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Book Review

Vanity Karma: Ecclesiastes, the *Bhagavad-gita*, and the Meaning of Life

by Jayadvaita Swami

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rigor which this one lacks; ultimately, this book reads more like a potpourri, a grab bag of topics rather than a sustained conversation.

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Vanity Karma: Ecclesiastes, the Bhagavad-gita and the Meaning of Life

Jayadvaita Swami

Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2015. 384 pages.

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In *Vanity Karma*, Jayadvaita Swami accomplishes a difficult task: producing a work that is widely accessible, personally engaging, and academically credible. Additionally, this book manages to occupy a rare literary niche that may be especially useful in the university classroom. Let me explain.

Books on Comparative Religion tend to fall into one of several genres. Most accessible are the ubiquitous non-academic monographs. A trip to your local bookstore (be it brick and mortar or virtual) will show that there is a seemingly endless supply of popular trade books comparing Hindu and Abrahamic scriptures, practices, and thought. Unfortunately, these books can vary widely in terms of readability, accountability to a tradition's actual teachings, and the authors' qualifications. One assumes

that the lay-reader seeking to engage a comparative study is not a scholar, but hoping to learn something new or stimulate an informed reflection. Perhaps they are a member of one religious group wanting to learn about another. Perhaps they have no religious affiliation whatsoever and are branching out to explore “religion” for the first time. For each of these audiences, locating a trustworthy and relatable author can be a significant challenge.

On the other hand, academic books are a constellation of worlds unto themselves. Each discipline and sub-discipline has very particular rules of style and lines of thought that must be adhered to. Religious Studies’ preference for a third person voice stands in stark contrast to the confessional and often first person voice found in many theological works. Although significantly different, both of these methodological approaches are equally legitimate and rigorous, and each makes contributions to their respective communities within agreed upon structures.

Vanity Karma is a book that could find a home in each of these categories. Jayadvaita Swami himself “is an American monk in the Indian tradition of Krishna spirituality. He has edited more than forty English volumes of Sanskrit wisdom literature. He travels and teaches in Africa, India, America, and Europe.”¹ As a professionally religious teacher who is well esteemed and in good standing, one can trust that his portrayal of the Bhagavad-Gita will be faithful to the teachings of both his organization and the tradition of Gaudiya Vaisnava Hindusim.

Jayadvaita Swami’s introduction tells us that this book is the product of a lifetime of personal reflection. We are taken back to the author’s youth, when existential questions first arose and gripped him. Beginning with a Reform Jewish temple classroom in New Jersey, he shares a brief autobiography of his classic seeker’s life. He lays out his reasoning, reflections, learnings, reachings out, and experiments. Turning points include a confrontational yet encouraging conversation with a Catholic priest, experimentation with psychedelic drugs, and eventually

¹ From the book cover.

finding a home in the emerging Krishna consciousness movement as a direct disciple of Bhaktivedanta Swami in 1968's New York.

After the introduction, we are treated to over 240 pages of systematic reflections on the entire book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) put in dialogue with words and principles existing both in the Bhagavad-gita and larger Hindu tradition. "...A commentary on a Jewish book from what might be called a Hindu perspective, and written by a born Jew who has crossed over to Hinduism" (p.12).

Equally important, is describing what this book is *not*. Jayadvaita Swami explicitly tells us that he is not a scholar, and is not writing an academic or traditional "comparative religion" book. He is not trying to demonstrate an underlying unity between the traditions or reframe Qohelet as a crypto-Hindu. He is also not claiming to represent a definitive Hindu perspective, but instead is simply offering the reflections of one man who has been personally moved by Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) while living as professionally Hindu for forty-five years. This is not a philological or exacting philosophical examination, and although alternative translations of some problematic words are provided, the nuances and implications of the Hebrew linguistic ideology are not discussed. Neither are the complexities of the texts' context and time of origin evaluated. Again, the author clearly states that he is not producing an academic work. His diction and writing style are not written in the specialized academic dialect; instead they are colloquial, straightforward, clear, and accessible to the lay reader.

So, why do I see academic value in this book? First, we still live in a world of religious and cultural tension. And while this book might not be useful for a classroom of technically minded graduate students specializing in scriptural analysis, it is certainly valuable for producing new insights and breaking down walls. Consider an average American (*Abrahamic-majority*) university or theological seminary where peaceful interreligious communication and understanding are articulated values. Many students have no knowledge of Hinduism and have never even met

a Hindu before, which can create a dangerous psychic breeding ground where caricatures, fears, and fantasies might grow. This book presents an opportunity to see into the heart and mind of an authentic, rational, sincere, and wholesome religious “other.” For the Hindu student, this book could be a valuable guided tour of a sacred text from an unfamiliar tradition. For the Religious Studies student with a working knowledge of both traditions, this book can be an enjoyable study in intertextuality and subject position. Further, as scholastic trends continue to move towards favoring particularity over claims of universality, hearing the detailed reflections of one person is a valuable tool for disrupting stereotyping tendencies. I also suspect that a professional scripture scholar who works with the Tanakh might appreciate the potentially unconventional insights that would be generated by the author’s unique vantage point. Additionally, for the theological student or lay reader who reflects prayerfully on the Hebrew Bible as a personal spiritual practice, reading the meditations of an outside religious teacher could prove very enriching.

Clearly, Jayadvaita Swami has spent a lifetime wrestling with the meaning of life and has taken ancient sages as his allies. Let us benefit from witnessing his measured response to the curmudgeonly Qohelet.

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