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The nature and significance of the Hindu Divine Mother in embodied theological perspective

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Abstract

The Hindu Divine Mother is revered by millions of religious practitioners in India and elsewhere, yet this goddess rarely receives attention in Western philosophy of religion. Focusing especially (though not exclusively) on her form as Kālī, this article utilizes sources from Hindu goddess traditions to explicate her contrasting characteristics, which include benign maternity and martial aggression. By adapting an embodied theological (or theologal) approach derived from feminist discourse, the intelligibility of worshipping such a goddess is expounded; connections are delineated between the conceptualizing of divinity as radically ambivalent or multivalent and the lived experience of inhabiting an often hostile world.

Discussions of goddesses – or of ‘the Goddess’ – have been conspicuous by their absence in most quarters of Western theology and philosophy of religion, apart from those to which feminists have made substantial contributions. In the late 1970s the term *theology* was coined by Naomi Goldenberg to distinguish feminist theorizing about modern Goddess-centred witchcraft or Wicca from most other theology, which had become pre-occupied with ‘Christian god-talk’ (Goldenberg (1979), 96). Since then, the remit of theology has expanded to encompass ‘reflections on the meaning of Goddess’ in multiple traditions (Christ (1987), ix), including those originating in South Asia (Sherma (2011), 1–2; Mukhopadhyay (2020), 6 *et passim*). The attention of certain feminists has been attracted by Hindu goddesses in large part because of the presence among these deities of decidedly powerful and independent figures. In fact, one of the most common Sanskrit terms for the Hindu Goddess is *Śakti*, translations of which include ‘power, ability, strength, might, effort, energy’ (Monier-Williams (1899), 1044), with votaries who treat the Goddess as their supreme deity being known as *Śāktas*. In view of this connection between power and female divinity, an obvious question to ask has been whether the prominence of goddesses has facilitated – or has the potential to facilitate – the empowerment of women in Hindu social milieus. More pithily, the question has been raised whether the Goddess herself is a feminist (Sunder Rajan (1998); Hildebeitel & Erndl (2000)).

Whether any Hindu goddess is indeed a feminist – in the sense of enhancing female influence within religious, political and domestic spheres or constituting an emancipative role model for women – is a complex question. Although it is not this particular question with which the present article is concerned, I shall be situating my study of the Hindu

Divine Mother within a conceptual and methodological framework derived from feminist discourse. More specifically, to explore the nature and significance of the Hindu Divine Mother, I draw upon the approach termed *embodied theology* by the feminist scholars Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow. As its subtitle indicates, their co-authored book *Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology* (2016) deploys the term ‘embodied theology’ rather than ‘embodied *thealogy*’. This is because it is only one of the authors, Carol Christ, who characterizes the divine overtly as feminine. Christ could have insisted on using the term ‘*thealogy*’ or some more inclusive yet unwieldy neologism such as ‘*thea-theo-logical*’, but her preference was, by sticking with ‘*theology*’, to accentuate the extent to which she and her co-author are engaged in a common enterprise (Christ & Plaskow (2016), xiii n. 6).

For my purposes, the term ‘embodied *thealogy*’ is apposite, given that it is a distinctly feminine conception of divinity that I am discussing. I shall, however, use ‘embodied *theology*’ more often when explicating the work of Christ and Plaskow. The latter explication comes in the first section after this introduction; for now, it will suffice to say that embodied *theology* (or *thealogy*) is an approach to the study of the divine that emphasizes the connection – and indeed the complexity of the connection – between one’s embodied experience of life and the world, on the one hand, and how one conceptualizes the divine, on the other. This approach is well suited for the present investigation, for my central objective is to bring out the nature and significance of the Divine Mother, not by supplying a dry account of her typical attributes, but by underscoring connections between key aspects of how she is conceptualized and certain salient features of experience. I shall be seeking not to convince readers that they ought to become worshippers of the Divine Mother themselves, but rather to show the intelligibility of being such a worshipper – the sense that worshipping the Divine Mother can have in a life.

Since representations and descriptions of the Hindu Divine Mother are multifarious, it will be necessary to narrow the focus of my discussion to a specific subset. Principal attention will be given to the Divine Mother in the form, or forms, of the goddess Kālī. Whether it is quite right to regard Kālī as a *form* of the Divine Mother or, alternatively, as the Divine Mother herself is a difficult question for scholars of Hindu goddess traditions. It is not a question that can adequately be addressed independently of the particular textual material or contexts of worship with which one is dealing. In some devotional songs and mythological sources, for instance, Kālī appears very much to be identified as the Divine Mother (referred to variously as Mā, Mātā, Śrī Mātā, etc.) or Great Goddess (Mahādevī) whereas, in other places, Kālī is represented as one among other goddesses. For example, the group of ten ‘Great manifestations’ or ‘Great wisdom goddesses’ (Mahāvidyās) invariably include Kālī as one of the ten (Kinsley (1986), ch. 11); yet even in these contexts she is frequently treated as the ‘primary’ (*ādi*) goddess among them – the one from whom the others originate (Kinsley (1997), 68). In any case, I shall be concerned, for the most part, with depictions of the Divine Mother as Kālī. One exception to this comes in the penultimate section, which includes some analysis of the goddess Śītalā. Although we should be careful not simply to conflate different goddesses with one another, comparing Kālī to Śītalā does not amount to a dramatic digression insofar as both goddesses are depicted as having liberating and potentially harmful capacities; each of them is a divine mother – or a form of the Divine Mother (Misra (1969), 140; Lebra (2008), 15).

As I aim to show, the Divine Mother is worshipped – or, at any rate, commonly worshipped – as embodying painful, distressing and terrible aspects as well as pleasant or joyous aspects of life or the world. In contrast to the all-loving or omnibenevolent god who has been the cynosure of much Western philosophy of religion, the Hindu Divine Mother is a fusion of contrasting qualities, including beneficence and ferocity, maternity and

truculence. It is this enigmatic ambivalence or multivalence that, I shall argue, contributes substantially to her significance and profundity, and it is with reference to embodied theology that this significance and profundity are well elucidated.

Embodied theology/thealogy

Establishing points of intersection between existing debates in Western philosophy of religion, on the one hand, and Hindu conceptions of divinity, on the other, is no easy task. It would, for example, be hard to take traditional natural theological arguments for the existence of God of the sort that have been a mainstay of Western philosophy of religion and adapt them for the purpose of defending the rationality of belief in the Hindu Divine Mother. Or, to be more exact, it would be hard to do this in a way that did not involve abstracting away from many or most of the distinctive characteristics that make the Divine Mother the deity that she is. There would thus be a risk of ending up with just another argument in favour of what has variously been termed ‘bare’, ‘standard’, ‘restricted’ or ‘broad’ theism (cf. Davis (1989), 191; Rowe (1984), 95; Rowe (2004), 4; Swinburne (2008), 23), thereby failing to do justice to the specificities of the Hindu deity in question.

As noted in my introduction, an alternative option that I venture in this article is to look not to existing debates in philosophy of religion but to feminist theology for conceptual and methodological resources with which to explore how conceiving of and worshipping the divine in the form of the Hindu Divine Mother can make sense in the context of human life. I prefer to frame this endeavour in terms of *making sense* or *bringing out the intelligibility* rather than *showing the rationality* of a religious belief or religious commitment; this is because I worry that the notion of rationality implies that coming to hold a religious belief or commitment, and hence also coming to live a religious life, is a process in which intellectual factors play a more pivotal role than they commonly in fact do. In this respect, I am in agreement with John Cottingham when he suggests ‘that it is in the very nature of religious understanding that it characteristically stems from practical involvement rather than from intellectual analysis’ (Cottingham (2005), 6) and with Ludwig Wittgenstein when he remarks that it is generally not arguments or ‘proofs’ that bring someone to a belief in God, but rather the life that one lives and the experiences, perhaps especially the sufferings, one undergoes; it is the totality of a life, with a certain upbringing, that ‘can educate you to “believing in God”’ (Wittgenstein (1998), 97e).

The approach termed embodied theology, deriving from the work of the feminist theologian Judith Plaskow and feminist *theologian* Carol Christ, is pertinent for my purposes precisely because it prioritizes embodied experience rather than purely or largely intellectual argumentation. Christ and Plaskow define embodied theology as an approach ‘that seeks both to demonstrate the connection of theology to experience and to show the complexity of the relationship between them’ (Christ & Plaskow (2016), xv). It involves relating one’s theological stance to aspects of one’s own autobiography but without allowing the theology to collapse into personal anecdote. Nor does the approach involve a crass abandonment of rationality. On the contrary, it maintains that theological ideas must be ‘defended on rational and moral grounds’ (*ibid.*), albeit with the emphasis remaining on how the theological ideas make sense within the experiential life – or ‘lived experience’ – of the person undertaking the theology (or the thealogy, as the case may be).

It is embodied theology/thealogy as an approach that is my principal interest in this section, but the articulation of this approach will benefit from some exposition of the differing theological positions of Christ and Plaskow. To characterize their respective conceptions of the divine, the authors both use the terms ‘panentheism’ and ‘immanent inclusive monotheism’, each of which denotes ‘the view that God is in the world and

the world is in God – without reducing either to the other’ (Christ & Plaskow (2016), 295). Beyond that initial agreement, however, Plaskow and Christ diverge in the details. For Plaskow, God is ‘an impersonal power of creativity that is the ground of all being and becoming, including good and evil’, whereas Christ replaces ‘God’ with ‘Goddess’ and characterizes the latter as ‘the intelligent embodied love that is in all being, a personal presence who cares about the world’ (*ibid.*, xiv, italics omitted). As they see it, these two conceptions ‘reflect significant divides in the ways people have imagined and thought about divinity in both the East and the West’ (*ibid.*, xiv). They admit, however, that some religious traditions have sought to overcome these divides by conceiving of the divine in terms that embrace aspects of both sides, certain interpretations of ‘the Great Hindu Goddess’ being among those unitive conceptions (*ibid.*, 301). Whether, within a single theological formulation, a personal loving goddess (of the sort that Carol Christ envisages) can coherently be combined with an impersonal ‘ground of being’ (comparable to what Plaskow affirms) is contestable, though we do see something close to such a formulation gestured towards in certain Śākta devotional songs and panegyrics. (An example from the poetry of Rāmprasād Sen will be given in the next section.) What is so valuable in the exchange between Plaskow and Christ is the way in which each of these interlocutors shows how her conception of divinity is internally related to her outlook on the world and to her own personal experiences. We thus see how both the personal and the impersonal conceptions can make sense within a life and hence, by extension, how both of them might exert a pull on a given individual or, indeed, on a given community.

Searching for an explanation of how different people can arrive at divergent conceptions of divinity, Plaskow draws an illuminating distinction between two ways of understanding ‘the purpose of religious beliefs and symbols’ (*ibid.*, 172). For some people, the purpose of those beliefs and symbols is ‘to give expression to their highest aspirations’, including, crucially, their highest moral aspirations, in which case no sense could be made of ‘the notion of a God who was other than perfectly good’ (*ibid.*). By contrast, Plaskow herself is among those who seek in religion ‘a map of the universe in all its messiness and complexity’; from this perspective, a conception of divinity that refuses to omit ‘the world’s terrors’ is more ‘satisfying’ (some might say *truthful*) ‘than one that crystallize[s] ideals’ (*ibid.*). Christ acknowledges that this distinction captures a significant difference between the respective outlooks of Plaskow and herself (*ibid.*, 209).

Plaskow’s conception of divinity prioritizes comprehensiveness over goodness or benevolence. Her understanding of the divine as encompassing both good and evil is based in large part on the observation that devastation and violence are no less prevalent in the world than are creativity, compassion and beauty. The ocean, for instance, is vast and majestic and yet, at the same time, a potential source of annihilation; human kindness and love can inspire wonder, but so can human wickedness (*ibid.*, 184–185). From Plaskow’s point of view, to assume that the divine pervades only what is regarded as good would be, in effect, to deny that divinity infuses and envelops everything.

For Plaskow, recognizing the ambiguity of the divine is necessary in the face of ‘the complexities and ambiguities of existence’ (*ibid.*, 172). There is, however, an ambiguity in this very talk of ambiguity. When, for instance, Plaskow describes the divine as the ‘ground’ of good and evil or as ‘including and supporting both good and evil’ (*ibid.*, xiv) or even as being ‘responsible for evil along with good’ (*ibid.*, 44), is she thereby attributing good and evil characteristics to the divine, or is she, alternatively, proposing that the divine outstrips all moral categories and is, therefore, *beyond* good and evil (to invoke a well-known Nietzschean phrase)? The latter proposal may be implied when Plaskow is described as inhabiting ‘a beautiful but indifferent universe’ (*ibid.*, 297), and yet the ambiguity is not resolved.

Whether, from the vantage point of embodied theology, the latter ambiguity is of ultimate importance is, however, doubtful. Where the force of Plaskow's theological vision comes through is in the descriptions of her own encounters with aspects of the world that embody the complexity and ambiguity – or, we might say, the transcendence of moral categories – that she wishes to accentuate. She describes, for example, looking deep into the turbulent waters at the foot of a waterfall and seeing there 'the wellspring of life in all its terror and sublimity'; these 'waters knew no moral purpose; they could as easily overwhelm and destroy as nourish and vivify' (*ibid.*, 173). It is in those raging waters, devoid of moral purpose, that Plaskow sees 'the face of God' (*ibid.*). Carol Christ, meanwhile, speaks powerfully of a revelatory experience that she underwent when, upon being present at her mother's death, she felt abundant love filling the room (*ibid.*, 150); from experiences such as this, despite the horrors of the world, she has drawn the assurance that 'Goddess is the intelligent, embodied love that is in all being' (*ibid.*, 261).

One way of envisaging the project of embodied theology advocated by Christ and Plaskow would be to view it as beginning by ruminating upon personal experiences and then, on that basis, devising a conception of the divine that reflects or conforms to those experiences. But this would be a crude way of envisaging what is going on. The 'connection of theology to experience' to which Christ and Plaskow refer is not a one-way connection, in which a theological outlook rests upon or is derived from experiences that are, in themselves, external to theology. Rather, the theologies not only 'emerge out of' but also 'shape the embodied realities of our lives' (*ibid.*, xv).

The respective theological visions of Christ and Plaskow are attempts to make sense of the world and of human experience. It is not my purpose to try to arbitrate between them as though from some neutral or objective standpoint. To do so would be to misrepresent the visions themselves, given that they are framed in terms that make no claims to neutrality or objectivity: on the contrary, each of them is *embodied* precisely in the sense that it is rooted in a particular life. It does not follow that an embodied theology is 'merely subjective' in the sense of being grounded in nothing but personal preference; it does follow, however, that the critical evaluation of an embodied theology cannot reasonably be undertaken without reference to the specific biographical factors that have contributed to its formation. Yet this is not the place to enter into detailed analysis of the biographies of Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow.

Nevertheless, even in the relatively brief treatment afforded in this section, we have seen in the theological outlook of Plaskow the possibility of making conceptual space for a notion of divinity according to which it is not readily definable in terms of goodness – still less in terms of goodness in a specifically moral sense – because, on this conception, the divine 'is the ground of all being and becoming, including good and evil'. At the same time, we have been introduced to Christ's notion of a Goddess who embodies an all-pervasive love. With these theological possibilities in view, we can usefully turn to a consideration of the intelligibility and religious profundity of an ambivalent, or multi-valent, Divine Mother. My task in the next section is to adduce some salient features of the Divine Mother as depicted in important mythological, iconographic and devotional sources pertaining especially to the goddess Kālī. The subsequent section will then bring out more explicitly the connections between, on the one hand, the characteristics of Kālī and of similar theological formulations of the Divine Mother, and on the other hand, the experience of the vicissitudes of life in an unstable world.

'Powerfully terrifying': Kālī, the Divine Mother

The name Kālī is the feminine form of *kāla*, meaning 'time', 'death' or 'black'; she is the 'Mistress of Time or Death' or, indeed, the very personification of time and death, 'the

one who devours' (McDermott (2001b), 4; see also Eliade (1958), 179). In the tenth book of the epic *Mahābhārata* (c. second to first centuries BCE), a figure named Kālī or Kālarātri ('Dark Night', 'Death Night') makes a brief intervention, stealing onto the battlefield 'to take away various kinds of spirits' (*Mahābhārata* 10.8.67, trans. Dutt (1902), 14). There she is described as resembling an elderly woman of dark appearance with 'bloody mouth and bloody eyes, wearing crimson garlands and smeared with crimson unguents'; holding a noose, she intones 'a dreadful song' (10.8.65–66). It is, however, in a later mythological text, the *Devī Māhātmya* ('Glory (or Greatness) of the Goddess') that Kālī is first identified explicitly as a goddess.

Estimated to date either from the fifth to sixth centuries CE (Coburn (1984), 1) or from the late eighth to early ninth centuries (Yokochi (2004), 21–23 n. 42), the *Devī Māhātmya* is the earliest known Hindu work in which the supreme deity is presented as female. Battling with demons, the Goddess is depicted as relentless in her destructive capacity, and yet she is said to retain a serene and subtle smile amid the chaos and to be engaged in slaughter for the purpose of restoring order (*Devī Māhātmya* 2.49–50, 7.2;¹ see Dimmit & van Buitenen (1978), 236, 238). Her ambivalence is epitomized in the fact that, aside from 'Devī' and 'Mahādevī', the two most common names for the Goddess in the *Devī Māhātmya* are 'Ambikā' and 'Caṇḍikā'; denoting maternality and ferocity respectively, these names are used interchangeably (Kinsley (1978), 497). In a striking scene, Kālī bursts forth from the brow of Ambikā as a crystallization of Ambikā's rage (*Devī Māhātmya* 7. 5; Coburn (1991), 61). Described as 'gruesome with shriveled flesh' and with a gaping mouth and 'lolling tongue' (7.6–7, trans. Dimmit & van Buitenen (1978), 238), Kālī howls, shrieks, cackles and hurls demons, elephants, horses and chariots 'into her maw. . . grinding them up most horribly with her teeth' (7.10, trans. *ibid.*).

An analysis by David Kinsley foregrounds the extent to which the Goddess as portrayed in the *Devī Māhātmya* as a whole – not merely in her form as Kālī – is intimately associated with the world, far more so than male Hindu deities tend to be. The male god Śiva, for instance, has at least two sides to his character inasmuch as he is, by turns, both guardian of the universe and the austere yogi who periodically withdraws from world-directed activity (Kinsley (1978), 501). The Goddess, however, as a fierce and terrifying mother, does not oscillate between world-involvement and world-renunciation; rather, she synchronically personifies 'the stunning ambiguities inherent in the very texture of existence itself' (502). This latter observation may put us in mind of Plaskow's reference to 'the complexities and ambiguities of existence', which, she maintains, must be embraced 'as part of the nature of God' (Christ & Plaskow (2016), 172). It also echoes or anticipates other descriptions of the Hindu Divine Mother, such as Kathleen Erndl's contention that, rather than being characterized in moral terms as malevolent or evil, the aggressive and destructive aspects of the Goddess may be viewed as being 'closely connected with the realities and ambiguities of life' (Erndl (1993), 158). In this respect, conceptions of the Divine Mother evince a sobering 'realism' (*ibid.*) – that is, a realistic attitude towards the world, recognizing its deadly no less than its fructuous elements.

From around the ninth or tenth century CE, as the variegated religious movement known as Tantra gathered pace in India, Kālī became one of the primary deities of Tantra's Śākta stream. Over time, several iconic representations of Kālī were formalized and then consolidated by their inclusion in works such as the *Bṛhat Tantrasāra* ('Great Essence of the Tantras'), a compendium of Tantric liturgy and iconography compiled by Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa in late sixteenth-century Bengal (Urban (2003), 276). The quintessential image of Kālī has come to be one in which she is shown as Dakṣiṇa Kālī, a prevalent construal of this name being 'southern Kālī' or 'Kālī of the South'. The name links Kālī with death and cremation grounds, since south is the cardinal direction governed

by Yama, the lord of the dead, and Indian crematoria are normally situated to the south of towns and villages (Dold (2003), 53).

A classic description of Dakṣiṇa Kālī, articulated in some detail in the *Brhat Tantrasāra*, blends horror with eroticism. Presented as an image to be meditated upon, Dakṣiṇa Kālī is described as standing on the chest of a supine Śiva in the midst of a cremation ground, emitting a frightful sound and encircled by baying jackals. With a deep blue complexion and unkempt hair, her face appears both ‘dreadful’ and ‘satisfied’; though smiling, she bares her teeth and dribbles blood. Naked except for a garland of severed human heads, earrings made from the corpses of children and a skirt of amputated hands or forearms, her skin glistens with the blood of her victims. Having a total of four arms, she clasps a bloodied sword and a severed head in her two left hands while making gestures of assurance and the granting of boons with her two right ones. ‘Her breasts are large and round’ and, purportedly, she ‘is eager to have sexual intercourse in reverse fashion with Mahākāla’, the latter (literally ‘Great Time’ or ‘Great Death’) being one of Śiva’s many names and ‘reverse fashion’ indicating a position in which Kālī squats over Śiva’s recumbent form (Āgamavāgīśa (1982), 387–388; trans. Kinsley (1997), 67).

Since the eighteenth century, this depiction of Kālī as both violent and lascivious has increasingly been combined in devotional songs and poetry with the overarching identity of Kālī as Divine Mother. Pre-eminent in this regard is the Bengali lyricist Rāmprasād Sen, who was almost certainly a historical personage who composed numerous songs during the mid-eighteenth century but whose name has also become attached to later compositions authored by others. In the songs attributed to Rāmprasād, the Goddess is the Divine Mother who cares about her children and the world they inhabit but can also be neglectful and even ‘stone-hearted’ – ‘a disgrace to the name of “mother”’ (Rāmprasād, paraphrased in McDermott (2001a), 379 n. 105). Her equivocal smile is like that ‘of a beast with bared teeth’ – possibly benign, though poised to attack – and yet she is also Brahman, the impersonal source whose nature is ultimately unascertainable but who resides ‘in all forms’ (Rāmprasād, quoted in McDermott (2001a), 77). In this respect, Rāmprasād is someone who attempts to synthesize the personal and impersonal conceptions of divinity, a task that we saw alluded to by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow.

In a notable contribution to feminist philosophy of religion, Vrinda Dalmiya characterizes Rāmprasād’s work and the attitude of devotion (*bhakti*) it displays as harbouring the potential to foster ‘liberative fearlessness’ in devotees (Dalmiya (2000), 139–146). Affirming the common view that Kālī, as Divine Mother, is the source of both life and death, Dalmiya identifies the devotional attitude typified by Rāmprasād as involving an acceptance of death as inexorably intertwined with life; it is in this spirit of acceptance that one is able to relinquish fear and live more ebulliently. While admitting that a complete transcendence of individuated consciousness is the hoped-for end of Rāmprasād’s devotion, Dalmiya maintains that this need not engender a retreat from ethics and politics or from the cultivation of ‘more just social interactions’ (*ibid.*, 147). Her line of thinking seems to be that, internal to liberative fearlessness, is the recognition of mutual dependence between living beings (‘many-in-relation’) and of collective dependence upon the Divine Mother; this recognition in turn promotes an impulse towards social, political and ethical transformation (*ibid.*).

Whether Dalmiya supplies a plausible reading of Rāmprasād’s devotionalism is not my principal concern here; what is of interest for our purposes is the way in which her interpretative approach eschews exclusively metaphysical styles of argumentation in favour of a consideration of social, political and ethical factors. For Dalmiya, what is important is the extent to which modes of religiosity exhibited in Rāmprasād’s songs to the Divine Mother – a figure both beautiful and ‘powerfully terrifying’ (Dalmiya (2000), 126) – could help to imbue life with an emancipatory ethical and political orientation. This

aspiration to ground religious commitments within the context of a life, as opposed to treating them more abstractly (as though such commitments might be arrived at on the basis of a formal argument or ‘proof’), has a strong affinity with the embodied theological approach that we have seen typified by Plaskow and Christ. Dalmiya’s stress on expressly ethical and political dimensions of experience takes her discussion in a somewhat different direction from the one I am pursuing in this article; even so, the summary that I have here provided of her treatment of Rāmprasād’s devotional relationship to the Goddess sets the scene well for a more sustained examination, in the next section, of how responses to the vicissitudes of life might cohere with conceptions of the Divine Mother as enigmatic and multivalent.

‘Wonder at what is terrible’: religious responses in a turbulent world

An obvious point that several authors have emphasized, including Plaskow and certain others to whom I have referred, is that life comprises a mixture of experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, along with challenges that range from the moderately uncomfortable to the downright traumatic. To put it mildly, there are, as Stephen Law has remarked, ‘some good days and some bad days’ (quoted in Regunathan (2012)), or, to invoke the more overtly religious vocabulary of Job, ‘the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD’ (Job 1:21, KJV). In the latter pronouncement, Job does not propose that because things are taken from us as well as given, we ought therefore to turn our backs on the Lord; on the contrary, the Lord is to be praised through thick and thin, for that is what having faith in the Lord consists in. Something similar can be said of faith in the Divine Mother of Hindu Śākta traditions.

Over the course of history, the people of the Indian subcontinent have faced more than their fair share of adversity, whether meteorological, geological, pestilential or socio-political. Describing life in rural Bengal in particular, Edward Thompson observes how it has not been uncommon for a year of drought and famine to be followed by a year of excessive rain and floods, ‘as if Nature were an ogress, watching till the folk had put together some makeshift shelter of palm-leaves and mud, to dash it to the ground again’ (Thompson (1923), 16). The natural environment may indeed be perceived as an ogress or, alternatively, as a goddess: the Divine Mother, celebrated as the source of nature’s fertility, is equally the source of natural disasters. Conceiving of the environment in these terms affords what D. Z. Phillips, in a slightly different context, has called ‘a language in which to think of the world’ (Phillips (2001), 158–159), a vocabulary and conceptual system through which to articulate one’s experiences, which may not be readily articulable in other terms. As Dinesh Chandra Sen has remarked of Rāmprasād Sen, ‘The red glow of the evening sky, with its first stars, wore to his eyes the angry look of the divine Mother’ and he saw her ‘flowing tresses’ in ‘the fierce rolling clouds that darkened the whole horizon’ (Sen (1911), 715). Although these are deliberately poetic turns of phrase, they indicate an internal relation between a way of perceiving the world and a way of understanding the presence of the Goddess. To see the red evening sky as her angry gaze is not to put a metaphorical varnish on an already established conception of the world; it is to see the world as infused with the Divine Mother’s presence.

Among the threatening phenomena in which a divine presence has often been perceived, diseases have been especially salient. In the *Devī Māhātmya*, for example, the forms of ‘Great Kālī’ (Mahākālī) are said to include Mahāmārī (*Devī Māhātmya* 12.35–36), an epithet that, while literally meaning ‘Great destruction’ or ‘Great death’, has been widely used in India to denote an epidemic or plague (Clemow (1903), 323; Khan (2003), 270). In the south Indian state of Kerala, the form of Kālī known as Bhadrakālī is closely associated with fevers and diseases that produce skin rashes or pustules. She is depicted as

‘covered with smallpox’ and yet nonetheless ‘lovely’ and ‘beautiful’ (Caldwell (1996), 196). Subsequent to the eradication of smallpox from India in 1979, other exanthematic conditions, such as chickenpox, were more prominently foregrounded as expressions or manifestations of the Goddess. Citing a young woman who had suffered a severe bout of chickenpox at the age of eighteen, Sarah Caldwell reports that white-coloured poxes were deemed to be ‘a blessing from the goddess’ in contrast to black-coloured poxes, which ‘represent a curse and the goddess’s anger’; fortunately, Caldwell adds, the blisters of her young female informant had been white (Caldwell (1999), 152 n. 22).

Similar associations have been made between pustular diseases and other goddesses – or, as some Hindus would say, other forms or manifestations of the Divine Mother. Especially notable in this regard is Śītalā, who is worshipped in many parts of northern India. Literally ‘the cool one’ (Wadley (1980)), Śītalā has also been conceived of as ‘the one who must be cooled’ (Babb (1970), 143), for, like Bhadrakālī in Kerala, she is often regarded as both the instigator and the reliever of smallpox and similar diseases. For this reason, Kālī and Śītalā are sometimes compared insofar as they both ‘embody affliction and liberation’ (Hawley (1996), 12). Each of them afflicts humankind with misfortune while also being the bestower of release from the afflicted predicament; it is just that Śītalā’s mode of affliction is principally disease whereas Kālī’s sphere of activity is more pervasive. At least one Tantric text, the *Muṇḍamālā Tantra* (c. tenth century CE), identifies these two goddesses as ‘one and [the] same’ (Mukhopadhyay (1994), 6).

On some accounts, at the time when smallpox was rife, the disease was ‘quite literally equated with [Śītalā], in the sense that a case of smallpox [was] treated as an instance of possession by the goddess’ (Babb (1970), 143; see also Kolenda (1982), 235). More recently, such accounts have been disputed by Fabrizio Ferrari, who has argued on the basis of extensive fieldwork and textual research that disease is not treated by worshippers of Śītalā as a form of possession and, moreover, the identification of Śītalā as a cause as well as an alleviator of disease is limited to a specific genre of Bengali narrative poems known as *Śītalā-maṅgalkāvyas*, which date from the seventeenth to the twentieth century (Ferrari (2015), esp. 23–27, 119–131). In these narrative compositions, ‘Śītalā is an intimidating presence who distributes infected pulses in village markets, or sends hordes of disease-demons, thus causing outbreaks of smallpox and other contagious illnesses’ (*ibid.*, 2). For my purposes in this article, it is not necessary to enter into the debate over how widespread the latter conception of Śītalā is; I mention her here only to illustrate a further instance of how the Divine Mother, or a divine mother, may be closely associated with maladies and tribulations. Additional instances have occurred during the recent coronavirus pandemic, with some Hindus re-envisioning Kālī as embodying the SARS-CoV-2 virus (*Times of India* (2020); Ruptly (2020)) and others worshipping an ostensibly new form of the Divine Mother as ‘Corona Devī’ or ‘Corona Māī’ (‘Mother Corona’) (Samanta (2020)).

What, however, are we to make of descriptions of people who ‘quite literally’ regard a disease as the presence of, or at least as having been initiated by, a goddess – that is, as a manifestation of ‘the Mother’s Grace (*Māyer dayā*)’ (Sil (2016), 283; see also Nicholas (2003), 107)? Among other things, the descriptions constitute an acknowledgement that worshippers of the goddess, whether she be depicted as Kālī or as Śītalā or in some other form, see in the affliction something both horrifying and awesome. In the case of smallpox, this was a visitation with the power to scar the body and to transform or end a life – a stark reminder of our vulnerability to contingencies and of the fact that the course of our lives is far from exclusively in our own hands.

The above thought might be elaborated by reference to a suggestion from Wittgenstein, that something terrible (*furchtbare*) can be precisely what inspires certain ritual activities, in some cases simply ‘Because it is terrible’ (Wittgenstein (1979), 3e). Building

upon this suggestion, Rush Rhees observes that the phenomena which evoke wonder in human life, and which in some cultures may prompt ceremonial or ritual responses, include not only scenes and acts of beauty but also instances of insanity or death – ‘wonder at what is terrible. . . treating what is terrible as a sacrament’ (Rhees (1994), 578). Merely noting that these are intelligible human responses is important insofar as doing so helps to loosen the grip of the assumption that religious attitudes and practices must always be explained by reference to underlying beliefs or doctrines, as though it were the intellectual component that must have logical and explanatory priority over the behavioural response. As certain anthropologists have pointed out, enquiring about the beliefs of a given religious or cultural community can often be misguided inasmuch as formalized beliefs may be, at most, secondary to religious activities. In the case of the Chhattisgarhi villagers with whom Lawrence Babb conversed, for example, there would be little point in asking for an account of their beliefs, for these are not the terms in which they comprehend their religious affairs; in brief, ‘religion is a thing done, not a thing “believed”’ (Babb (1975), 31). It does not follow that beliefs are absent from their religion; it is simply that assuming that the practices are invariably ‘based on’ particular beliefs would be to project onto the beliefs an artificial air of priority. (Cf. Wittgenstein (1979), 2e: ‘we can only say: where that practice and these views go together, the practice does not spring from the view, but both of them are there’.)

The significance of these observations in the present context is that, by coming to appreciate how even terrible or tragic aspects of life – or perhaps *especially* terrible or tragic aspects – may give rise to feelings of awe, one is afforded a stronger sense of how the characters of particular deities may be related to the gravity of certain phenomena in the life of a community. Gaining a fuller comprehension of how, for example, being infected with a potentially lethal disease could be viewed as a blessing from a goddess may require a more thorough familiarity with the relevant anthropological literature than I have supplied in my exposition; what I am proposing, however, is that by means of that familiarity we are exposed to a particular form of collective embodied theology – a way of understanding the disease as something sacred, as an aspect of divinity. The disease does not thereby cease to be dreadful, but, from the religious perspective at issue, its dreadful nature is not delineable in purely biomedical terms. It is one of the ‘realities and ambiguities of life’ to which Erndl refers.

Relevant to these considerations is the way in which certain Indian thinkers have characterized the divine as transcending moral categories. In a short essay penned in 1918, Sri Aurobindo affirms that ‘God is beyond good and evil, not below them, not existing and limited by them, not even above them, but in a more absolute sense excedent and transcendent of the ideas of good and evil’ (Aurobindo (1997a), 148). Whether this asseveration is equivalent to Plaskow’s contention that the divine is the source or ground of good and evil (and hence not itself describable in these terms) is not obvious, but there is undoubtedly a strong affinity. That God, for Aurobindo, is not exclusively male becomes clear in other writings. In one place, for example, he praises what he views as the honest and courageous mode of religion that, recognizing the enigmatic nature of the divine, venerates the Goddess not only in her ‘beneficent’ form but also in her form as ‘the terrible Kali in her blood-stained dance of destruction’; ‘This too is the Mother’, the religion declares, ‘this also know to be God; this too, if thou hast the strength, adore’ (Aurobindo (1997b), 45). Putting it in these terms implies that there are barriers to be overcome – perhaps psychological or emotional barriers or limitations of imagination – before one is able to perceive and cherish the divine in the roughest of life’s ordeals as well as in life’s smoother moments. These difficulties are no doubt present; that overcoming them is nevertheless a live aspiration, we see professed vividly in the Śākta traditions of South Asia.

Concluding remarks

The Divine Mother, as envisaged and worshipped across diverse Hindu traditions, encompasses what, on the face of it, appear to be antagonistic qualities. She is admired for her elegance, praised for her benevolence, invoked for her fecundity, propitiated lest she unleash her catastrophic rage, and wondered at in fear and trembling when that rage is nonetheless unleashed. In light of the more macabre imagery associated with Kālī and other *raudra* ('fierce', 'terrible') forms, it is unsurprising that certain styles of goddess worship in India have, on occasion, been described as exemplifying a 'Mysticism of Horror' (Otto (1936), 109) or 'terror of the sacred' (Bharucha (2014), 14). It requires only a little imagination, however, to see how the depiction of divinity as comprising aspects of charm, fertility and aggression points towards something profound. It indicates a conception of the divine that, like the Lord who speaks from the whirlwind in the Book of Job, is not reducible to human moral categories. It is a conception that, as Aurobindo underscores, urges prospective devotees to find the holy not only amid the joys but also amid the horrors of life – to treat the terrible as well as the beautiful as a sacrament (as Rhee puts it).

None of this implies that worshippers of Kālī are enjoined to eliminate moral categories from their own lives. There are Tantric sects that do advocate 'transgressive' ritual practices and an ultimate transcendence or inversion of conventional morality (see Feuerstein (1998), esp. 100–103; Urban (2003)). But such a path requires special initiation and is unavailable to the majority of practitioners, who remain bound by socially sanctioned ethical norms. The connection between morality and conceptions of divinity is a topic well worth pursuing, though I have not had space to do more than touch upon it here.

For conceptual and methodological materials to explore how ideas of a multivalent Divine Mother might have an intelligible place in the life of an individual or community, I have looked to, among other resources, the work of feminist theologians. The concept of embodied theology/theology is especially promising for capturing the sense in which a conception of divinity, despite not being systematically formulable in a way that would make it objectively compelling, might nevertheless have a robust and meaningful role in individual or communal lives. When we examine, for instance, the poetry of Rāmprasād or even the more overtly philosophical output of a thinker such as Aurobindo, we do not find a systematic theology in the sense of a fully worked-out and internally consistent theoretical product. We do, however, find evocative and vigorous embodied theologies in a sense not too distant from that explicated by Plaskow and Christ. In other words, we find powerful invocations, articulations, interrogations and sometimes (at least in the songs of Rāmprasād) expressions of reservation or reproach concerning a radically ambiguous and multivalent divine figure.

So, too, do we see rich connections between bodily experience and conceptions of the divine in the myths and rituals surrounding the Divine Mother, in the form both of Kālī and of others associated with dangerous phenomena such as potentially disfiguring or lethal illnesses. Thus, although my approach has differed from that of Christ and Plaskow inasmuch as I, unlike them, have not been drawing connections between experience and theology in relation to my own life, fruitful terrain has been opened up for further philosophical exploration. Rather than limit the discussion to only one mythic or iconographic representation of the Divine Mother, the article has ranged widely both historically and textually. This has had the advantage of enabling us to view the Divine Mother, as it were, from different angles, thereby developing a multi-aspectual picture of her nature and significance. Options for further study include more historically or geographically circumscribed investigations, which could also be extended to incorporate comparisons between different deities, both internal to Hinduism and between Hindu

and other religious traditions, or between different depictions of what is ostensibly the same deity. Such studies offer considerable potential for advancing a radically pluralistic appreciation of the existence and nature of deities across multiple spheres of religious life.²

Notes

1. My numbering of chapters and verses from the *Devī Māhātmya* follows the numbering in Coburn (1991). For the original Sanskrit text, I have consulted Agrawala (1963).
2. I thank three anonymous referees, whose comments on a previous version prompted me to hone the structure and clarity of this article.

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