

Book Review

***A Śākta Method for Comparative Theology: Upside Down, Inside Out.* By Pravina Rodrigues. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2024. vii+145pp. \$95.00 (hardcover) ISBN: 1666905054.**



Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2024, Issue 41, 173-175
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

In this essential publication for specialists in interreligious dialogue, comparative theology, and theory of religions, much needed as well by practitioners of interfaith caregiving such as chaplains and spiritual directors, Pravina Rodrigues elegantly and eloquently names, describes, and contextualizes the positionality of what a long-time practitioner and newly burgeoning Śākta scholar like me aspires to communicate. For a Śākta, religious diversity is a thread alongside those of cosmology, topography, and biodiversity in the rich tapestry that is the Goddess in both her collective (*samaṣṭi*) and individuated (*vyasṭi*) forms. Religious diversity's paradoxicality is the basis of a lifegiving methodology for interreligious dialogue, comparative theology, theory of religions, and interfaith vocational arenas. *A Śākta Method for Comparative Theology: Upside Down, Inside Out* provides such a method—one that has the potential to transform by sharpening the reader's awareness of possibilities for decolonizing the landscape of religious studies—for moving beyond the World Religions Paradigm, as is advocated by Paul Hedges in his acclaimed *Understanding Religion*.¹

Noting that *theology* is rooted in the masculine vision of the Divine, Rodrigues begins with a personal prelude and confessional *theology* rooted in the body-mind-sense complex. Rodrigues describes herself as a Catholic born into a multireligious, multilingual, and multicultural milieu. She maps the journey to “multireligious belonging,” “double religious belonging,” or “hyphenated identities” during which she absorbed, incorporated, and synthesized religious beliefs and practices from the lineage called Suddha-Vidya-Tattva with the power and authority granted through ordination to teach, interpret the lineage's sacred scriptures, and lead others to the light. I rejoice that Rodrigues has used this power and authority to reconstruct and reinterpret Śākta texts for our times. I affirm her assertion that:

From a Śākta perspective, diversity is not to be sublated or bypassed to make room for unity. In fact, diversity counterbalances unity...the Great Goddess not only wills

¹ Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021).

cosmological, topographical, environmental, terrestrial, biological, and cultural diversity but also literally becomes it...thereby affirming an Earth-centered oneness that is rooted in irreducible diversity (xx–xxi).

In the Introduction, Rodrigues adds context to Comparative Theology methodology so that it need not exclude practice and intuition. Intuition and insight are essential for a deep understanding of the Other; but they require the availability and choice of a systematic method. *A Śākta Method for Comparative Theology* locates itself as an example of a systematic approach founded upon a Śākta ontological understanding of the Divine that subsumes comparisons.

In Chapter 1: “The Case of the Missing Interlocutors: Methodological Issues in Hindu-Christian Studies,” Rodrigues examines the matter of Hindu underrepresentation in interreligious dialogue, comparative theology, theory of religions, and interfaith vocational arenas through a postcolonial trauma lens. She argues that Christianity serves as a *lieu de memoire* (site of memory) that distances Hindu interlocutors from those academic disciplines and blocks Hindus from forgetting historical trauma experiences, thus integrating them into a narrative exacerbated by contemporary Hinduphobia, appropriation, and microaggressions (both overt and covert).

In Chapter 2, “One, None, Many: A Śākta Ontology,” Rodrigues draws from multiple sacred texts to demonstrate how the Śākta method—as a *thealogy* of religions rooted in the Divine as one, none, and many—can support and expand interreligious dialogue, comparative theology, theory of religions, and interfaith vocational arenas. While the One (the Great Goddess) is absolute, free, and independent of the Many, the Many exist in and through the One (the universe of form and multiplicity). As None, the Goddess is latent potentiality—the ontological absence that precedes all form and phenomena. Neela Saxena Bhattacharya describes this as the “pregnant nothingness” of the womb.²

In Chapter 3, “A Śākta Thealogy of Religious Diversity,” Rodrigues provides a framework in which simultaneous ontological similarities, difference, and irreducibility attest to a multi-faceted reality, which then allows a variety of perspectives both to correspond and to contradict each other. In particular, this chapter will be useful to students, faculty, and staff who must find energy during times of turbulence—and even times of terror.

In Chapter 4, Rodrigues presents a Śākta micro-discourse as *anti-method* (a new body-mind-sense complex that is nonhierarchical and rooted in a tangled mutually conditioned world), as a *method* (engaging the body-mind-sense complex through multiple practices that engage holistically) and as an *a-method* (transcending the putting of the body-mind-sense complex to work). She concludes with a reminder that traumatic experiences are routinely denied, dismissed, or disregarded. Thus, it is important to understand the Hindu’s psychological and emotional pain may be an answer to missing Hindu interlocutors.

A Śākta Method for Comparative Theology: Upside Down, Inside Out is life-giving in so many ways. It outlines what is required for entering and contributing to interreligious dialogue, comparative theology, theory of religions, and interfaith vocational arenas. It speaks to the shifts

² See Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, *Absent Mother God of the West: A Kali Lover's Journey Into Christianity and Judaism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

needed to break the boxes that limit ability to do that work. It claims and reclaims the importance of fluidity yet rootedness. Most importantly, it gives credence to the lived experience and context of many Hindus—particularly, Śākta practitioners and scholars.

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