

## Review

*When a Goddess Dies: Worshipping Mā Ānandamayī after her Death*, by Orianne Aymard. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xi + 348 pp., £65.00 (hb), £19.99 (pb). ISBN 978-0-19936-861-7 (hb), 978-0-19936-862-4 (pb).

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Aymard's study, a revision of her 2008 doctoral dissertation, explores what she terms the 'postmortem worship' of the Bengali female Hindu guru, Anandamayī Ma (1896–1982). Drawing upon fieldwork that included interviews with Indian, North American, and European followers, she is particularly interested in the question of how a community of worshippers continues without the living guru as guide from both institutional and experiential perspectives. As such, the work adds to existing scholarship on Anandamayī Ma, such as Lisa Hallstrom's *Mother of Bliss: Anandamayī Ma* (2008), a study of the guru's life and teachings. Aymard's book raises important questions about the role of the guru in both Hindu and transnational contexts, the relationship between gender and guruship, and the process of community formation and maintenance in the absence of the founding guru. Aymard's ethnographic work provides a wealth of fascinating information on how people from diverse backgrounds were drawn to Anandamayī Ma, and have continued to be inspired by her in the years after her death. Aymard's choice to de-emphasize the specific socio-historical context of Anandamayī Ma's communities of followers however, in some ways detracts from her overall effort to understand how a community fares without its founding figure.

Aymard first describes the 'postmortem cult' surrounding Anandamayī Ma, and subsequent chapters address the role of relics in Hindu traditions, how Anandamayī Ma's followers have sought to interpret and understand her death, how they have experienced her presence since her death, concluding with a chapter on the 'sustainability of the postmortem cult', in which Aymard argues, along with many of Anandamayī Ma's followers, that the cult is in decline. The opening chapters draw broad comparisons with practices and beliefs surrounding sainthood and relics in other traditions such as South Asian Sufism, Christianity, and Buddhism, and also note practices surround-

ing *sannyasis* and entombment, as well as views within Hinduism on how exactly the death of a guru, who presumably has control over illness, aging, and death, may be understood. Aymard's interviews suggest that European and North American followers adopted an Advaitic approach to their relationships with Anandamayi Ma, and were therefore better able to accept her death than Indian devotees, while Hindu devotees' relationships were built along *bhakti* or devotional lines, the result being that they were therefore more deeply affected by the guru's death. Aymard often draws comparisons with South Asian Sufi practices, and compares devotees' statements to passages from the Upanisads and other Sanskrit texts, as well as components of the movements that have developed around other Hindu gurus from a wide range of times and places (e.g. Eknath, Amrtanandamayi Ma) but without making specific historical connections or noting differences in region and the social makeup of various gurus' communities.

Aymard builds her analysis using theoretical models from the works of Mircea Eliade (the sacred and the profane), Max Weber (charisma and its routinization), van Gennep (rites of passage), and Rudolf Otto and William James (religious experience), with occasional mention of others such as Pierre Bourdieu, as well as some critiques of James. While these are classic works, the analysis could have been enriched with consideration of more recent theoretical perspectives, particularly with respect to gender and caste, both of which are clearly key points of contention among Anandamayi Ma's followers.

Emphasizing the 'inward turn' and the experiential nature of Anandamayi Ma's cult, Aymard chose not to explore the social, economic, and political context of Anandamayi's cult on the grounds that it was not central to her focus on 'death and modes of transmission within the postmortem cult of gurus' (pp. 33-34). Many readers, however, will likely wish for just such a contextual framework, for Aymard's interviews and her own analysis suggest strongly that there are social, economic, and political factors that have had powerful impact on the fate of Anandamayi Ma's followers in the decades since her death in 1982. European and North American followers, for example, women in particular, have been excluded from participation in some activities by orthodox Brahmin leaders within the Anandamayi Ma movement. Other possibilities that emerge from followers' comments include the tensions between Indian and non-Indian followers, as well as differences of opinions regarding caste and gender practices at different ashrams. Indian and non-Indian followers seem to have very different approaches to understanding Hindu concepts and textual traditions, as well as different approaches to ritual practices. The nature of gender discrimination in a movement dedicated to a female guru is clearly deserving of further attention. Similarly, the transnational nature of the community, as well as the impact of social media and other forms of communication, is significant. These are all matters that presumably have an effect on the postmortem cult, and its seeming decline.

Aymard, however, argues for the primacy of a transhistoric, atemporal experience of Anandamayi Ma (p. 182) as the central focus of her analysis.

Unfortunately there are inconsistencies and errors in transliteration and punctuation throughout the book; while some names are presented with diacritics and others without, many names and terms have some but not all the diacritics necessary for a full transliteration.

The ethnographic data from which Aymard draws is rich, and provides intriguing insights into how a range of people were drawn to Anandamayi Ma both while she was alive, and also after her death (the nature of attraction to a guru who is alive versus one who is not is in and of itself an important question). The chapter entitled 'Presence of the Guru' presents engaging accounts of followers' dreams, visions, and receipt of posthumous guidance from Anandamayi Ma. Aymard's interviews also illustrate that while there are some topics on which Anandamayi's followers are largely in agreement, there are other points on which they have a broad range of divergent views, which in and of itself might be a factor in the movement's failure to thrive in the years since Anandamayi's death.