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### Book Review

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David L. Haberman, *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 265 pp., \$35.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-19-992916-0.

To persons who travel to India, sacred trees are common features of the urban and rural landscape. They may appear near a temple or at the edge of a crowded market. Their position on the margin of our attention reflects their position in scholarship on the religions of India. Until David Haberman's latest book they have not been the focus of scholarly attention. When we do observe them it is frequently to the comments in the literature of the religions of humankind that our minds intuitively turn. These sources are not especially illuminating. In his *Manual of the Science of Religion* of 1891, P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye states that the manner in which trees were worshiped was various: 'The roots were sprinkled with sacrificial blood; food and other gifts were hung on its branches; there were rag-trees hung with all sorts of shreds and threads. People also addressed trees for oracles, and imagined they heard them in the sighing of the tree-tops (Chantepie 1891: 93). Haberman's study of sacred trees moves what Chantepie and others have called 'dendrolatry' from the margins of scholarly attention to the place it merits, especially in the study of the religious traditions of India.

Haberman explains that the title of *People Trees* relates to the content of the book in a number of ways. One is that the word pipal (the pipal tree) in Hindi is pronounced like the word people in English. Another is that in India the notion of the personhood of trees is commonly accepted, an issue he develops in the book. What was most striking is that the worship of trees is worship by ordinary people, unmediated by any professional elite. The people have direct access to the trees and worship them in their own way. The trees they venerate, then, are people trees.

To place his research in the context of the study of religion, Haberman begins with a look at tree worship as historically understood by the Western mind. He observes that for Edward B. Tylor, among the patriarchs of anthropology, the belief that spirit is present in non-human life is the very basis of 'primitive religion'. Sir James Fraser likewise argued that the 'primitive philosophy' he called animism tended to attribute to nature a principle of life like that with which early humans were most familiar, their own souls. Haberman states that while contemporary scholarship has rejected Tylor's evolutionary views, his ideas of what distinguishes the civilized from the primitive mind still obtains. The notion that a tree is a sentient being with whom one can have a meaningful relationship remains, he says, quite alien to most people in the West. While Tylor and Fraser celebrate this distinction, others, including Lynn White, Jr., and theologian Sallie McFague, question that boundary and explore its negative consequences in the abuse of the natural world. Haberman's exploration of the thought of such figures as David Hume, Auguste Comte, and W. Robertson Smith in establishing the nature of the 'primitive' provides useful insight into developments among Christian theologians that justified missionaries to India in promoting

Christianity as the religion of the civilized as opposed to the idolatry of the Hindus. In this context he examines a survival of the views of Comte and Hume in the contemporary work of Stewart Guthrie's famous *Faces in the Clouds* and the contemporary anthropologists who support his view, as well as those who have found weaknesses in this understanding of the essence of religion. Haberman observes that while the claim of animal sentience has become increasingly acceptable, the idea of sentience among trees remains less so. He questions that assumption.

Having piqued our curiosity about an actual living encounter with trees, Haberman takes us on a journey of exploration of the veneration of trees historically and around the world, an exploration more thorough and sympathetic than the treatment of dendrolatry in the writings of Tylor or Chantepie. He then settles into tree worship in contemporary India and especially in Benares where the majority of his field work was undertaken. He states that what is exceptional about tree worship in India is the long history of its uninterrupted practice that continues to the present day. While he refers frequently to ancient and medieval texts that support or illuminate the practice, it is to the views of the people that he most carefully attends. He notes that in India, while all trees are sacred, Puranic literature identifies five specific trees as being sacred: the Panchavati. Typically they are identified as the pipal, the banyan, the bel or wood apple tree, the amala or India gooseberry, and the neem. But he finds that in the worship of the people, the pipal, the neem, and the banyan have pride of place, and to them he devotes four successive chapters. Of these, the pipal is regarded as the most powerful of the sacred trees of India: the king of trees. But taking a clue from Rudolf Otto, he recognizes that the power of this tree has two aspects that merit the attention of two succeeding chapters.

The pipal tree, for example, is worshiped during the day as the visible form of Vasudeva or Vishnu or of all of the gods and goddesses and is besought for blessings for a good life or for appreciation for the benefits the tree provides. This is the beatific feature of the power of the tree, the *mysterium fascinans*. The other side of power is expressed at night as the *mysterium tremendum*. People reported that while they worship the pipal during the day, they do not go near it at night. For then it is the abode of ghosts or of Shani, the god Saturn. To get at the cultural expression of this ambivalence toward the pipal tree, Haberman sometimes brings in stories from such popular sources as comic books, like the one his daughter discovered at a book stall in Benares. One such story is of a policeman who is worried that a notorious criminal whom he had sent to jail had escaped and was threatening revenge on him and his family. The policeman notes that the front door of his house is old and weak and in the interest of security should be replaced. He makes a contract with a carpenter who replaces the door with one from the wood of a pipal tree. The policeman now assures his wife that they will be protected by the gods residing in the wood. But they are not. The door opens for the criminal who then shoots and kills the policeman's wife. The policeman later discovers that the wood of this tree has caused death and destruction wherever it has been used. It turns out that a year prior to these events a young woman of his wife's family had fallen in love with a college classmate and had eloped to marry him. The elders of the family did not forgive the offence but hanged the couple from the pipal tree from which the policeman's door and the many other destructive objects had been made. After the murder, the family had cut down the tree and sold it to the lumber yard. The young reader of this little book learns that the souls of the young couple had resided in the tree and through its wood were exacting

revenge on this family on the anniversary of their murder. The succeeding chapters on the neem tree, known often locally as the village pharmacy, and on the banyan, the tree of immortality, are as rich in detail and as full of intrigue. What keeps the reader's attention is the constant reference to Haberman's own experiences and conversations. He not only reports his findings, he brings the reader into the conversation from which these insights are derived.

In his final chapter, his arboreal reflections, Haberman returns with the benefit of the explorations through which he has taken the reader to some of the questions with which he began. He states that one of the joys and challenges of living for an extended period in another culture is finding oneself among people who view the world quite differently. It gives a glimpse of how the world might look beyond the depiction fashioned by one's own culture. So what about tree worship? Is it an expression of a primitive mentality, the childhood of humankind? Haberman invites us, instead of employing the culturally loaded concept of progress, to evaluate the behavior of other peoples, to explore difference without hierarchy. India is by no means a primitive country, and those who practice tree worship are by no means restricted to the least technologically informed of its citizens. Haberman invites us to consider not only that Indian views of trees are as valid as the prevailing American views, but that the Indian view might have something to offer to contemporary Americans. Indian tree worship encourages us to reconsider that aspect of animism that regards human life as sentient and imbued with spirit, but recognizes that humans share these characteristics with non-human others.

In this book David Haberman has given profound insight into the depth of meaning of a form of religion that has until now evaded serious scholarly attention. It discredits the perspective that purports to stand above the worship of trees by attending to the perspective of the people who are so engaged. It is a book that will engage both students and professionals in the field of the history and philosophy of religion and will lead to a questioning of some of the tacit assumptions with which we tend to view the other.

#### *Reference*

Chantepie de la Saussaye, P.D. 1891. *Manual of the Science of Religion* (trans. Beatrice S. Colyer-Fergusson; New York: Longmans Green).

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