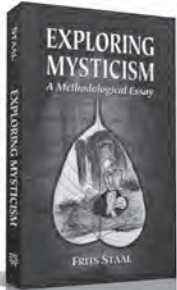


REVIEWS

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Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay

Frits Staal

Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 41
U A Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar,
Delhi 110 007. Website: www.mldb.com. 2013. xxv + 230 pp. ₹ 495.

The author of this book writes that Christian theologians ‘reject mysticism because of its emphasis not only on rationality but also on what is impersonal, eternal, and general’ (30). Although there is now a branch of well-defined study on mysticism within Christianity, known as ‘mystical theology’, it is not yet part of the core curricula in most Christian seminaries. Further, Christian scholars scrutinize mysticism through structuralist hermeneutics and apply reductionist approaches to the phenomenon of mysticism. This is the result of the historical method practised by Christian scholars—*vide* John Paul Meier’s three volumes on the life of Christ. This is not the proper approach in studying religious phenomena, and cannot be the proper approach at all in studying mysticism. Hinduism, on the other hand, accepts and incorporates within its lived reality the mystical turn in both the individual and the *faith community*.

Staal tackles an intricate and vast field in a systematic manner. He interrogates mysticism both ontologically and philologically. His stress throughout the text is in constructing Indian paradigms for the study of mysticism. While creating such paradigms Staal devotes an entire chapter to the philological and historical contingencies, which should inform the discourse of Indian mysticism. Generally speaking, Western theologians eschew problematizing mystical texts and do not speak of constructing a new methodology for accessing these texts. Therefore, we have a paucity of Christian theology on

mysticism. Also Hindu glossing often seems to be too logical and apparently reduces received divine wisdom to dry philosophical statements. Staal resists this reductionist approach in both Christianity and Hinduism. This is why Staal devotes Part II of the book to ‘How not to Study Mysticism’, a unique feature in texts of this kind. This is a bold step, for Staal’s peers may not like their methodologies for interpreting mysticism to be questioned.

The author is to be praised since he does not waste time with what is the mysterious prerogative of Hinduism: ‘Since we do not know much about what *brahman-force*, *tapas*, and Yoga are, it is fruitless to speculate exactly how they were related’ (79). This is contrary to the scholastic approach to metaphysics and mysticism. Neothomism continues to mar European narratives about mysticism. Thomists tend to take a Newtonian approach to mysticism; they see only the cause and results of grace in the person of the mystic, they reduce the mystic to a medium of God’s grace. Hinduism sees the mystic as potentially divine; the mystic having achieved the *turiya* state is one with Brahman. The mystic is willy-nilly a sign of the truths of Advaita Vedanta. Staal stresses this point in his book. He is perceptive in including photos of certain mystical Indian motifs; the one showing ‘Karman: Ritual Activity in a Vedic Sacrifice’ is necessary in the book, for later Staal speaks of this ritual: ‘Who is that Agni? ... He is an entity postulated as a referent to which the grammatical dative (“*agnaye*”) refers’ (194).

Staal does the impossible: he encapsulates the plethora of mystical experience not only in Hinduism but also in Islam, Buddhism, and Jainism. His scholarship is all-encompassing and masterfully comments on the relevance of ‘Patañjali, Don Juan [pseudonym for a Yaqui Native American], and Freud’ (134) to the study of mysticism.

His discussion on samadhi, as the ultimate mystical union of the soul with Brahman is interesting (151) and in line with contemporary research on brain activity during dreaming and REM sleep. Staal is not an armchair theorist; he proposes empirical research to understand mysticism (152). This need to validate theory with reality is the way forwards for Hinduism. For Hinduism to flourish there is need of empirical proofs of its religious patrimony and more writings in English as well. Staal's work, being in English, is itself a way forwards for Hinduism.

The Second Vatican Council did away with Latin for the celebration of Mass, since Latin was not understood by most practising Roman Catholics. Latin continues to be studied today by a clutch of specialised scholars. Maybe Staal's kind of texts are performing their cultural work by opening up Hinduism to Hindu theologians. Theologising is somewhat an alien concept to canonical Hinduism, but a lived religion needs theologians who can write in a global idiom—in this case, English. Swami Vivekananda encouraged publishing in English, as he had the foresight to understand that the Sanatana Dharma must be rescued from the elitism effected through linguistic isolation and linguistic hegemony. Thus Staal's book on methodology can become the type of text that will usher Hinduism into the twenty-first century.

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**Lectures on Patañjali's
Mahābhāṣya
Volumes IX and X**
P S Subrahmanya Sastri

The Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute, Mylapore, Chennai 600 004.
Website: www.ksrisanskrit.in. 2011.
Volume IX: xxxvi + 364 pp. ₹ 300;
Volume X: xlvi + 396 pp. ₹ 300.

The Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute has been doing admirable work in preserving and propagating the wisdom found in Sanskrit texts. It has been publishing various rare texts

with translations into English to ensure that these otherwise inaccessible treasures reach the common people. One such addition to this marvellous corpus of literature is the translation of Patanjali's Mahabhashya into English. These are based on the lectures given by the late Prof. P S Subrahmanya Sastri at the behest of Swami Chandra-sekharendra Saraswati of the Kanchi Kamakoti Pitham. The whole work was supposed to be published in 14 volumes. By 1962, 6 volumes were published. After a huge gap, the seventh volume was published in 2009 and the eighth in 2010. The present ones, the ninth and the tenth, were published in 2011.

Prof. P S Subrahmanya Sastri was an extraordinary personality. Founder member of The Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute, he remained so till his passing away in 1978. He was the first person to be awarded a doctorate in Tamil by the University of Madras. Starting his career as a teacher of mathematics, he went on to do pioneering research in Tamil and Sanskrit. A genius of sorts, he was a master of Sanskrit, Tamil, English, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, German, and French. A devout worshipper of Shiva, he lived a highly principled life. Thoroughly brought up in the Vedic tradition, a Vedic scholar himself, he also possessed a modern outlook on life—he was even a regular tennis player.

Sastri's scholarship is evident in the lucid translation of Patanjali's Mahabhashya. The ninth volume contains *abnikas*, divisions, forty-two to forty-seven, and the tenth volume contains *abnikas* forty-eight to fifty-six. Each Panini sutra is followed by the relevant *bhashya*, commentary, and the *varttika*, annotation, of Vararuchi. There are explanatory notes by the author wherever needed. Due to the simplicity and readability of the translation the reader is relieved from the complexity of the original text. Each volume has indexes of the sutras, *varttikas*, *nyayas*, *paribhashas*, and important Sanskrit and English words. Produced elegantly and having a low price, these volumes are a must for every Sanskrit library and also for students and teachers doing serious studies in Sanskrit.

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