the role of the "Mother" and mediatrix. To worship her is easier and it bears fruit sooner than the worship of Kṛṣṇa: "By service to him, you shall obtain his world after many births. Worship the supreme Rādhā, the presiding deity of his life. By the grace (of Rādhā), full of compassion, you will quickly attain his abode" (Prakṛti Khanda, 55. 4-5).

The conclusion, which constitutes Part D of the book, offers further remarks on the history of the *Brahmavaivarta Purāna* and its possible influence on later devotional movements.

Undoubtedly, this is a fascinating book. On the one hand I believe that its ideology constitutes a radical break with tradition, in the sense that Reality, usually conceived in terms of masculine forms, here can more properly be described with the help of a mature feminine theology. On the other hand "God as Mother" makes it clear that the Hindu literature preserves and constantly reaffirms one of man's earliest religious orientations to the universe, an orientation that particularly in the West seems to have been largely forgotten.

A prejudice may arise against the subject of Brown's research. What difference, we may ask, does it make if humans worship God as a woman instead of as a man? We may answer with what Daniel H.H. Ingalls writes in his introduction to the book: ".....the theology of the *Brahmavaivarta*.....is not the description of a female icon. It strives to express the possibilities of the goddess rather than her iconic limitations. What it seeks is to construct a feminine theology that is free." For this reason

the book can be considered as a relevant contribution to the religious speculation of today.

Its most striking feature, in my opinion, is the dissolution of the opposition between the masculine and feminine aspects of Reality. To put it in philosophical terms, this book celebrates the disintegration of the opposition between Spirit and Matter, Purusā and Prakṛti, embodied here by Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. I believe that this assertion is also present in that earliest of Vedic literature namely, Ṛgveda, which is referred to the revelation about the Origins and the Cosmic evolution. (Rg. X 90; 129; 130).

Other important features are to be found in the third part of the book, where the author explains the cosmogonic and redemptive role of Prakṛti. Particularly interesting is the doctrine of Prakṛti's divisional manifestation, which is closely related to the theory of cosmic cycles. Interesting also is the copulative cosmogony as a significant experiment in feminine theology, combining the amorous and the maternal. The redemptive role springs forth through a laborious theology in which Prakṛti seems at first to bind men to the world of experience, but at the end she appears as the ultimate liberation, the Divine Mother, who redeems and emancipates mankind.

"God as Mother" is rigorously scientific. One of the main preoccupations of the author is to prove his thesis not only with *Brahmavaivarta's* text, but also with a myriad of other texts taken from the inexhaustible Indian literature. Moreover, the linking between the various parts and chapters is well done. Brown makes the reader, especially if he be unfamiliar with Indian language and philosophy, feel at home with the book providing him with a comprehensive glossary, index and a rich bibliography. For those who are familiar with Sanskrit however, some parallel passages are proposed in three appendices, in order to help the reader to deepen his study on some topics already tackled throughout the exposition.

Lastly, I believe that the author has succeeded in illuminating historically as well as doctrinally the transition from a masculine-oriented theology, centred upon Visnu or Kṛṣṇa, to a feminine theology, centred upon Kṛṣṇa's consort Rādhā. In doing so he has avoided eclecticism. He has looked at the whole picture. He has let the text of *Brahmavaivarta* speak for itself and never forced it into a logical consistency which in fact it does not possess.

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