RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS OF PATRICK OLIVELLE TO INDOLOGY

THE EARLY UPANIŚADS: ANNOTATED TEXT AND TRANSLATION
Pp. 736. $65.00.

PAṆČATANTRA: THE BOOK OF INDIA'S FOLK WISDOM

THE UPANIŚADS
Pp. 510. $6.95.

RULES AND REGULATIONS OF BRAHMANICAL ASCETICISM: YATIDHARMASAMUCCAYA OF YĀDAVA PRAKĀṢĀ
Albany: University of New York Press, 1995
Pp. 458. Cloth, $57.50; paper, $18.95.

THE ĀŚRAMA SYSTEM: HISTORY AND HERMENEUTICS OF A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION
New York: Oxford University Press, 1993
Pp. 288. $55.00.

THE SAMNYĀSA UPANIŚADS: HINDU SCRIPTURES ON ASCETICISM AND RENUNCIATION
New York: Oxford University Press, 1992

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The ancient Upanisad texts of Hindu culture that inspired Westerners like F. W. J. Schelling (1775-1854) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) continue to attract the interest of students of Indology. These texts, originally considered secret wisdom imparted directly from a teacher to an eager student, offer speculations about the origins of life and the universe, provide answers to the meaning of human existence, and suggest insights into the mysteries of death. Even though the questions raised and the answers provided are artifacts of an ancient past, we can still examine the episodes depicted in the texts and ponder their answers to the problems associated with human existence at the dawn of a new century. This suggests that the ancient students and teachers are still in some sense present long after their deaths. For those interested in Indian culture, this century has provided new scholars for some of these classic texts, including Louis Renou of France, R. C. Zaehner of India, Heinrich Zimmer of Germany, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan of India, Jan Gonda of the Netherlands, and others. Each has written about the importance of the Upanisads and the significance of asceticism in shaping Indian culture. Another name should now be added to this distinguished list—Patrick Olivelle, who has become perhaps the most prolific scholarly contributor to the study of Hinduism in the 1990s.

Olivelle received his B.A. (1972) and M.A. (1977) degrees at the University of Oxford where he studied under Thomas Burrow, Professor of Sanskrit, and the comparativist R. C. Zaehner. He completed his doctoral work at the University of Pennsylvania in the History of Indian Religions (1977) under the guidance of Ludo Rocher. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, he accepted a teaching position at Indiana University, and eventually served as chair of the Department of Religious Studies for six years until accepting another position in the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures at the University of Texas at Austin. In 1994, Olivelle became chair of the Department of Asian Studies and director of the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Texas. Olivelle has held a Guggenheim Fellowship and an NEH Fellowship; he has won awards for his translation of the Upanisads from the Association for Asian Studies and its A. K. Ramanujan Translation Award (1998), and he received the American Academy of Religion’s Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in the historical category (1994) for his book on the ancient Indian āśrama system.

Unlike Renou (1958), Olivelle is not obsessively concerned with a quest for origins, although he shares Renou’s approach to Hinduism through its ancient texts. With Zimmer (1951, 1963), he shares an interest in symbol, myth, and philosophy. On the other hand, Olivelle does not share Zaehner’s neglect of ancient and popular Hindu ritual, his lack of interest in the roles of women in Indian culture, or his assumption of the superiority of Catholicism, as found in Mysticism Sacred and Profane (1962). Neither does Olivelle offer an interpretation of Hinduism from the perspective of Advaita Vedānta like Radhakrishnan (1927). Due to his use of and emphasis upon philology and history, Olivelle’s style of scholarship reminds one of the work of Gonda (1960, 1963, 1965), although the former demonstrates a much greater sensitivity to issues associated with the roles of women in Indian culture. Moreover, Olivelle’s text-based scholarship stands in sharp contrast to the ethnological approach of someone like Jonathan Parry (1994) or the combination of ethnography with textual support, as found in the scholarship of Alf Hiltebeitel (1988, 1991).

During the 1990s, Olivelle’s production of articles, books, and translations (which began in the 1970s) became nothing short of prodigious, perhaps almost superhuman. This essay will be confined to his work in the 1990s, discussing some methodological issues associated with his scholarship, his various textual studies on Hindu asceticism, what I call the feminine and symbolic thread in his work, and the new directions he is currently taking.

Methodological Issues

Although there is no single book or essay providing a definitive explanation of his method, one can find enough comments throughout Olivelle’s work to piece together his approach to his subject. His method weaves together an emphasis on historical and social context, textual analysis, comparison, and hermeneutics. Each of these features will be analyzed as I discuss his scholarship.

In his fine work on the development of the āśrama system in India (1993), Olivelle begins by placing his subject within its cultural background, its Brāhmanical theological milieu, and its socioeconomic context. With this foundation, Olivelle argues that it was urban Brahmans who were most influenced by the dramatic socioeconomic changes of urbanization and the rising prestige and influence of non-Brāhmanical religious movements. These changes, rather than any external threat, functioned as an impetus for the creation of the system. The failure to contextualize the āśrama system led to an inability to evaluate and interpret the most ancient data, which
eventuated in the mishandling of the evidence and resulted in incorrect conclusions by the previous generation of scholars (1993, 7). By locating the āśrama system within the historical context of Brāhmanical hermeneutics (miniṃsa), it is possible to grasp it as a theological construct of ancient Indian thinking. Originating as a neologism to express a unique notion at a particular moment in Indian history, the term āśrama served to designate a particular Brāhmanical notion connected to the lifestyle and social obligations of members of the highest caste and to those Brahmans who dedicated themselves to a devout religious life in an extraordinary manner (1993, 19). Citing support from Jonathan Z. Smith (1982), Olivelle emphasizes the importance of hermeneutics and exegesis. If interpretation is, as Olivelle implies, the working out of understanding, it is an understanding that is both pragmatic and existential and never primarily theoretical. Since Olivelle does not write extensively about his methodology, it is unclear whether interpretation is the unfolding of a preunderstanding.

Before one can interpret a text, it is important to analyze it by means of philology. This calls for close attention to the language, style, and narrative strategy of the author or authors. When studying ancient texts to determine the earliest versions, there is a temptation, according to Olivelle, to neglect later versions of the text. What the scholar may then miss are the historical, religious, intellectual, and social contexts that have shaped the text (1999b, 47). In an essay on the three versions of the Švetaketu story in the Upanisads, Olivelle indicates that the versions in the Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad (6. 2. 1-8) and the Chândogya Upanisad (5.3) tend to follow each other rather closely, whereas the Kausātikā Upanisad (1) represents a distinctive redaction (1999b, 46). A philological analysis of these versions of the narrative enables Olivelle to demonstrate that the author of the Brhadāraṇyaka wants to teach a theology about sexual intercourse modeled on a fire sacrifice, while the author of the Chândogya text focuses instead on the fire sacrifice made as an offering to one's breath and thereby creates a different theological strategy. The third author presents a more difficult challenge because his purpose is limited more narrowly to recasting the path of one's dharma, thereby creating a different theological strategy. The third author presents a more difficult challenge because his purpose is limited more narrowly to recasting the path after death into a narrative about the journey to the realm of Brahman (1999b, 48). These types of narrative strategies indicate how essential it is to identify historically and study the materials with which the authors worked in order to have a better appreciation of the documents as works of literature.

In order to contrast Indian scribes with Western philologists and to show that the latter were often less faithful transmitters of Upanisadic texts, Olivelle raises an interesting question: Is it legitimate to incorporate philological conjectures into an edited text? He cites Böhtlingk's (1897) tampering with texts that served to mislead later scholars. Böhtlingk rejects, for instance, difficult readings in favor of easier ones. He introduces, for instance, the term krtvā to help interpret the expression karmātiṣesena that he claims to have derived from reading a commentary by Śaṅkara. Thereby, he violates the cardinal principle of lectio difficilior, which advises that more difficult readings are to be preferred over easier ones (1998a, 177), by using Śaṅkara's commentary to simplify his own interpretation. Olivelle draws three lessons from such misuse of philological method. First, nineteenth-century scholars were much too confident about the ability of philology to uncover original meanings. Second, native Indian commentators were reliable resources for the transmission of texts; and finally, Olivelle thinks that we have become "less confident of our ability to recover 'original' meanings of ancient documents" (173).

The type of philology espoused by Olivelle is ideally sensitive to the importance of context and resists the temptation to reify anything. It attempts, for example, to determine changing word patterns for a diachronic grasp of the distinction between pure and impure in Indian culture. Such use of the philological method discloses a vision of "the changing reality of the social world lying behind the language" (1999b, 2). The way that Olivelle uses philology suggests that he understands it as a method of retrieval and recovery. In order to comprehend his use of philology in this way, it is necessary to understand that Olivelle grasps this method as a process within time in which the philologist follows the changing patterns of terms in order to get a glimpse into the evolving social milieu behind the words. This type of dynamic process is evident in Olivelle's essay on caste and purity (1999a), in which he traces the changing patterns of terms like suci, which shifts from meaning "shining, bright, white" in the earliest literature to meaning "pure" in the early Dharma texts, with primary reference to people, although it can refer also to animals, clothes, mines, and water. In addition, Olivelle demonstrates the term's connection with morality, personal character, and innocence within the context of the criminal justice system. Furthermore, he examines other terms conveying the notion of purity as well as their opposites, like mala (dirt, stain, bodily excretions).

Another important component of Olivelle's method is the comparison. He uses this method broadly to compare terms, texts, the roles of figures within certain texts, different religious movements and teachings within Indian history, and religious phenomena. He does not want simply to classify similar and different religious phenomena into a static typology. If one looks behind his methodological use of comparison, there are always the dynamics of historical and social change. In his essay on the young student Švetaketu, Olivelle compares, for instance, the versions of the dialogue between the principal subject and a warrior-caste teacher named Jaivali or Citra. Again, in his study of the Yātīdharmasamuccaye of Yādava Prakāśa, which represents a nibandha work of medieval Indian literature, he uses the comparative method to advantage, comparing the nibandha genre, a subcategory of Brāhmanical literature concerned with legal and social issues, to early technical writings on dharma, the so-called Dharmaśastras. These eponymous types of sacred literature became revered texts under the rubric of sruti (that which is remembered) as opposed to śruti (revealed truth). In comparison to the dharma texts, Olivelle clarifies that "The nibandhas, on the other hand, were original compositions not directly tied to root texts and dealt either with the entire spectrum of dharma or with selected topics" (1995, 140). Good examples of such a special topic are the rules associated with the lifestyle of the ascetic (yatīdharma). Olivelle also makes interesting comparisons when discussing the development of the āśramas with other Brāhmanical institutions (1993), or when he examines the attitudes toward food among ascetics in relation to the value system manifested in Vedic thought and mythology (1991, 1995d). Olivelle demonstrates that food helps to construct reality within the sociocultural context, operating to strengthen the social structure by means of rules about food transactions and maintenance of boundaries of purity. Food becomes something dangerous and fearful, however, when the attitudes of ascetics are considered (1991, 22-23).

With respect to his use of comparison, Olivelle does not attempt broad generalizations like those of Mircea Eliade (1963) about various kinds of religious phenomena. His method is more in line with
Jonathan Z. Smith's call for a form of comparison that is limited to cultural artifacts contiguous in space and time (1982, 23). This more limited and controlled type of comparison is superior to Eliade's use of morphological classification with its romantic and neoplatonic idealistic influences and its exclusion of the historical aspects of religious phenomena. Although he does not explicitly specify his attitude, Olivelle's work suggests that comparison is a subjective experience connected with memory of past events, but he is not obsessed, as Eliade tended to be, with finding similarities. To his credit, Olivelle does not neglect the issue of difference. Moreover, he uses comparison to differentiate his viewpoint from those of his scholarly predecessors. When examining the semantic history of the Sanskrit term ānanda, Olivelle distinguishes his interpretation from an earlier one by J. A. B. van Buitenen (1979): "His reluctance to assign a central role to the sexual dimension, which he qualifies as 'a metaphor,' coupled with his fear of 'reductionism,' prevented him from seeing the explicit and unambiguous connection between ānanda as orgasmic rapture and ānanda as the experience of brahman/gītman" (1997b, 154).

Olivelle does not break new methodological ground or extend the horizons of methodological possibilities in new or adventurous ways. Of course, it is not his expressed intention to explore or develop new methods for the study of Indology. He adopts methods—philological, historical, and comparative—that have stood the test of time within his field. What he does accomplish is an integration of philology with sociology, history, and sensitivity to cultural context. Some theorists would probably label his style of scholarship and use of methods conservative. Such a conclusion would, however, be a misleading rush to judgment because Olivelle also makes use of the sociological insights of such scholars as Mary Douglas (1966, 1970) and Victor Turner (1969).

Although he does not specifically refer to his methodological approach as Religionswissenschaft, Olivelle's methodological choices suggest such an attitude. This suggests that Olivelle's work is devoid of a theological agenda and thus adheres to the scientific goals advocated by Donald Wiebe (1999). Since Olivelle uses philological, historical, and comparative methods, this combining of methods does not allow him to accept Wiebe's call for a rejection of polymethodological approaches to the study of religion (1999, 291). Nor does Olivelle make use of the method of falsification called for by Ivan Strenske and other theorists who consider it necessary to test one's hypothesis or interpretation by falsifying or refuting it in order to eliminate nonscientific theories (1993, 57-58). Olivelle appears to have avoided the controversy over the definition of religion as sui generis, i.e., autonomous, unique, and essential—a position that a theorist like Russell T. McCutcheon calls a discursive and political strategy (1997, xi). Having accepted a thinker like Michel Foucault too uncritically, McCutcheon views scholarly theories, methods, and texts as contributing to the maintenance of social and political privilege and power (1997, 18). During a period of time in higher education characterized by tight budgets, elimination of entire departments in various academic disciplines, poor job prospects for doctoral students in many academic fields, and the emphasis on careerism at many institutions, it is difficult for those laboring in our offices and school libraries to feel very powerful or influential.

As stated earlier, Olivelle's Indology is textually based. After a work on Buddhist monasticism (1974), Olivelle published a two-part study entitled Vāsudevārāma Yatidharmaprakāśa: A Treatise on World Renunciation (1976, 1977). These volumes were followed by three more studies of asceticism in the 1980s. Olivelle critically edited and composed an introduction to the Samnyāsapaddhati of Rudradeva (1986a) and published a two-volume medieval Hindu debate between the Advaita Vedānta school (1986b) and the Viṣṇuśāstra school (1987) concerning aspects of renunciation. Since these works were published prior to the 1990s, I will not discuss them except to affirm that they represent important contributions to our understanding of Hindu renunciation and asceticism.

The so-called Samnyāsa Upanisads are not an indigenous classification, and Olivelle's 1992 publication of these texts places them within the context of Brāhmanical literature on renunciation. The texts are evidence of ascetic literary works "that were either incorporated into or deliberately composed to fit the Vedic category of Upanisad" (1992, 15). In the introduction to his translation, Olivelle differentiates his position from J. C. Heesterman (1985), who perceives an internal development of renunciation within Vedic thought. In contrast to Heesterman, Olivelle agrees with Louis Dumont (1960), who views renunciation as a new element in ancient Indian culture that initially challenged and contradicted the fundamental premises of Vedic sacrificial theology (1992, 21). Olivelle also distinguishes his scholarship from positions that view ascetic modes of life as non-Āryan in origin. This either/or type of historical stance might be reflected more accurately by a both/and perspective because it is possible that both internal and external cultural forces may have worked together to contribute to the historical development of asceticism in India (Olson 1997, 6). Nonetheless, Olivelle's translation of The Samnyāsa Upanisads represents a scholarly advance over A. A. Ramanathan's 1978 translation for the Adyar Library and Research Centre (connected to the Theosophical Society in Madras). Ramanathan's introduction and rendition of the text pale in comparison to Olivelle's.

The importance that social and historical context play in Olivelle's method is evident in his introduction to his translation of The Upanisads (1996), which is part of Oxford University Press's World's Classics Series. This paperback edition is followed by a more deluxe edition, The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation (1998), which includes the English and Sanskrit texts on facing pages. The introduction is the same for both editions. Olivelle argues that these texts were composed at a time of great social, economic, and religious flux as Indian society moved from the ancient ritualism of the Vedas toward different religious ideas and institutions (3). The origin of these texts is not located by Olivelle solely within Kṣatriya social circles due to the complexity of the relationship between the two highest castes that could be cooperative or competitive: "The entire Brāhmanical ideology of society and the science and practice of ritual were designed, on the one hand, to enhance Kṣatriya power and, on the other, to ensure the recognition by the Kṣatriyas that the source of their power was the Brahmin" (1998, 11). Other contextual aspects involve the works' chronology and geographical setting, the prevailing Vedic rituals and cosmologies, and the ancient understanding of human physiology and psychology. A section called "cosmic connection" is intended
to discuss the importance of the practice of bandhu (connection, binding).

Olivelle’s translations of the Upanisads are models of lucidity and judicious organization and compare favorably to those of Hume (1931) and Radhakrishnan (1953), two older translations that are also widely used and highly regarded. If one compares the three translators on, for example, the Kena Upanisad (2.4), one finds that Hume gives a more literal translation of the passage on the value of knowing Brahman (highest reality); Radhakrishnan and Olivelle are also true to the meaning of the Sanskrit, while offering a more polished English rendering than Hume in this particular case. Radhakrishnan and Olivelle make some different choices in the English translation of Sanskrit terms. Radhakrishnan (1953, 586) translates, for instance, the beginning of the passage “When it is known through every state of cognition (pratibodha-viditam),” which Olivelle translates as “When one awakens to know it, one envisions it.” In the prologue to the Katha Upanisad (1.1), to cite another example, Hume is rather literal, while Olivelle’s translation reads clearly in an overall sense but proves problematic. Olivelle translates the father’s name as “Usân, the son of Vâjasravana,” whereas Hume and Radhakrishnan make it clear that the father of Nâciketas is named Vâjasravana. Hume renders “usân” as zeal (341), while Radhakrishnan translates the term as desirous (595). This is a perfect example of the kind of crucial choice facing a translator that can result in an alteration of the meaning of a passage or text. Disagreement among translators is a good lesson for students of religion, reminding them to be aware that any translation should be used with caution, even those that read as lucidly as Olivelle’s.

Each text is given a short introduction, an outline of its contents, and a translation with notes at the back of the book. Olivelle admits that his translation of the earlier Upanisads does not represent a critical edition because he did not attempt to assemble and compare the various versions of any of the particular texts (1998, xx). For Olivelle, a translation is always an interpretation. Furthermore, texts come to us already interpreted in the sense that they are accompanied often by formal commentaries and later commentaries on the primary commentaries. Olivelle’s translation is not intended to serve as a means of promoting religious truths but rather to elucidate India’s ancient history (1998, xxi). Since the Upanisads, like other ancient texts, represent a living reality, they must be distinguished from archaeological data. Olivelle states that such data cannot tell us why Brahmins deliberately include episodes that cast them in an unfavorable light and misled prior scholars to conclude that the texts were composed within the milieu of a Kṣatriya society. Such apparently disparaging episodes can be explained better by political, religious, economic, or literary reasons.

In addition to his work on the Upanisads, Olivelle extends his talents to a translation of the Pañcatantra: The Book of India’s Folk Wisdom (1997), which appears also in Oxford’s World’s Classics Series. More than just a collection of animal fables, this text represents a śāstra, a technical or scientific text. Dating from around 300 CE, this text can be identified more specifically as a nitiśāstra, a work about government or political science. In contrast to Franklin Edgerton (1924) with his preference for the location of composition in southwestern India, Olivelle argues for a northern origin (xxiii); in contrast to Hertel’s (1906) assertion that the title means “klugheitsfall” (cases of trickery), Olivelle agrees with Aartola (1955) that it means “The Five Topics,” which suggests that it must have been an abbreviation of a longer title (xiv). After examining themes in each of the five books, Olivelle again differs from Hertel and Edgerton about the so-called Machiavellian doctrine of deceit, cheating, and ruthlessness advocated by the text. Olivelle perceives a wider purpose of the text: “The Pañcatantra and its stories depict human life with all its ambivalences and contradictions, and that is its beauty and the reason for its popularity” (xxxii). He rejects the claim by Falk (1978) that the author of the text borrowed stories from the Mahābhārata and the Jātakas, modified these stories, reversed their original meaning, and intended to teach correct moral conduct, not Machiavellian politics. Olivelle finds Falk’s argument too simplistic, because it distorts the stories by claiming that the author wants to warn his readers about the dangers of modeling their behavior upon the heroes of the narratives (xxxi). Even though the text contains moral lessons, in Olivelle’s view, they embody both sides of a given moral/ethical issue in an attempt to convey the basic message “that craft and deception constitute the major art of government” (xxxv).

The Feminine and Symbolic Threads

Unlike many of his Indological predecessors, Olivelle is sensitive to the issues concerning the contributions and roles of women in Indian religious history. It seems fair to say that he would like to break from the androcentric model of humanity and recognize that humans represent two sexes, although he does not go as far as to advocate the androgynous model of humanity espoused from the feminist perspective by Rita Gross (1996, 20). Since the study of women has been neglected in Indian culture, Olivelle’s work suggests that he desires to make a contribution to rectifying this oversight by previous scholars.

Within the context of his study of the development of the āśrama system, Olivelle draws some lessons about the status of women by comparing the āśramas with other Brāhmaṇical institutions. The āśramas are presented as a spiritual path to a particular goal, and this path was denied to women. What we find in Brāhmaṇical theology is a blatant assertion of the spiritual superiority of men (1993, 188). Olivelle also calls attention to the roles of women in the Upanisads by noting that Gāṇḍi Vācaknavi and Maitreyi, spouse of the legendary teacher Yājñavalkya, participated in philosophical dialogues with other thinkers (1998, 12). This suggests an intellectual and pedagogical role for some women in ancient India. Unfortunately, he does not develop these types of observations from the perspective of a feminist scholar like Gross.

Olivelle does, however, attempt to expand more fully his observations about women in Indian culture in an essay devoted to the study of the term amṛtā (immortal) and the connections among the ancient notion of immortality, ways of achieving an immortal condition, and changing social conditions. Besides drawing on Carrither’s (1985) distinction between personne, which means to be a member of an ordered collectivity, and moi, a conception of a physical and mental being interacting with other moral beings within the context of a cosmos, Olivelle also uses Mary Douglas’s (1970) paradigm of grid and group in order to draw distinctions between men and women in India in terms of serving as instruments and agents. This enables Olivelle to draw a portrait of women serving as instruments at the personne pole and functioning strongly as agents and individuals with desires and roles independent of their connection to males at the moi pole (1997a, 430-31). Although the instrumentality of the mother is evident in her son as the physical and ritual continuation of the father, women are to be distinguished from other instruments because they are also ritual actors, even
though they are not independent ritual agents. Women gain immortality (amrātā) by adhering to their husbands. This kind of sensitivity and attention to topics of a topic for women in ancient Indian culture represents an attempt to address scholarly negligence by prior Indologists and to balance to some degree the overall portrait of a predominantly male-dominated culture.

The same type of balanced approach is evident in his informative essay on the cultural significance of hair in Indian culture. When men and women appear in public with loose and disheveled hair, for instance, they are attempting to manifest something about their social status, whereas shaving of the head can signify temporary or permanent separation. Indian widows fall into the second type of separation because of their polluting and inauspicious status. Not only is hair analogous to bodily waste, its symbolism is polygenetic or derives from many sources. This feature of the symbolism of hair possesses two consequences: 1) hair symbolism can have more than a single meaning in either the same or different context, and 2) multiple meanings of a symbol are not reducible to a primary source (1998b, 35). These two consequences have some important methodological repercussions for Olivelle. He is forced to recognize the circularity of his argument, but he tries to turn this to his advantage by claiming that his circular argument can be converted from a vicious circle to a hermeneutical one. By admitting that the so-called root meaning of a symbol is a fiction, he invokes a pragmatic aspect of his argument by stating that it is more or less adequate or useful to recognize the abstracted or extrapolated nature of this fiction. In a practical sense this means that one must look at the sources for the symbolism of hair, not only to analyze its root meaning but also to examine its complex of levels, and he finds that hair symbolism is connected to certain biological facts connected to sexual maturity, an unconscious connection between hair and sexuality, and its biological uniqueness in contrast to other bodily parts that do not grow continuously. Olivelle isolates three principles of hair symbolism that express something about social control, ritual separation, and the physical separation suggested by matted hair (1998b, 39-40). With his essay on hair and other works on asceticism, Olivelle recognizes along with Harpham (1987, xiv) that the human body bears both meaning and value and conveys many instructive cultural messages.

New Directions

Olivelle's early contributions to the study of Indian religion and culture focused on the ascetic and the practice of renunciation. This early scholarly work included textual studies of ascetic literature that will be an enduring contribution to Indology over the course of time. Like Harpham's (1987) contribution to the study of Western asceticism, Olivelle's studies of Indian asceticism raise the issue of the nature of culture by pointing to the fact that asceticism can either endorse or oppose the prevailing culture of its context. Overall, there is a certain irony embodied in Olivelle's work on asceticism because he uses hermeneutic tools to uncover cultural figures who withdrew from the world and often concealed themselves.

Although some of his earlier scholarly interests remain, the 1990s mark a turn by Olivelle to other subjects. In a sense, Olivelle's textual work on the Upanisads represents a continuation of his earlier contributions to the study of asceticism, as does his textual work on the Vaitdharmasamuccaya of Yādava Prakāśa. The Āśrama System: History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution (1993), which won the American Academy of Religion's Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in the historical category in 1994, both continues Olivelle's scholarship in the area of Indian asceticism and branches out in new directions. The change is especially evident in his translation and informative introduction to the Padacanātra, which is a treatise on the art of government and not a mere collection of innocent animal fables. This project enables Olivelle to examine such themes as the art of dissolving friendships and political alliances with the intention of promoting one's self-interest. He also explores the value of alliances between groups with different amounts of power and skill, distinct natures, and different habitats. Other themes focus on external threats to state security, deception, appropriate timing for declaring war, the dangers associated with hasty actions, sagacious lessons about being careful, and the impotence of the king without the assistance of a competent and wise minister.

In an essay that presents a critique of Louis Dumont's (1970) view of the hierarchical nature of the opposition between purity and impurity in Indian society, Olivelle, using a philological and historical approach, shows that this distinction tends not to be applied to groups but rather to those individuals who have lost purity and need to recover it within a context of moral and criminal law; the distinction between pure and impure "lends little support to a theory which makes relative purity the foundation of social stratification" (1999a, 20). In fact, the textual evidence supports the position of Mary Douglas (1966) rather than Dumont because the opposition between pure and impure is relational. Moreover, evaluative concepts manifest a concern for the integrity of physical and classificatory boundaries. When the boundaries of the human body are broken and internal substances cross the boundaries, a person becomes impure. Thus, it is important to maintain the integrity of the human body according to the pre-established boundaries set by the culture. Despite this fundamental agreement with Douglas, Olivelle criticizes her claim that intention plays a role in ethical rules but not in rules of purity: "This, I believe, is mistaken. In Dharma discourse not only are terms for impurity and immorality often interchangeable, but intentionality is central also to rules of impurity, although its role there is in many ways different from its role in ethics" (1999a, 23). The rules and practices pertaining to impurity in the Dharma literature resemble a ritual apparatus rather than a social ideology, although rules about impurity sustain and reinforce the given social structures or boundaries. Overall, Olivelle sees purity and impurity (rightly, I believe) as process more than stasis.

In a forthcoming work, Olivelle offers an annotated translation of the Dharmasūtras. In the near future, he plans to provide the first critical edition of the Manusmṛti ("Laws of Manu"), which will be a major comparative and philological endeavor. Olivelle also wants to examine images of the body in ancient India, a theme that he has already begun to explore with his work on ascetics and the statements that ascetics make through their bodies. These plans suggest that Olivelle will make new contributions to Indology without abandoning the themes and concerns of his earlier scholarship.

In addition to the themes of asceticism and renunciation that run through much of Olivelle's work, his scholarship is textually grounded and addressed to specific topics within Indology. Overall, his scholarship is not driven by any apparent apologetic impulse, hidden theological viewpoint, or political agenda. It is empathetic toward its subjects, sensitive to hermeneutical issues, sagacious in its historical judgments. Because Olivelle does not adopt any postmodern fad in scholarship, some may think that his work appears a bit staid. Such a conclusion would be misleading. Even
when Olivelle examines ancient texts that have been studied by many other scholars, he manages to contribute something new to the subject or to give the reader a new perspective on a particular subject or problem in hermeneutics. Like such predecessors as Renou, Zaehner, Zimmer, Radhakrishnan, and Gonda, Olivelle’s contributions to Indology give students and scholars much to ponder with respect to Indian culture.

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