

Michelle Voss Roberts

Tastes of the Divine: Hindu and Christian Theologies of Emotion, Comparative Theology: Thinking across Traditions, New York: Fordham University Press 2014, 256 p., ISBN 978-0-8232-5739-3, price \$ 28.00.

The American theologian Michelle Voss Roberts has written an interesting book in which she proposes to use the Indian *rasa* doctrine for detecting the Divine. It 'pursues three sentiments for their aesthetic, spiritual, and ethical value: the transcendence of a soul at peace, the passion of a heart in love, and the liberating energy of fury at injustice' (p. xvi). The main impetus for writing this book is the urgent ethical question she asked time and again: 'What do inner peace and love for the divine have to do with peace in our world and love of the other?' (p. xvii). *Rasa* is emotion and that is important, for '[r]asa allows theologians to account for the transcendence of religious experience, the embodied means to evoke it, and the tensions between transcendence and the demands of justice' (p. xviii). While reading the volume it is important to realize that Voss Roberts is not only a theologian educated in sound academic reasoning but also a musician. She knows how music can evoke emotions and how these emotions colour one's thoughts. Repeatedly she warns against an attitude she often encounters within the world of inter-religious dialogue, the attitude that reduces religious differences to aspects of the same.

The author starts with an introduction in which gives a detailed exposition of the contents of the Indian *rasa* doctrine as found in Bharata's *Nāṭya Śāstra*. In this text *rasa* denotes emotional states savoured by spectators of an Indian dance drama. Bharata lists eight sentiments being the erotic, the comic, the pathetic, the furious, the heroic, the terrible, the odious, and marvellous. Later a ninth sentiment is added: peace. Voss Roberts selects three sentiments which she will analyse more fully: peace (*śānta*), love (*śṛṅgāra*, the erotic) and fury (*raudra*, the furious).

Subsequently she analyses peace in Part 1 of her book. She starts with a description of the thoughts of the tenth century Indian thinker Abhinavagupta about this *rasa* as well as some critics of his ideas. In the next chapter she shows how Jyoti Sahi, an Indian Christian, dealt with the concept of *śānta* in his works of art and publications. Sahi attempts to make a link between peace and the suffering of humanity thus trying to prevent that *śānta* becomes something that loosens the person experiencing peace from the concrete material world.

In Part 2 Voss Roberts analyses love, since love is a central emotion both in Hinduism and Christianity. She begins with a chapter about *bhakti*, the devotion experienced by the devotees of Kṛṣṇa. One of the central feelings in this devotion is the erotic, *śṛṅgāra*, in particular among the devotees. In the next chapter she demonstrates that something similar is the case among the medieval Christian mystics, in particular with Bernard of Clairvaux. These mystics expressed their experiences in quotations of the Song of Songs. But Voss Roberts also shows how in both religious movements the evocation of this feeling is canalized to less erotic conduct, which shows that the erotic was also a problem for these mostly celibate people. In fact, the love is increasingly loosened from the body.

Part 3 presents an analysis of fury, a sentiment expressed in many communal celebrations held by *dalits*. The main source of this fury is the injustice they experience in their lives. Voss Roberts combines this feeling, which is also present among the *rasas* with the fury expressed by the Hebrew prophets, in particular Amos. It is this fury that prevents people striving for inner peace to loosen themselves from the material world. Peace must be combined with peace on earth and there will only be peace, if injustices are removed.

In Part 4 Voss Roberts attempts to develop a holistic theology of emotions. She writes 'There is no inherent reason that European philosophical traditions must govern Christian theology across the globe. The cultures of Asia, Africa, and South America, where the majority of the Christians now live, offer categories for imagining the life of faith, not only for local or indigenous theologies but for the theological "mainstream" as well' (p. 159). Subsequently she shows what each of the *rasas* can contribute to current Christianity. She concludes with the *rasa* of wonder. For this *rasa* 'entices us to consider the reality of the unseen, the existence of a more general order of existence from this world derives its meaning and purpose' (p. 182).

At the end of her book Voss Roberts returns to the views of Francis X. Clooney who defends the thesis that one is always changed after an encounter with texts, masterpieces and other artefacts of other religious traditions. In the same way the *rasa* doctrine can help Christians to come to a better articulated and better reflected theology.

What struck me while reading this magnificent book was the absence of the Hebrew word *shalom*. Where Voss Roberts elaborately compares Sanskrit terms for love, such as *śṛṅgāra* and *prema*, with Christian terms including *agape*, *eros* and *philia*, she refrains from comparing *sānta* with *shalom*. It is Amos, the prophet, who guides her to a view of peace which has everything to

do with the material world and with the injustice and suffering in this material world. In my view, a comparison of *śānta* with *shalom* would have clarified her position better and prepared what she wrote in Part 3.

Despite this small point of critique I only can recommend this book to all theologians as it will help them to develop a more articulated and refined theology. In my view this book is also a welcome contribution to Indology, since there are almost no profound and thorough analyses of the *rasa* doctrine in this discipline.

Freek L. Bakker

Utrecht, The Netherlands