

BETWEEN CERTAINTY AND TRUTH
INDIAN DREAMS
AND THEIR MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS*

John B. Carman, Harvard

Introduction

Dreams are often considered the very opposite of both *Gewissheit* and *Wahrheit*. This is assumed in the English expression, "It is just a dream". However vivid the dream, upon waking, the dreamer recognizes that the substance of the dream, whether pleasant or unpleasant, dissolves in the light of day. Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), clear rational awareness, uses the metaphors of "waking" and "morning light" in a way that suggests a sharp contrast with both sleeping and dreaming.

There is, however, a very different interpretation of certain special dreams in which the dreamer keeps the certainty of the dream after waking up and may consider the dream to contain or convey a truth superior to, and thus threatening or enhancing, the common order of daily life. Such dreams may give a vague presentiment of future events, sometimes of unexpected good fortune and more frequently of impending disaster, such as the death of a loved one. The type of dream to which I want to draw our attention is one in which a divine, angelic, or demonic being appears in a recognizable form and/or communicates a clear message, either a warning or a command. This supernatural communication through dreams may rarely be recognized in secularized Western society, and certainly reports of such dreams are given no credence in intellectual circles, but there is much evidence from the Bible and from many other religious traditions that such dreams are taken very seriously.¹ In many cases, this

* I am grateful to Ms. Tamara Lanaghan, my research assistant, for substantial help in writing and editing this paper.

¹ In a recent article, my colleague, KIMBERLEY C. PATTON, has examined the phenomenon of "dream incubation" in which individuals inten-

kind of dream is closely related in the interpretation of its own culture to visions in the waking state and to divine inspiration to prophets, poets, and seers, sometimes leading to trance, “speaking in tongues”, or other ecstatic states. These revelations in abnormal states, when they are remembered and passed on to future generations, become either the basis of scriptural authority or a challenge to the religious establishment. Revelations in dreams seem closely connected with the personal faith (*Glaube*) of the dreamer, whether to establish, confirm, or challenge that faith.

To explore the way such revelatory dreams may transform the dreamer’s life, I relate two examples that my colleague and I discovered during a study of village Christian congregations near Hyderabad, which are part of the Medak Diocese of the Church of South India. The study took place in 1959 and 1960; my role was that of advisor to the principal investigator, the Rev. P. Y. LUKE, and co-author of the subsequent publication. These two cases are striking precisely because they represent a belief in the reality of dreams that contrasts with the “common sense” dismissal of dreams as well as with more sophisticated rational explanations, which are prevalent both in India and the West.

Dreams of Indian Christians before they became Christians

The first of my cases involves a sequence of three dreams of three family members of the toddy-tapper caste.² The first dream came to Narayana, the head of the household, during an outbreak of cholera. When he refused to join the village-wide rituals meant to appease the goddess Sītālā, he was threatened by the villagers. In his

tionally prepare themselves ritually and sleep in particular “strong” places (i.e. those places that have a particularly thin “membrane” between the worlds) in order to receive an epiphany of the divine (PATTON 2004: 194-223). In traditional Indian society, as in the Mediterranean world, these cultivated dreams are sometimes utilized to address crises people face, such as infertility or health problems. While there are elements of dream incubation that parallel the dreams I discuss here, the lack of intentionality on the part of the dreamer makes these dreams distinctively different.

² LUKE/CARMAN 1968: 154-55.

dream, he wrestled with a demon figure whom he called Shaitan (the Arabic term common among the Muslims in the community). After some time, Jesus appeared and defeated the demon, thereby rescuing Narayana. When he awoke, he considered the appearance of Jesus in his dream to be a real encounter, because of the widely accepted belief in India that deities do appear in dreams. He did not, however, take any further steps such as changing his religious affiliation.

Three years later, after his wife Satyamma had given birth to a son following a difficult pregnancy, she came down with a severe abdominal pain. Despite traditional medical treatments, the pain persisted. Then, Satyamma had a dream in which Jesus appeared, touched her on the painful spot and put three pills in her mouth. When she awoke the next morning, the pain had disappeared and never returned. This second dream encounter with Jesus convinced Narayana and Satyamma of the truth of the Gospel stories Narayana had learned as a child when he attended a school run by a Christian catechist. Therefore, they decided to be baptized and join the out-caste congregation, even though this initially led to a breach in their relationship with Satyamma's family.

What is intriguing is that three months after their baptism, Satyamma's father also had a dream in which Jesus appeared. At Narayana's suggestion, he had discontinued worshipping his personal divine image (*iṣṭadevatā mūrti*) while in the hospital for an eye operation. He even went so far as to toss the image out of the window. That night, he dreamt that Jesus came and told him not to be afraid and that the operation would go well. This dream convinced him that Jesus was, in fact, a true and living God, as his son-in-law had told him. The breach with his daughter and son-in-law was repaired, and he began reading the Bible regularly. Despite his conviction of the truth of the dream, however, he remained unbaptized two years after the successful operation.

The second story involves a land-owning farmer who, as a staunch Hindu, was so hostile to Christians that once he beat up a Christian catechist who was visiting his village to preach.³ Later, he developed an abdominal pain that was not cured even after trying va-

³ LUKE/CARMAN 1968: 182-83.

rious medications. One night, he dreamt that Jesus visited him and told him the specific date on which the pain would disappear. To his great surprise, the pain was gone exactly on that day. This experience led him to learn more about the Christian church, and he subsequently was baptized and joined a congregation of outcaste Christians, a very difficult thing to do given the great potential for him to lose his higher social standing.

When it came time, however, to find a marriage partner for his daughter, he was faced with the problem that there were no Christians belonging to his caste in his village. The role of caste in the Christian community has long been a difficult issue for Indian Christians.⁴ In this case, the farmer had made concessions to attend an outcaste church, thereby violating many of the caste laws governing communal worship. Like most Christians, he was not willing to transgress those laws with respect to the marriage of his daughter. For that reason, he wrote to Veṅkaṭeśvara, a young Hindu man of the same caste, who lived in another village some distance away.

Veṅkaṭeśvara himself had shortly before had a dream in which a divine figure, whom he took to be Kṛṣṇa, appeared and instructed him to accept the next marriage proposal he received in the mail. When the farmer's letter arrived, Veṅkaṭeśvara was completely surprised that it should be from a Christian, but he believed that Krishna had ordered him to accept the marriage proposal. He agreed to the farmer's proposal, therefore, even though it was not as financially lucrative as some other offers he had received. Subsequently, after being instructed by his prospective father-in-law in the Christian faith, Veṅkaṭeśvara decided that the divine figure in his dream was not Kṛṣṇa but Jesus. At his baptism, he was given the new name of Christopher Dayanand.

Christian and Hindu Background

When I first heard these stories, I was reminded of healing miracles and dreams in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. There are many examples of Divine or angelic communication in the Bible.

⁴ HUDSON 2000.

Those in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are described as visions, notably the conversion of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus.⁵ The Gospel of Matthew uses the word “dream” when describing the visit of the angelic messengers to St. Joseph⁶ and the Wise men.⁷ In Acts, the opening of the Christian Church to Gentiles involved visions both of Cornelius, the Roman centurion,⁸ and the Apostle Peter, including an angelic command and an interpretation within this repeated vision, “Up, Peter, kill and eat!” and “It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean.”⁹ Like the Indian dreams, these visions assume the reality of the encounter with the divine or angelic messenger and come to be connected with events outside the vision or dream that confirm its reality.

The more I learned about Hindu belief and practice, the more evident it became why both the person experiencing the dream and those to whom it was recounted would take it very seriously. For village Hindus, there is only a thin line between dreaming and longer-lasting possession by deities, ghosts, or demons. In many cases the dream contains a message from supernatural sources about actions to be taken outside the dream or a change effected (e.g., healing) that continues to be real after the dream. Upon awakening, the dreamer has to decide whether to take the dream seriously. For Narayana and Satyamma, it took a second dream, accompanied by a healing, to effect their conversion. At the time they related their story to my colleague, Mr. Luke, their father-in-law was impressed by his dream, but still undecided about becoming a Christian. Veṅkaṭeśvara, on the other hand, was immediately convinced of the genuineness of his dream and prepared to act on the instructions given. It was his interpretation of the dream that later changed.

The first story of the dream of Jesus as healer clearly presumes, in the minds of Narayana and his family after their conversion, the

⁵ Acts 9:1-9.

⁶ Matthew 1:18-24, 2:13.

⁷ Matthew 2:12.

⁸ Acts 10:3

⁹ Acts 10:11-16.

miracle stories of the New Testament. Narayana had heard these stories years before while attending the local Christian school.¹⁰ This was supplemented by his wife having received pills in the name of Jesus at a Christian hospital. The struggle between Jesus and the devil may also presume village Hindu experience of possession by demons or by village goddesses. Perhaps more important is the unargued assumption that such dreams of demonic or divine “invasion” of the body are real experiences with real consequences when the dreamer awakes. This assumption is shared by many devotional (theistic) Hindu traditions, though not by all Hindu philosophies.

When we look for the Hindu background of the second story, we see some evidence of the Vaiṣṇava tradition: the young man’s name was Veṅkaṭeśvara, which is the name of the image incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu on the sacred hills above Tirupati in perhaps the wealthiest temple in South India. This connection is of minor importance, however, for this deity’s name is taken as a personal name by Hindu men of various sects. More important is the fact that Veṅkaṭeśvara thought that the divine figure appearing to him in his dream was Kṛṣṇa, the most widely worshipped *avatāra* of Lord Viṣṇu. The acceptance of the possibility of Divine communication in dreams is certainly present in popular Vaiṣṇavism. What support does this belief have in philosophical texts? We can distinguish at least three positions.

Dreams in *Yogavāsiṣṭha*

One resource available for aiding our understanding of these dream experiences is the collection of stories in the work called the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* (9th-12th century), on which DONIGER O’FLAHERTY bases her book *Dreams, Illusions, and Other Realities*.¹¹ In the various myths recounted in this text, and sometimes even within the same myth, there are two opposing views of reality. For one, the liberated state (*mokṣa*) is the true reality, in contrast to an illusory world of ignorance and bondage to pleasure and worldly gain. In this

¹⁰ LUKE/CARMAN 1968: 154.

¹¹ DONIGER O’FLAHERTY 1984.

view, DONIGER O'FLAHERTY says, "birth, sex, and marriage are not good and ... the wise man seeks release (*mokṣa*) from them and from the whole vortex of worldly life."¹² The second view is that "worldly-life (*saṃsāra*) is real and good."¹³ DONIGER O'FLAHERTY takes the dominant Hindu view, well represented in *Yogavāsiṣṭa*, to lie between the extremes: "There is something real in the world but ... we constantly mistake it for something unreal. Moreover, since it is impossible to know when we are making this mistake, it is impossible to know precisely what *is* real."¹⁴

The paradoxical situation of seeing a world that may be illusory is brought out in the stories of dreams within dreams, and "when two dreamers create each other in their dreams . . . the problem becomes a logical paradox: which of the two dreamers is the first dreamer?"¹⁵ "The paradox of mutual hierarchy – the relationship between two things, each higher than other – ¹⁶" in these myths concerns not only dreamers but the highest gods, for the creator god "Brahma was born from a lotus that grew out of Vishnu's navel when he was sleeping on the milk ocean."¹⁷ This suggests that the very act of creation by Brahmā is paradoxically both real (from his perspective) and a dream (from Viṣṇu's perspective).¹⁸ Each of the

¹² DONIGER 1984: 12.

¹³ DONIGER 1984: 11.

¹⁴ DONIGER 1984: 12.

¹⁵ DONIGER 1984: 253.

¹⁶ DONIGER 1984: 252.

¹⁷ DONIGER 1984: 255.

¹⁸ This is made even more apparent in another story about the relation of Brahmā and Viṣṇu to creation. In this story, Brahmā first enters Viṣṇu's body and discovers the entire universe within, and then Viṣṇu enters Brahmā's body and discovers the same universe (*Kūrma Purāna* 1.9.6-29; included in DIMMITT/VAN BUITENEN 1978: 30-31). This expresses the paradox concerning who is the source and creator of the universe. A second story relates how the great sage Mārkaṇḍeya, who has the boon of never dying, wanders about inside Viṣṇu's body during the time when the manifest world has been dissolved. Three times, Mārkaṇḍeya slips out of Viṣṇu's body and

groups championing their own deity as the highest god has its own “solution” to the paradox, but in their contemplation of the mutual relation of divine and human, there is only an amazed acceptance of the paradox. The two figures in the myths recounted above “at first think that God is their son and that he is inside them . . . Both of them come to learn that God is their parent and that they are inside him. Yet this second vision does not replace the first view; it supplements it. God is both inside and outside them, is both their child and their parent.”¹⁹

I have included this summary of DONIGER O’FLAHERTY’S interpretation of Indian dreams because it represents one important Indian view of dreams, and of reality, namely that dreams are paradoxically both real and unreal. They contain within themselves an enactment of the real, such as Viṣṇu or Brahmā dreaming the world into existence within his body. But there is also the need to transform that internalized world outward into a manifest, concrete form. Yet, in doing so, there remains the question of which is creating the other: is the manifest world the source of the dream world or visa versa? The answer one provides to that question determines in large part how a person will interpret a dream and act upon it.

This tension over how the Indian consciousness understands the reality of dreams can be seen in the two great Indian philosophers ŚAṆKARA (8th century) and RĀMĀNUJA (12th century). This is best seen in their treatment of an important passage from the *Vedānta Sūtras* on the nature of dreams.

ŚAṆKARA and the Illusory Nature of the Dream World

ŚAṆKARA’S commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras* would seem to reinforce the dream world’s illusory quality. The main question ŚAṆ-

finds himself in the great ocean of milk that is the quiescent and undifferentiated universe. Terrified, he is confronted with the profound question about what is real, the dream world he has wandered about within Viṣṇu’s body or the great ocean outside that body. The story never resolves this tension (see ZIMMER 1946: 35-53).

¹⁹ DONIGER O’FLAHERTY 1984: 255.

KARA raises is whether or not we should understand the world of the dream as having a reality that is comparable to that of the waking state. His conclusion is that it cannot be real in the same way because “the nature of the dream world does not manifest itself with the totality of the attributes of real things,” that is, with time, space, efficient cause and irrefutability.²⁰ While the dream may appear to have these qualities at the time of the dreaming, they are immediately refuted upon waking. Yet, he is not prepared to deny all validity to dreams as a source of knowledge. Those who are expert in the “science of dreams,” for example, argue that elements in dreams, such as elephants or donkeys, can be signs of what happens in the waking state, signs that can often be sent by minor deities (*devatās*) or caused by special *mantras*.²¹ ŚAÑKARA does not accept that these signs have any reality, since they are part of the dream. Yet, he does go so far as to say that, while the dream world might be illusory, the thing it points to, such as good or bad fortune, can in fact be real. What makes it so, however, is not the dream itself, but the actions that the dreamer takes to actualize the dream’s message. In other words, the elements or events in the dream become real when the dreamer reenacts them in the waking state;²² good or bad fortune arises not because of the dream but because of what a person does while awake.

This being so, we must ask what generates such a world in the dream state. Here, ŚAÑKARA is less definitive, making some tantalizing statements that lead to a certain ambiguity. His main argument is that the individual *ātman* (elsewhere called *jīva*) is what generates and shapes the dream world. It does so in large part due to mental impressions (*vāsanā*) received during the waking state which in turn makes them seem “equal to the [waking state] in appearance.”²³ Ne-

²⁰ ŚAÑKARĀCĀRYA, *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya*, III.2.3 (= THIBAUT 1904b: 134/2 vol).

²¹ ŚAÑKARĀCĀRYA, *The Vedānta Sūtras* III.2.4 (=THIBAUT 1904b: 136/2 vol).

²² ŚAÑKARĀCĀRYA, *The Vedānta Sūtras* III.2.4 (=THIBAUT 1904b: 137/2 vol).

²³ ŚAÑKARĀCĀRYA, *The Vedānta Sūtras* III.2.6 (=THIBAUT 1904b: 141/2 vol).

vertheless, because the individual *ātman* is also the supreme *ātman* (called “Lord” in this passage), albeit in a state that is “obscured by its connection with the body,”²⁴ there is a sense in which the Lord-*ātman*/*Brahman* also participates in generating and shaping the dream-state world by virtue of being the source of all. ŚAṄKARA writes that we do not “deny altogether that the highest Self is active in dreams; for as being the Lord of all it may be considered as the guide and ruler of the soul in all its states.”²⁵

The Interpretation of Dreams by RĀMĀNUJA and the Śrīvaiṣṇavas

RĀMĀNUJA gives a brief interpretation of the relevant section of the *Vedānta Sūtras*,²⁶ but that interpretation suggests a philosophical foundation that is very different from the interpretation of dreams in ŚAṄKARA’s Advaitavedānta. The difference turns on two recurring arguments over ambiguous terms.²⁷ One text in dispute is *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* IV.3.10: “He creates chariots, horses and roads ... he himself creates blessings, happiness, joys, and so on.” The interpretation RĀMĀNUJA is opposing takes the “he” who creates in dreams to refer to the individual soul; RĀMĀNUJA insists rather that the “he” refers to the Supreme Soul, i.e. *Brahman*, on the basis of his interpretation of the third *sūtra* in the section. Since that *sūtra*, which is referring to dreams, begins, “But it is mere *Māyā*,” this would seem an unpromising support for arguing that the Supreme Soul is really creating the dream, and that what is being created is real. RĀMĀNUJA, however, does not understand *māyā* to mean “illusion” but rather “wonderful or miraculous creation.”²⁸ “Absolute *mā-*

²⁴ ŚAṄKARĀCĀRYA, *The Vedānta Sūtras* III.2.6 (=THIBAUT 1904b: 140/2).

²⁵ ŚAṄKARĀCĀRYA, *The Vedānta Sūtras* III.2.4 (=THIBAUT 1904b: 138/2).

²⁶ RĀMĀNUJA, *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary by Rāmānuja* ad III.2.2 (=THIBAUT 1904b: 601).

²⁷ The following discussion is based upon RĀMĀNUJA, *The Vedānta Sūtras* III.2.1-6 (=THIBAUT 1904b: 601-604).

²⁸ RĀMĀNUJA, *The Vedānta Sūtras* III.2.3 (=THIBAUT 1904b: 602).

yā” means “things created by the Supreme Person.” He explains the text cited to mean, “The Supreme Person creates things to be perceived [only] by the dreamer and persisting for a certain time only.” While the individual soul after its liberation in principle possesses the power to realize its wishes, it does not yet have the power while bound in *saṃsāra*, for its true nature is hidden by its sin, caused by the endless chain of *karma*. RĀMĀNUJA adds that the Supreme Person’s special dream creations are intended to be a reward or punishment for good or bad deeds of minor importance, i.e. minor in comparison with deeds that lead to the soul returning to the world in a new body that experiences pleasures or pain in the waking state. In his final comment, RĀMĀNUJA notes that “according to scripture, dreams are prophetic of future good or ill fortune”, a position elaborated by those who claim to be experts in the science of dreams. Now, concludes RĀMĀNUJA, if the dreams were created according to the wish of the individual dreamer, they would portray only good fortune, and this is manifestly not the case. “Hence”, RĀMĀNUJA states, “The creation which takes place in dreams can be the Lord’s work only”. Behind Veṅkaṭeśvara’s response to his dream is RĀMĀNUJA’s assumption of the reality of all dreams and RĀMĀNUJA’s conclusion, as a theological commentator, that the Vedānta affirms dreams as special divine creations of limited duration for specific persons, the dreamers.

While RĀMĀNUJA stays close to his Vedāntic source in interpreting dreams, the hagiographies of the great Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers go further. One is of special importance: the dream that the very first leader of the community, NĀTHAMUNI, had while visiting the childhood home of Lord Kṛṣṇa in Bṛndāvan, more than a thousand miles to the north, on the banks of the Yamunā River. NĀTHAMUNI wanted to settle down and stay permanently in the holy place, but Lord Kṛṣṇa appeared to him in a dream, in his image form in the temple in NĀTHAMUNI’s home village, and ordered him to return home to the Tamil country and serve him there. That service is reported to have included collecting the Tamil hymns praising Viṣṇu by the Tamil poet-saints and arranging for them to be sung in the otherwise Sanskrit liturgy of the temple dedicated to Viṣṇu and his consort Śrī (or Lakṣmī). It was not the ancient Kṛṣṇa but Kṛṣṇa living in his temple

image (*ārcāvatāra*) who instructed NĀTHAMUNI to begin a new community of Brahmins and non-Brahmins singing his praises and defending his supremacy against rival philosophies. Was it this present-day Kṛṣṇa who appeared to the young man Veṅkaṭeśvara faced with the most important decision of his life – the choice of a life-partner – or was it Viṣṇu’s new *avatāra* for the modern age, worshipped only outside the temple by the outcastes at the edge of the village, whom they called Yesuswami, “Lord Jesus”?

In either case, Veṅkaṭeśvara made the further assumption of the Vaiṣṇava tradition, not evident in RĀMĀNUJA’s own writings, that the Lord can appear in a dream to his devotees with explicit instructions for life-changing decisions after the dream is over. In the case of NĀTHAMUNI’s dream just mentioned, that dream-command leads to the establishment of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community. In Veṅkaṭeśvara’s case, the dream initiated a series of decisions that led to his baptism, his marriage into a Christian family, and his preparation for an entirely different career as a Christian catechist and pastor.

Certainty and Uncertainty in Dreams and in “Glaube”

The diverse Hindu views of the reality and significance of dreams remarkably parallel diverse interpretations of “faith” both among and within various religious traditions. Among these varieties of “faith” are certain distinct types, which vary both in their significance in the religious systems of which each is a part and in their relation to certitude or certainty. The basic Islamic view of faith (*imān*) is that the dependence of the finite universe on its all-powerful Creator and sustainer is so evident that denial of that truth is morally reprehensible; it is ingratitude, the root sin. In this case, faith is both subjectively and objectively certain. That might also seem to be the case with the view of faith in the Epistle of James, but there is an important difference. For James, God’s existence is certain, but that belief is not so religiously important as moral action, specifically works of love (*agápē*). The predominant view in the New Testament is that faith is objectively *uncertain*; it lacks the evidence of sense perception. Thus we have the definition in Hebrews: “The assurance of

things hoped for, ... the conviction of things not seen.”²⁹ In some cases, Christians have understood faith as that which is irrational or paradoxical (*Credo quia absurdum*, attributed to TERTULLIAN), that is, *objectively* uncertain by standards other than those of faith.

One may, however, be *subjectively* certain or sure (*gewiss*) about the object of one’s faith, as well as certain about the life-saving nature of that faith. If we look at Hindu and Buddhist concepts that we might translate as *Glaube*, they include the general Hindu concept of *śraddhā*, which means a necessary confidence in any path to salvation one has chosen to follow, and *viśvāsa*, which theistic Hindus, and Christians who have borrowed the term, understand as devotion or personal commitment to the highest divinity in personal form, who is the way as well as the goal.

Among Buddhists, there is a notion of a faith that is indispensable at the beginning of one’s spiritual journey but that diminishes in importance as faith is replaced by knowledge. There is also, however, the Japanese Shin Buddhist notion of *shinjin*, often rendered in English as “faith”, a translation to which some of their scholars object, since they consider the Christian concept of faith to be too dualistic.³⁰ *Shinjin* for them is the union in past, present, and future of Amida Buddha’s compassionate mind with their utterly foolish and sinful human selves. Paradox is piled on paradox as the believer confidently asserts, in the midst of a bleak world, when calling on Amida’s name: “My birth in the Pure Land is settled; my salvation is sure.”

With this brief comparison of types of faith in mind, what can we say about the significance of *Glaubensgewissheit* with respect to dreams of divine communication? They combine a high degree of objective uncertainty (i.e. according to the standards of the waking state) with varying degrees of subjective certainty. At times, such subjective certainty can lead to conflict between the one given the dream communication and those who base their faith on the less directly experienced communication of scripture and tradition. What is

²⁹ Hebrews 11:1.

³⁰ For a discussion of *shinjin*, see chapter 7, “Amida’s Grace and Shinran’s Faith” in my book, CARMAN 1994: 115-42.

striking about RĀMĀNUJA's faith, as OBERHAMMER further elucidates elsewhere in this volume,³¹ is that faith in the metaphysical reality of Lord Viṣṇu and his consort is understood to be made vivid by a meditation on (or devotional remembering of) the Vedic (*Upaniṣadic*) passages that becomes almost as vivid and direct as physical perception and "as continuous as the flow of oil". The interpretation of the *Upaniṣads* in the *Vedānta Sūtras* is so sacred as to be treated with the same respect as the Vedas themselves. Communication in dreams would be expected to confirm the truth already accepted through meditating on the scriptures. In this, as in many other respects, Christian and Śrīvaiṣṇava orthodoxy agree, though their social settings are very different.

The account of both the dreams and the faith of their great teachers in the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographies have a different emphasis than in RĀMĀNUJA's own writings. One favorite story is about RĀMĀNUJA's debate with YAJÑAMŪRTI, an eloquent disciple of ŚĀṄKARA, who was so sure that he would defeat RĀMĀNUJA that he promised to convert to Śrīvaiṣṇavism in the unlikely event that he would fail. RĀMĀNUJA was unwilling to promise to convert if he failed; he promised only to admit that he had been defeated. The later tradition's memory and interpretation of RĀMĀNUJA's faith places it at a deeper level than RĀMĀNUJA's skill as a debater. Indeed, according to the story, by the night before the final debate, neither debater had succeeded in convincing his opponent. Then, during the night, RĀMĀNUJA had a dream in which Lord Varada (an image-form of Viṣṇu) instructed him to use his predecessor YĀMUNA's arguments against ŚĀṄKARA's doctrine of the illusory character of the world – and of dreams. When RĀMĀNUJA appeared the next morning, he looked so confident that his opponent confessed defeat before the debate began and became RĀMĀNUJA's disciple.³² The modern dream-encounters leading to Christian conversion show some resemblance to the dreams recounted in the lives of the Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers. Obeying commands for a decisive change of life and gaining new confidence because of the divine communication both signify a close

³¹ See OBERHAMMER in this vol. pp. 193ff.

³² CARMAN 1974: 41-2.

relation between the reality of the dream, the faith of the dreamer, and the subsequent life decisions of those who have experienced the dream, often along with their families. The reality of the dream is more than a subjective certitude opposed to a rational skepticism, and the reality of faith is more than an emotional high. Divine reality when mediated through human consciousness has real, if limited, power to change the persons most directly affected and the world around them. For both Hindus and Christians in India, this is the power to break through, even if only very partially, the bondage of caste barriers in order to create a more inclusive community of those belonging to the Lord's own people.

Concluding Reflections

When we consider dreams as a cultural phenomenon, we need to include their diverse interpretations. In Vedānta and classical Indian thought more generally, the dream is considered to be *māyā*, but *māyā* has two seemingly opposite interpretations: illusion and miraculous creation. Both meanings may go back to *māyā*'s earlier meaning of "magical power". It all depends on whether you accept the credulous view of magic, a real power to do extraordinary things when in the hands of a real expert, or the skeptical view, in which *māyā* is the magician's trick accomplished by his sleight of hand and his power to fool our minds. DONIGER O'FLAHERTY has shown how the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* brings together dreaming and creating in paradoxical fashion without determining which is primary. For a certain Indian mindset they simply belong together. It is clear that, for RĀMĀNUJA, Divine creation is the larger and more comprehensive category; dreaming is only a special kind of Divine creation in a system in which there is no room for illusion or indeed for fundamental error of any kind.

There is an interesting combination of these opposite connotations of dreaming in CHARLES DICKENS' *A Christmas Carol*. On the whole, it is a good example of the category of dreams I have been highlighting: divine or angelic communication through dreams to effect some important change. In the case of Ebenezer Scrooge, the total effect of his visitations by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas

Present, and Christmas Yet-to-Come was his conversion, a real *metanoia* or change of heart. But, the skeptical view of dreams is, as Doniger O'FLAHERTY points out, included in Scrooge's own words early in the story:

“When Ebenezer Scrooge encounters the Ghost of Marley, the Ghost observes that Scrooge does not believe in him, and he asks Scrooge what evidence of his (the Ghost's) reality he would have beyond that of his senses, and why he doubts his senses. Scrooge replies: ‘A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato’.”³³

Unconverted at the beginning of the story, Scrooge might have regarded the bright new world of Christmas morning as an illusory dream, as DICKENS' many depressing accounts of nineteenth century England make clear. Yet even if that were true, we would have to say that it is a Christian dream: the brief glimpse of the coming kingdom that most of us have not yet seen.

In defining the problematic behind this symposium, OBERHAMMER has asked us to consider whether we might avoid the difficulties of an interpretation of religious faith that focuses on the (absolute) truth (*Wahrheit*) of the object of faith by turning our attention to the conviction of the certainty (*Gewissheit*) of human encounter with the Transcendent.³⁴ I suspect that we may confront the same difficulty in a new guise, but it may be useful to see that there are not only different representations or conceptions of the primordial religious encounter, but also different views of the subjective certainty or certitude of that encounter, most noticeably between the subjective assurance of the revelatory experience and the skepticism or outright disbelief of many to whom the supposed revelation is communicated. On the other hand, the examples I have given suggest that there may be similar religious ideas and experiences that can be interpreted in the different “languages” of at least two distinct traditions. Indeed, it

³³ DONIGER O'FLAHERTY 1984: 44-45, citing CHARLES DICKENS, *A Christmas Carol*, Stave I.

³⁴ See OBERHAMMER'S introductory article in this vol. p. 9f.

may be that there is considerable common imagery in many cultures that recognize several religious traditions. I am impressed by the extent to which both Christian and Hindu accounts of significant divine-human encounters regard the consequence of such encounters, not in the abstract language concerning degrees of reality, but in more concrete language suggesting a power to change social – and eventually cosmic – realities, changing the present and transforming the future.

It is more difficult to decide whether the observer’s discovery of similarities and differences can lead us in a particular philosophical or theological direction. Do either the authoritative scriptures of one religion or powerful revelatory experiences of particular individuals or communities enable us to translate Transcendent encounter into the more personal language of “God commands” or “God heals”? In the context of this symposium, this remains an open question.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CARMAN 1974 CARMAN, JOHN B., *The Theology of Rāmānuja. An Essay in Interreligious Understanding*. [Yale Publications in Religion 18]. New Haven, London 1974.
- CARMAN 1994 Id., *Majesty and Meekness. A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God*. Grand Rapids 1994.
- DIMITT 1978 CORNELIA DIMMITT, JOHANNES ADRIANUS BERNARDUS VAN BUITENEN, (eds./trans.) *Classical Hindu Mythology. A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas*. Philadelphia 1978.
- DONIGER 1984 WENDY DONIGER O’FLAHERTY, *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities*. Chicago 1984.
- HUDSON 2000 DENNIS D. HUDSON, *Protestant Origins in India. Tamil Evangelical Christians, 1706-1835*. [Studies in the History of Christian Missions]. Richmond, Surrey 2000.

- LUKE/CARMAN 1968 P.Y. LUKE, JOHN B. CARMAN. *Village Christians and Hindu Culture*. Rural Churches in South India. [*World Studies of Churches in Mission*]. London 1968.
- PATTON 2004 KIMBERLEY PATTON, A Great and Strange Correction: Intentionality, Locality and Epiphany in the Category of Dream Incubation. In: *History of Religions* 43/3 (2004), pp. 194-223.
- THIBAUT 1904a GEORGE THIBAUT (trans.), *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary of by Śaṅkarācārya*. [*Sacred Books of the East Series* 38]. Oxford 1904 [Reprint Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1962].
- THIBAUT 1904b Id., *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary of by Rāmānuja*. [*Sacred Books of the East Series* 48]. Oxford 1904 [Reprint Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1962].
- ZIMMER 1946 HEINRICH ZIMMER, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, JOSEPH CAMPBELL (ed.). [*The Bollingen Library* 6]. New York 1946 [Inc. Reprint New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962].