

## Review

*Attending Kṛṣṇa's Image: Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Mūrti-sevā as Devotional Truth*, by Kenneth R. Valpey. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006. xiv + 225 pp., £80 (hb). ISBN 0-415-38394-3.

This book concentrates on image worship (*mūrti-sevā*) in the Indian theistic tradition of *bhakti* or devotion to Kṛṣṇa propagated by the medieval saint Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1533), who is considered by his still expanding worldwide followers—Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas—to be an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa as well as Kṛṣṇa's divine consort Rādhā.

In the Introduction, the author draws attention to a major reason for focusing on image worship in this tradition: his own involvement in it. As a committed adherent of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, but also as an academic, the author recognizes the need to address the issue of 'boundary crossing' that his study inevitably involves. Indeed, such a position—one that attempts to combine devotional commitment with the rigour of scholarly pursuit—tends to be seen by academics in the study of religion as contradictory or as suspicious, as the author indicates. But Valpey offers at the outset an argument in defence of his approach, claiming that a committed religious stance need not involve promotion of the faith and that, as a member of a religious community, an 'insider'-scholar may be able to offer depth of understanding difficult to achieve from the alternative standpoint of an 'outsider'-scholar. Whether or not Valpey is correct in making such an assertion, his endeavour appears to be well executed. Not only does his study deliberately avoid any kind of religious advocacy, but in terms of sensitivity to Caitanya Vaiṣṇava beliefs and practices the study provides much insight, aided as it is throughout Valpey's book by engagement of the notion of 'religious truth'.

This notion, which emerged from the Comparative Religious Ideas Project at Boston University in the mid-1990s for a variety of analytical purposes, such as comparison of claims to truth and analysis of universal patterns of belief found in the world religions, is a central orienting principle in Valpey's book. However, the author extends the use of this concept, as he employs it not merely to assess how Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas understand their own truth claims, expressions and practices, but also to go beyond projectionist theories of religion, as well as to ensure that the full force of practitioners' own religious convictions is taken seriously. And this explicit attempt by the author to privilege the authority of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas truth claims enables readers to gain genuine appreciation of the experiential reality, power and immediacy religious life holds for adherents of the tradition.

With regard to image worship, the book compares (and contrasts) practices at the famous Rādhāramaṇa shrine in Vrindavan, India with activities at the temple of Bhaktivedānta Manor near London in the UK. The book itself is divided into two parts, with Part 1 focusing on the former temple, and Part 2 concentrating on the latter, and this division facilitates understanding of the two temple communities, both in terms of their own distinctiveness and in terms of their similarities as well as their differences.

In Part 1, key religious texts pertinent to Caitanya Vaiṣṇava image worship are examined, and Valpey shows how these texts contextualize and organize such worship. At the Radharamana shrine, image worship informed by these texts is carried out by one family line of priests who have been custodians of the temple for over four centuries, the temple having been established by Gopala Bhatta, a close disciple of Caitanya and a celebrated Caitanyite theologian. This priestly family's attendance of the *mūrti* of Radharamana, who is seen by the priests and temple devotees as a manifestation of both Kṛṣṇa and Radha, tends to be insular in form and style, constituting what Valpey terms an 'embodied community', since priestly authority and activity here are essentially a function of birth and characterized by brahmanical hierarchical tradition. But this community, as Valpey further demonstrates, is equally sustained by the conviction of divine presence embodied in the very image of Radharamana.

In Part 2, the author examines how such conviction of the truth of divine presence in images, as well as belief in divine grace bestowed by Kṛṣṇa through the act of attending them, took on a new missionizing trend in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This trend, which the author argues developed largely as a response to the rise of Western modernity, but which would selectively embrace certain elements of it, led to the establishment of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism on Western soil in the form of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, now a global organization also known as the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness (ISKCON). Headed by ISKCON's charismatic founder, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism have succeeded in erecting temples throughout the West, such as the UK temple of Bhaktivedanta Manor, where Valpey has carried out many years of research. Here, as in all ISKCON temples and centres around the world, attending Kṛṣṇa's image is not associated with birth or heredity but is open to everyone, as Valpey shows, for Prabhupada placed emphasis on Kṛṣṇa's accessibility to all humanity, particularly in terms of worship of the deity in its *mūrti* form.

By focusing attention on the Radharamana and Bhaktivedanta Manor temple communities, Valpey offers a fascinating account of image worship in Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* worship tradition, an account that does not merely investigate Caitanya Vaiṣṇava scriptures, teachings and practices, but also Caitanya Vaiṣṇava origins, history and the various stances it has adopted in order to ensure its maintenance as well as to achieve renewal and reform. The book is a major contribution and will be of particular value to students and scholars of Indic religions. It will also be of value to a wider readership in the field of religious studies.

Graham Dwyer  
University of Winchester