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## BOOK REVIEWS

### ASK YOURSELVES IN YOUR OWN HEARTS . . .

*The Rig Veda: An Anthology.* One hundred and eight hymns, selected, translated and annotated by WENDY DONIGER O'FLAHERTY. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981. Pp. 343.

After her *Hindu Myths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), W. D. O'Flaherty has issued another translation of Sanskrit texts which should be a part of the personal library of any student in history of religions: an anthology of the Ṛgveda. She has made the selection with skill, presenting readers (both nonspecialists and specialists) with some of the most important hymns of the ten *maṇḍalas*, grouped according to a typological classification (Creation; Death; Sacrifice; Gods: Agni, Soma, Indra, the Maruts, Solar Gods, Gods of Sky and Earth, Varuṇa, Rudra and Viṣṇu; Realia; Women; Incantations and Spells). The 108 hymns (108, being  $2^2 \times 3^3$  or  $4 \times 27$ , is a magic number in the Indian tradition) represent some 10 percent of the total of 1,028 hymns of the ten *maṇḍalas* of the Ṛgveda. These hymns cannot usually be understood without the commentaries of Sāyaṇa and other ancient Indian paṇḍits. If we look at the Max Müller edition (without translation), which is no less reliable than others, we can understand why very few scholars have attempted a complete translation of the Ṛgveda: as a matter of fact, the *Samhitā*, together with the commentary of Sāyaṇa, covers four volumes of some 2,000 pages (see *Rigveda-samhitā: The Sacred Hymns of the Brāhmins, together with the Commentary of Sāyaṇācārya*, ed. Max Müller, 2d ed. [London: Henry Frowde, 1890]). That is why, with the exception of Geldner's German translation, the most reliable modern translations of the Ṛgveda—W. O'Flaherty's being one of them—are only partial. However, W. O'Flaherty has, in her present translation, a wider scope than other scholars—Louis Renou, for instance, whose *Hymnes spéculatifs du Véda* are a

model of accuracy—who prefer to limit their choice to one thematic set of hymns.

Length is not the only reason why scholars are usually loath to translate the R̥gveda. Most of the hymns are quite cryptic, and the ancient commentaries fail to establish a single reliable interpretation. An outstanding scholar in Sanskrit might thus publish a literal translation which makes absolutely no sense; to come to the *meaning* of the text, other instruments besides perfect mastery of Sanskrit grammar are required. And the temptation is great to seek a universal hermeneutical key whose purpose is to simplify the whole Vedic puzzle. This is what Max Müller did, reducing most of the Vedic material to a metaphoric description of the solar track in the sky and of meteorological phenomena interfering therewith. This led to the farce (*kottabos*) of the Dublin students who, applying to Max Müller's own career his own exegetical principles, demonstrated that this scholar coming from the East (Germany) to the West (England) never existed: as a matter of fact, his existence was only a solar myth. . . .

Aware of all these difficulties, W. O'Flaherty shows us that the meaning of the Vedic hymns is to be sought on different levels. Many of the hymns have a riddle structure that is impossible to understand without a commentary, though this may remain succinct. For instance, who might be "this beloved grey priest (who) has a middle brother who is hungry and a third brother with butter on his back" (1.164)? The three brothers are the three sacrificial fires: the oblation fire ("with his beard grey of smoke"), the southern fire, and the domestic fire ("that is 'fed' with the butter oblation"). The meaning of this riddle was relatively easy. However, most of the hymns contain references to symbolic gestures which are part of rituals, and since many of these rituals are unknown today, the reference is completely lost forever.

On the other hand, the Vedic universe of images is puzzling for a modern reader: how are we to understand the unique image of two births productive of one another ("From Aditī, Dakṣa was born, and from Dakṣa Aditī was born": 10.72,4)? The bold sexual metaphors for sacrifice are perhaps more comprehensible than the idea that the sacrifice itself prepares a chariot for the journey to the netherworld (10.135). And, last but not least, puns and double meanings abound in the R̥gveda, making of its reading and translation an intellectual exercise which needs constant patience and perspicacity. For instance, puns (*sleṣa*) upon the word *pada* are frequent (1.164; 4.5): "To know the verse (*padam*) is to know how to follow the footprint (*padam*) along the path (*padam*) to the sacred place (*padam*) of the sun-bird" (p. 113, *in re* 4.5). As an example of double meaning, I would quote the following (10.82,7): "Those who recite the hymns are glutted with the pleasures of life," which means, as the translator notes, that "the priests are glutted with the life they have stolen from the sacrificial beast and with the high life of luxury they have bought with their undeserved fees."

Although she is aware that the religious and social universe of the Vedic man is completely different from our own, W. O'Flaherty believes that, even in the cases when the references to unknown rituals are undecipherable, "the human concerns . . . are vividly accessible to us, whatever the ritual may have been" (p. 52). I am afraid this is a bit too optimistic. To find an answer to the

Vedic riddles, a learned priest of Vedic times would certainly have followed the advice of the R̥gveda (10.81,4): “You deep thinkers, ask yourselves in your own hearts. . . .” But a modern reader might look thousands of times into his own heart and find nothing. That is why, rather than consulting the heart—which has never been a good oracle—he would do better to take in his hands a reliable translation such as that provided by O’Flaherty. This is the only way to understand something of the R̥gveda: by having a faithful guide in one’s own library.

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### WALKING PART OF THE WAY WITH WACH

*Die Religionswissenschaft Joachim Wachs.* By RAINER FLASCHE. Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann, Band 35. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978.

Joachim Wach led the way in defining *Religionswissenschaft* as an independent discipline among the various components of religious studies and in influencing its establishment in universities and colleges throughout the world. It is interesting that, although his most important scholarly contributions were produced at Leipzig before he moved to America in 1935, his influence has been far more powerful in the English-speaking world than in Germany, and most studies of his *Religionswissenschaft* have been written by his students at Chicago, Joseph Kitagawa in particular. One welcomes, therefore, Rainer Flasche’s book-length investigation of Wach.

Flasche presented this work as his *Habilitationsschrift* at Marburg in 1975, under the descriptive title, “Die Religionswissenschaft Joachim Wachs: Ihre Entwicklung, Vertiefung und Überwindung—dargestellt an seinem Gesamtwerk—und die Möglichkeiten einer Weiterführung seiner religionssystematischen Ansätze.” The book falls into three major parts. First comes an overview of Wach’s intellectual background and his life as a teacher and researcher. The second part is a detailed study of the development and results of Wach’s theories of *Religionswissenschaft*. And the third section presents a critical discussion of problems in Wach and the possibilities of using his methods still today.

While Flasche does not present much biographical data which are not already known through Kitagawa’s descriptions, he does offer a convenient overview of all of Wach’s writings. Dividing them into philosophical, *religionswissenschaftliche*, and theological spheres, he lists the works chronologically and gives a digest of the content and purpose of each. He also provides a convenient summary of Wach’s intellectual background, holding that Troeltsch, Dilthey, and Georg Simmel were the major influences in Wach’s development. One misses other important influences like August Boeckh; still, Flasche provides a helpful summary of each of these three and shows how their thought recurs in Wach’s own work, especially in his three-volume *Das Verstehen*.