RELIGION AND IDENTITY IN SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND
Cultural, Historical and Textual Studies of South Asian Religions

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RELIGION AND IDENTITY IN SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF PATRICK OLIVELLE

Edited by Steven E. Lindquist
The first birth is from the mother and the second is at the student’s girding. At the latter birth, the Sāvitrī verse is his mother, while the teacher is said to be his father.

Vasiṣṭhadharmaśūtra 2.3
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I have always thought it was an unfortunate cliché to start an introduction to a well-known individual by stating that such a person “needs no introduction.” More than once, when someone has ventured forth with this sort of beginning, I have silently asked, “Then why are you here?” Of course, the irony of all armchair criticism is that it turns itself on the accuser should he or she be placed in a similar position and that position, I can firmly attest, is uncomfortable indeed.

If Patrick Olivelle himself does not need an introduction to the reading audience, this volume certainly does. It would be disingenuous, however, to separate the two and simply avoid the difficulty of introducing a person who is so well known, as each contributor in this volume has been directly influenced by Olivelle both personally and professionally. All of the contributors in this volume have worked directly with Olivelle in some fashion, most having done so in the classroom. I am sure these contributors could all share anecdotes of Olivelle’s soft reproaches to a mangled Sanskrit translation, his parental sternness when grammar or historical context is misunderstood, his magnanimous attitude in advice and criticism, and his unflagging support for his students, whether they are aspiring Sanskritists or whether their research specializations lay elsewhere. The few contributors who were not directly Olivelle’s students have known him through his numerous publications and have similarly sought his academic expertise and guidance in their work.

In the conception of this volume, it was decided early on that the most fitting tribute to this great scholar was not a Festschrift of senior Sanskrit scholars (itself, a long-standing and noble tradition), but a

* I would like to thank the series editor, Federico Squarcini, for his support and encouragement for this volume. The authors also deserve acknowledgment, not only for their fine contributions, but also for their diligence and patience.
volume which reflects his diverse influence as both a scholar and a teacher of a younger generation. Many participants in this volume are new professionals in their respective fields and their influence on the field of Asian Studies is fast emerging. The more senior participants come not only from South Asian Studies, but also Central and East Asian Studies, and are firmly established in their own rights.

Olivelle, Sanskrit, and the Study of South Asia

With my own accusatory question in the back of my mind, coupled with the fact that introductions always rehearse at least some information that is well known, I will not attempt to “introduce” Patrick Olivelle to the audience of this volume. Rather my goal is simply to augment and remind the audience of what it already knows. I do not think it is hyperbole to state that Olivelle’s work is known to anyone and everyone working on ancient and classical India as well as to those who teach religions of India more broadly. Whether that knowledge is through his monographs, his five critical editions, his eleven erudite and flowing book-length translations, his five edited volumes, or his more than fifty articles (not to mention dozens of encyclopedia and dictionary entries), those working in the history, language, and religion of early India are well aware of his work. Olivelle is not only exceptionally prolific and wide-ranging in his interests, but he is also a model scholar who can speak to different audiences, yet remain historically sensitive, philologically rigorous, and thematically relevant to the expanse of Indological and religious inquiry.

While the term “Indology” has fallen out of fashion as of late—sometimes dismissed as an obscure facet of historical linguistics or otherwise criticized as a regionally specific subset of Orientalism—Olivelle’s work stands solidly in a European intellectual lineage of professional Indology, exemplified in the historical and philological rigor of his training, first at Oxford University and then at the University of Pennsylvania under the tutelage of Ludo Rocher. This rigor is most clearly seen in his several critical editions of dharmasāstra texts and his scholarly editions of other texts, such as the Upaniṣads. While editions

1 A short biography and an appraisal of Olivelle’s work through 1999 is already the subject of a detailed review (Olson 2000).
2 In particular, see his work in the Oxford Classics series, where he has published seminal translations, often accompanied by separate scholarly editions with the Sanskrit originals on opposing pages. Such translations should be a model for both specialized and popular translations—straightforward, but detailed introductions that do not oversimplify, accurate and clear translations with a flair for readability, and finally copious notes that are up to date and academically rigorous, yet do not intrude on the easy readability of the text as a whole.
3 A bibliography of Olivelle’s major works is found at the end of this introduction.
4 For example, see Inden (1990). Inden’s work, however, has been the subject of criticism (e.g., Halbfass 1997; Smith 2005), not the least of which is that his definition of Indology variously encompasses professional academic Indologists, Western philosophers without significant training in India, and British amateur Indophiles.
of these texts have been available in some fashion to Western scholars for a long time, their importance within their respective traditions and in the history of early India is hard to overstate. It has become clear in retrospect, as Olivelle notes in several of his introductions and articles, that most of these previous editions are less than ideal—scholars have sometimes emended the texts against manuscript evidence, have relied upon previous editions and very few manuscripts, have not properly constituted a critical apparatus, or have produced translations that have not stood the test of time as readable and accurate. Olivelle’s critical editing of texts, particularly of the dharma literature, is unparalleled in the number of manuscripts collated (the most important marker of quality of a critical edition), the care with which he considers variations and their significance, and his close analysis of problematic passages in light of the manuscript evidence and the latest scholarly exegesis. Olivelle’s Manu’s Code of Law (2005) should be a model, albeit extremely difficult to emulate, of not only the care and hard work needed to construct such an edition, but also the revolutionary benefits that arise from that labor (such as Olivelle’s novel argument about Manu as an author or the dating and interrelation of various dharma texts). Clearly, such fundamental work by Olivelle will be, like much of the work by his predecessors that he builds upon, the benchmark for work in these areas for the next several generations of scholars. I suspect that Olivelle’s general humble nature, evidenced in his critical respect towards the generations of scholars that came before him, would compel him to add that he fully expects his own translations to be superseded in the course of time. Similar, though, to Olivelle’s Manu’s Code of Law appearing well over a century after Bühler, it will be longer than this before there is any perceived need for new comprehensive translations of many of these works. His critical editions are definitive and will certainly remain so.

Though Olivelle has focused a significant amount of his scholarly endeavors on the painstaking work of critical editing, his popularity beyond Indology comes from his ability to speak to a wide range of audiences while maintaining a faithfulness to his Indological lineage. In this sense, his work is the best of what Indology has to offer to the wider academic disciplines concerned with South Asia. The appreciation of Olivelle’s work is easily seen in the number of accolades he has received from the academy at large: the Association of Asian Studies’

5 One broad criticism of critical editions is that such editions privilege a particular version of the text over another and are thus inherently suspect and perhaps should be abandoned. There is no doubt that a critical edition privileges the reconstituted text based on the assumption of an Urtext from which other versions are thought to have emerged, but to suggest that critical editions should thus not be undertaken is seriously misguided. Unlike non-critical editions and translations, the main scholarly benefit of a critical edition is the critical apparatus (along with a stemma codica), a means by which several versions of a text are simultaneously made publicly available. The problem then, to my mind, is not with critical editions themselves, but rather with how some people use them.
A.K. Ramanujan Prize for Translation (1998), the American Academy of Religion’s Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in the Historical category (1994), several fellowships (including the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Guggenheim, the American Institute of Indian Studies, the Smithsonian Institution, and the American Council of Learned Societies) and various visiting positions. Represented in the prestigious awards that Olivelle has received, the dizzying array of conferences he presents at, and the various offices he has held in learned societies, Olivelle’s work has directly impacted not only linguistics and religious studies of South Asia, but also history, anthropology, and the social sciences.

If there has been any significant criticism of the field of Indology from South Asian area studies more broadly, it has been that philologically-oriented studies of India have tended to produce works of intense specialization which have remained, at least in classical studies, rather immune to recent theoretical trends in academia, particularly in terms of theory or application of modern and post-modern European or North American philosophical thinking. With the rise of Area Studies, and more recently Cultural Studies, there has been a progressive blurring of the lines of disciplinary boundaries and an increased emphasis on theory. No doubt this is a positive development in many ways, as regional expertise cannot be confined by parochial limitations of a region, language, or religion, but it also cannot and should not be confined by theoretical approaches. A rise in an emphasis on method and theory and a decline in the “nuts and bolts” of cultural study (i.e., language and history), however, could lead to the “throwing of the baby out with the bath water.” This fear, at least for some, is that the increasing emphasis on theory and the blurring of disciplinary boundaries could lead to destruction of those lines altogether, where “culture” can be taken as some sort of universal, and context is given a secondary role at best.

Olivelle has always been open to new methods and theories, but has placed the most value in those which have direct practical application in the investigation of historically situated texts and practices. He began his career in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington (1974-1991, Chair from 1984-1990), as the only South Asianist among a diverse crowd of religionists. It is in this context, I imagine, that he learned to speak to a broad audience of colleagues, while advocating for the importance and distinctiveness of Indian traditions and history.

Olivelle shifted in 1991 to Texas and his leadership within the Department of Asian Studies at The University of Texas at Austin is a

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6 The declining importance of philology, albeit defined much more broadly than most who call themselves “philologists” would probably prefer, has recently and cogently been discussed by Pollock (2009). It is important to note, however, that philology has not suffered a universal decline in the disciplines as it retains a more secure position in Religious Studies than in other fields.
testament to the blurring of boundaries in the study of Asia, but in a way that retains the distinctiveness and value of the different disciplines brought together under one institutional roof. Olivelle served as the Chair of the Department of Asian Studies from 1994-2007 as well as the Director of the Center for Asian Studies (now the South Asia Institute) from 1994-2000. During this period, the program grew swiftly, hiring approximately twenty professors and lecturers and expanding the language offerings from six to ten. The University of Texas at Austin’s program now includes forty specialists in these languages during all time periods, and includes seventeen affiliated faculty from ten departments and colleges. The University of Texas at Austin’s Department of Asian Studies now houses one of the largest South Asian Studies programs in all of North America and much of that is thanks to the leadership of Olivelle. It is known not only as a premiere center for the study of Sanskrit, but also for history, art history, anthropology, and literature of South Asia. While Olivelle would be the first to say that it is the faculty that has made the program what it is, his own hand was central in what it has become.

Olivelle’s Scholarship and This Volume

In terms of texts, Olivelle’s body of work is largely concerned with two broad categories of Sanskrit literature: texts concerned with asceticism and those concerned with law (dharma). Another way to view his body of work is that there is an overriding theme of investigating the constitution and constraint of the individual body (particularly in regard to asceticism, but also gender) and the constitution and constraint of the social body (from the householder up to the king). Such a characterization, though, could be misleading if it was not clearly understood that, for Olivelle, defining the individual or the social is, at its base, a historically situated task, not just within a limited time span or region, but within particular communities or authors that are composing such texts. In particular, one of Olivelle’s driving motivations appears to be getting “behind the texts” to explore and elucidate the social and ideological world constructed by real people “on the ground.”

All of the papers in this volume, in some sense, build on the themes that have concerned Olivelle throughout his career. Like the best of all teachers, however, Olivelle neither guided his students to simply replicate his own interests nor was his assistance to younger scholars limited to classical India or even South Asia. The contributors in this volume stand as a testament to the diversity of his influence. As such there has been no conscious attempt at thematic unity in this volume, but a unity of sorts has emerged on its own, which seems to me fittingly appropriate to what will become known as Olivelle’s legacy. In particular, all contributions to this volume are committed to linguistic and historical rigor, combined with a sensitivity to how the study of Asia has been changing over the several decades since Olivelle began his long and
illustrious career. It is clear in all cases that these contributions build on the long and distinguished work of those who came before them and, rather than jettisoning their predecessors’ hard work, move the ideas, theories, and areas of study forward.

Many of the contributions of this volume are concerned with the construction of religious and cultural identity (whether among Brahmins, Buddhists, Dalits, or Muslims of Iran and Central Asia). Several are concerned particularly with the problem of historical reconstruction and textual interpretation (whether of a figure like Yājñavalkya, the identification of Jain deities, the linguistic role of mantras, the literary function of secrecy, or the role of the snātaka or “bath-graduate”). Some focus on the earliest material (such as the Rg and Atharvaveda), while others are decidedly more recent (such as the rise of Hindutva ideology or a newly formulated version of an Upaniṣadic story). Law and asceticism are reoccurring topics throughout the volume.

The volume begins, in a sense, where Olivelle’s career began and spreads out geographically and temporally from there. Section I, “Word, Text, and Context,” consists of a series of papers concerned with the intersection of the literary and the historical especially in ancient India, but also in the medieval ascetic text of Vidyārāṇya. Section II, titled “Custom and Law,” more clearly represents Olivelle’s scholarly emphasis on dharma traditions since the late 1990s. Section III, “Buddhist and Jain Selves and Others,” points to Olivelle’s influence in the study of ascetic traditions outside of classical Hinduism. The final section, “(Re)considering Geographical and Conceptual Boundaries,” branches the furthest out, both temporally and geographically, considering not only Sufi, Jewish, and Manichaean traditions, but also nationalism, Dalit literary criticism, and the Hindu diaspora.

Dallas, August 2010

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