Globethics Repository



The Presence of the Holy in the Lilanukarana

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Weber, Edmund
Publisher	Frankfurt University
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-16 22:04:28
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/191216

Edmund Weber: The Presence of the Holy in the Lilanukarana. On the Theology of Play in the Religion of Braj.
Journal of Religious Culture / Journal für Religionskultur No. 44 (2001)

Journal of Religious Culture
Journal für Religionskultur
Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber
in Association with / in Zusammenarbeit mit Matthias Benad
Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main
ISSN 1434-5935- © E.Weber

No. 44 (2001)

The Presence of the Holy in the Līlānukaraṇa

By

Edmund Weber

The people of Braj[1] are attracted by the Holy in many ways. But nowhere is its attraction perceived as strongly as in the public performances of the līlās[2] of Kṛṣṇa[3] – the līlānukaraṇas[4]. Although by their aesthetic constitution these dramatic performances are a mixture of song, theater and dance, they do not belong to the genre of folkloric entertainment, for in their very essence they are revelations of the Holy. Thus in Braj the Holy is not at all considered a nirguṇa[5] entity concealing itself from the world. On the contrary, it reveals itself plainly and unmistakably. This revelation is fully authentic because in its essence the Holy is saguṇa[6], i.e. possessed of form.[7] This, however, further means that the līlānukaraṇa do not present something

* Cf., German Version: Theion - Annual for Religious Culture II, Frankfurt am Main 1993, p. 169-176

[1] Hindi (= Hind.) braj, m.; Sanskrit (= Skr.) vraja, m.: the camp of the cowherd people or the cows; here: the sacred land of Kṛṣṇa, situated north of Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India. Cf. Entwistle, A.W. Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage. Groningen, Groningen Oriental Studies Vol. 3., 1987: 1–8.

[2] Skr. līlā, f.: the play, i.e. an activity that has not arisen from an interest and is not done for some interest. Regarding līlā theology, cf. especially Eidlitz, Walther. Die indische Gottesliebe. 1955: 40–50. Corcoran, Maura. Vṛndāvana in Vaiṣṇava Braj Literature. Diss., London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1980: 104–25.

[3] Skr. kṛṣṇa, adj.: dark; here: one of the names, i.e. invocation mantras, of the Holy in Braj. However, in their encounters with the Holy, the Brajbāsīs (Hind. brajbāsī, Skr. vraja + vāsī, mf.: the residents of the Braj) usually address the Holy with the more intimate name śyāmasundara (Skr. śyāma, adj.: black, dark; Skr. sundara, adj.: beautiful. The color indicates that Kṛṣṇa draws everything into himself, thus not pushing anything away or withdrawing from it.

[4] Skr. līlā + anu + karaṇa = līlānukaraṇa, n.: the appropriate performance of a līlā. Cf. John F. Hawley in association with Shrivatsa Goswami: At Play with Krishna: Pilgramage Dramas from Brindavan. 1981: 17.

[5] Skr. nirguṇa, adj.: without qualities, formless.

[6] Skr. saguṇa, adj.: with qualities, having form.

[7] According to the saguṇa religion, the nature of the Holy is 'with form'. Also belonging to the saguṇa type is that religion in which the Holy is visualized as nāman (Skr. nāman, n.: name, form). According to the nirguṇa religion, the nature of the Holy is amorphous, and thus on principle its manifestations are to be considered unreal.

mundane as sacred, nor do they present a 'substitute religion' – for they offer the experience of the Holy moving among and with the līlānukaraṇa, as their equal, freely and naturally, without fear of touch by the creature. And this unconcern for possible worldly contamination allows the Brajbāsīs to meet the Holy without fear, and in intimate friendship.

Thus, it is totally out of question to interpret the līlānukaraṇa as symbolic drama.[8] The notion of symbolic encounter implies a distancing from the sacred, which is entirely absent from the līlānukaraṇas. It would ultimately reduce them to mere objects of intellectual and aesthetic consumption. By default, a symbolic interpretation does not permit a direct experience of the Holy. Līlānukaraṇa, on the other hand, is distinguished solely by an attitude of fearless (i.e. unmotivated) readiness to venture into existential participation in the pastime.[9]

By its symbolistic interpretation, the nirguṇa religion tries to strip the saguṇa religion of its very nature and thus subject it to the nirguṇa view of the Holy. Since in the nirguṇa religion the Holy does not possess qualities, there is no question of its revealing itself as rūpa (Skr., n.: form). To various degrees, Vedānta Hinduism, Buddhism, modern atheism, and symbolistic theologies and theories follow the nirguṇa religion (cf. Eidlitz, ibid., 45).

[8] According to John S. Hawley and Shrivatsa Goswami (ibid., 16) rāsa-līlā (Kṛṣṇa's circular dance with the cowherd ladies) is liturgy, equal to the Eucharist and the pūjā (Skr., f.: the religious worship of a Holy form, mostly of God]), and thus to be understood as a sacramental procedure (glossary, ibid., 317). This interpretation is undoubtedly appropriate. Unfortunately, the reference to the Eucharist doctrine is not dealt with more deeply; it is limited to a descriptive, comparative mentioning. In my opinion, this causes the authors, by use of the a-religiously interpreted word “imitation” (ibid., 17), to understand rāsa-līlā more in the sense of a symbolic act and attach its reality to subjective belief (ibid., 18). But the Sanskrit expression anu-karaṇa, which the word imitation refers to, means “real repetition,” i.e. a real presentation of an original (here sacral) event, as such resembling a Roman Catholic Mass. An actual repetition is possible because of the līlā's spatio-temporal omnipresence. The authors' explanation, based on their symbolizing tendency, that the Brajbāsīs do not believe in the svarūpas (Skr. svarūpa, m.: one’s own form), i.e. Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in līlānukaraṇa, in the same way as American children do in Santa Claus, is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of līlā as religious reality. The alternative of either childlike faith or symbolic belief is wrong. When children see Santa Claus they think he is real, not just played. Of course, as John S. Hawley and Shrivatsa Goswami rightly comment, the adult Brajbāsīs are not under this illusion of the children. However, there is no reason for them to think in that way, for from the nature of the līlā it follows that only a played Kṛṣṇa can be the real Kṛṣṇa. The use of the word belief (see above) for distinguishing the līlā perspective of adult Brajbāsīs from that of the children seems to be not less problematic, since it depicts the Brajbāsīs as people who either believe against their better judgment or who have a split consciousness. However, the fact that they neither subscribe to a confused symbolism nor to a childlike faith becomes obvious when one understands līlā as the nature of Kṛṣṇa that manifests most purely in the līlānukaraṇa. But that the original nature of Kṛṣṇa is manifested without any restriction in the līlānukaraṇa, for this fact John S. Hawley and Shrivatsa Goswami do provide the key of understanding, namely by pointing out the power of visualization, which is of basic importance for the constitution of religious reality in the Braj religion (ibid., 17). Because symbolic interpretation makes nirguṇa religion the measure of any religious reality, it is useless for understanding the Braj religion, which is a saguṇa religion. One of the reasons for the almost automatic symbolic interpretation of all sacred phenomena is the fact that, even if moderately, the nirguṇa religion still determines the basic assumptions of the humanities to a large degree.

[9] However, human participation in the Holy pastimes is simply a consequence of man’s common nature with the Holy, not due to his capricious nature. Religious voyeurism, on the other hand, does not induce one to participate in the play; rather, it makes the play of others an object, because one has become withdrawn from one’s own nature, the play, while at the same time trying to visualize it in a covered way. This repression of one’s own nature and the hidden lust for it lead, as an unidentified compromise, to symbolic interpretation. But the reality of play can only be experienced by someone who enters into the world of play and participates freely.

The Braj religion reveals that Kṛṣṇa's actual existence is exclusively manifested through the play and in the play itself. Thus, the only way of realizing him is through the drama.[10]

Actually, according to līlā-theology, the intrinsic nature of the whole world is to manifest līlā, and thus everything that happens is a līlā of the Holy itself.[11] Thus the question arises as to what constitutes the specific character of the līlānukaraṇas, as compared to other līlās.

The līlānukaraṇas belong to the category of undisguised līlās.[12] They are not symbolic representations of līlās, but are revealed līlās, perceivable anu-karaṇas[13] of sacred līlās. In this world there are more disguised līlās than revealed ones; only with difficulty – if at all – can the disguised ones be perceived as līlā. Even if someone accepts the līlā nature of the world, he is normally unable to recognize līlā in nature and history. The stories of the līlānukaraṇa, however, can be understood; their content is generally familiar and their performance follows the rules of drama; everything can be understood.

In the līlānukaraṇas, whether enacted on a maṇḍala[14] or in a hall, Kṛṣṇa plays himself openly and without disguise. Whenever a līlānukaraṇa takes place, he manifests himself within the dimension of time. Thus, during the performance there is no distance between him and the other Brajbāsīs. And therefore līlānukaraṇa is darśana[15] – in the true sense of the word – a direct, asymbolic vision of the Holy.[16]

If, however, līlānukaraṇas were merely a symbolic event, it would belong to the disguised līlās of the natural, historical world; moreover, it would be the only līlā in which people are intentionally deluded into considering some real event – the totally revealed manifestation of the Holy – to be something symbolic.

If, on the other hand, the līlānukaraṇas as such are manifestations of holy līlās, then Kṛṣṇa himself is the actor playing as Kṛṣṇa, whatever name the young brahmin[17] may have in his civil life.

---

[10] Therefore the līlānukaraṇa is under no circumstances a symbolic substitute for some enigmatic holy thing or for some bygone sacral event; neither is it an imitative act of play, a seeming encounter with the Holy. By symbolic interpretation the līlānukaraṇas become spiritually desecrated, having been stripped of their most profound idea, and thus their very nature is covered. With this kind of intellectual-aesthetic religious voyeurism, the secularized consciousness has no other choice but to see the līlānukaraṇas – just as any liturgy – as a leisure-time activity, in other words, as a more or less successful folkloristic event. For this end, the truth of the līlānukaraṇas is denounced as exotic mythology. Thus only being able to interpret the līlānukaraṇas as an entertainment commodity, the religious voyeurism breaks into their sacredness. As a result, touristic colonialism – the exploitation of the manifestations of the Holy – is justified, with destructive consequences, as experience has shown, now also within the cultures of the East.

[11] In this connection, Eidlitz mentions “the external līlās.” (ibid., 48)

[12] In Christian culture known as liturgies and mystery plays. Cf. John S. Hawley / Shrivatsa Goswami, ibid., 13.

[13] Skr. anukaraṇa, n.: correct repetition.

[14] Skr. maṇḍala, n.: circle; here: the circular arenas (in Braj) where līlās are performed.

[15] Skr. darśana, n.: view, vision, revelation.

[16] Eidlitz, ibid., 45: The Holy play "has innumerable acts. It is, so to speak, being enacted simultaneously on God’s countless stages, ..". Thus he confirms that if all events of this world are only stage play, līlānukaraṇa is consequently the uncovered stage of Kṛṣṇa.

[17] John S. Hawley / Shrivatsa Goswami, ibid., 13.

This does not at all mean that a human of pre-puberty age is deified and has actually become Kṛṣṇa. Rather it means that Kṛṣṇa for some time plays himself as this young actor. It is not that by this act Kṛṣṇa becomes a human being. Since he is eternally all that exists, he already is human outside of the līlānukaraṇas, though in a concealed way. When appearing in a līlānukaraṇa as a human actor, he reveals his humanness, his 'co-nature'. This revelation of Kṛṣṇa's 'co-human' nature also rules out the idea of the youthful actor imitating Kṛṣṇa and thus becoming a kind of human symbol of Kṛṣṇa – an idea stemming from the nirguṇa mode of thinking.[18]

In the līlānukaraṇa, Kṛṣṇa's nature as an eternal player is manifested as rūpa. Therefore, in these performances he can be seen, heard, smelled, and even tasted – purely and directly. Whereas according to the nirguṇa concept the actor represents Kṛṣṇa only symbolically, the religious logic of līlānukaraṇa draws the opposite conclusion: If Kṛṣṇa wants to manifest his nature as a player, he must appear as the performer in the līlānukaraṇa.

Kṛṣṇa's nature is to play, either disguised or as he is. Thus if he wants to reveal himself to the people in his supreme aspect, as a player, he cannot appear other than as an actor. If he does appear as a non-actor, then his identity as a player remains hidden. He may manifest himself as creator, ruler, advisor or as a child, but his true nature is not perceivable in these forms.

Therefore, if Kṛṣṇa wants to be perceived in this world as he is, i.e. as a player, he can only as an actor, playing himself in the drama.

As a result, and contrary to the view of religious symbolism, Kṛṣṇa is not played by an actor, but the actor is played by Kṛṣṇa. In other words: by playing the Kṛṣṇa-actor, Kṛṣṇa can playfully communicate with the world. However, if he plays a role outside the līlānukaraṇa (which is, as it were, his normal condition) he disappears behind the mask of dharma[19]. Thus if Kṛṣṇa must be a Kṛṣṇa performer, the brāhmaṇa boy plays not only Kṛṣṇa, but also himself in his most pure form, since his nature as a human is non-different from Kṛṣṇa. In this sense Kṛṣṇa and the actor playing Kṛṣṇa are identical. Therefore, for the Brajbāsīs, the actor playing Kṛṣṇa is Kṛṣṇa. This further implies that līlānukaraṇa is the supreme revelation of Kṛṣṇa's being.

However, when the performer stops playing Kṛṣṇa and returns to his routine life, his Kṛṣṇa nature again becomes covered, from himself and from others.

Therefore, the Holy can manifest its supreme nature only by playing itself. In its purest form, this happens in this world in theatre. So if someone asks where and when Kṛṣṇa can be experienced directly, the answer is: Go to visit a līlānukaraṇa in Braj. There he can be directly perceived, without symbolic covering, for Kṛṣṇa himself is no one else than the young actor from

[18] In its struggle for superiority in the field of religious interpretation, the nirguṇa religion has undoubtedly achieved great success by use of the symbolic method. However, it should not be overlooked that in this way the culture of saguṇa religion is being exploited experience-wise, is spiritually reversed to the opposite and in the long run stripped of its life source, the experience of the Holy as rūpa and nāma.

[19] Skr. dharma, m.: the law; here: that which has been set by līlā.

Braj. The mime brings to light the truth of that which is mimed. Therefore, mimic līlānukaraṇas are the most exalted and powerful manifestation of the Holy.

Thus, if līlā, is the essence of Kṛṣṇa, and of his world also, then līlānukaraṇa, the conscious sacred play, constitutes true religion. And so the people of Braj know, just as does every pūjārī or friend of Kṛṣṇa, that they realize a līlā, that they play, that they are players in a play. This understanding is necessary, because the true nature of the Holy can only be revealed to the human being as human play. When religion is no longer played , nor understood as play, it will inevitably be declared as non-play, as a necessity and thus linked to work and duty.[20] It is then merely symbolic representation and thus a pseudo-play of another reality. In this way the playful nature of the Holy becomes covered and conceals itself in the māyic[21] form of dharma, which subsists on karma[22].

The karmistic religion cannot bear the playful nature of reality. Rather, this religion resembles a playful child so much absorbed in its play that it does not find its way out of its imaginary world. Thus absorbed in his līlā, man has forgotten this truth, the freedom of play, and does not realize anymore that he is both subject and object of the play. But even in his apparently playless situation, man exhibits his līlā nature, for it enables him to generate the world of karma, to follow its laws, and put himself at its mercy, under the delusion that it is not his own and is thus an unchangeable reality.

This self-developed immaturity in a self-created world covers the exquisite beauty of Śyāmasundara, the dark and handsome one, who, in the eyes of the work-bound human, transforms into yama[23], the god of dharma, who is sentencing and enacting revenge according to karma. By this reversal of the Holy man loses sight of its beauty. Having also lost sight of his own beauty, which is nothing but the joy of playing, he constantly strives in vain to regain it through applying karmic cosmetics, though his own splendor is never actually lost. The reason

---

[20] In this connection, John S. Hawley's and Shrivatsa Goswami's reference to a benefit idea (ibid., 18) current in Braj should be mentioned. It is however diametrically opposed to the a-karmic religion of bhakti (Skr., f.: devotion to the Holy; see also ibid., 16). To gain an advantage by participation in rāsa-līlā through a kind of belief-work is absurd because all activities within the maṇḍala are just meant to be unmotivated because of the actors' being carried away by the Holy. The sacred play is characterized by taking place out of itself, in itself and for itself. It happens without cause and purpose outside of itself. Bhakti is the state of mind accompanying the sacred play. It is so strong that it neither hankers for any benefit nor can it be reached by any benefit. As such it has to find its satisfaction within the play with the Holy. Eidlitz quotes Kṛṣṇa, who says in the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, a canonic scripture of the Kṛṣṇa-bhakti religion, that he has nothing to give to the cowherd damsels burning with love for him, but this very love for him. So big is their love for him that he remains indebted to them, being unable to give something equal in return (ibid., 238). Besides the radical bhakti religion one can also find the karma religion in Braj, a religion that turns bhakti, which is by nature free love of God, into an unfree love, a kind of paid work (because of being misused for the sake of benefits). The payment is saṁsāra (Skr., m.: existence, the cycle of birth and death, cycling around existence). Regarding the problem of law and gospel in the Braj religion, cf. Weber, Edmund: Der Diebstahl der Flöte. In: Indien in Deutschland. Ed.: E. Weber, in cooperation with R. Töpelmann, Frankfurt am Main, 1990: 201–11).

[21] Skr. māyā, f.: illusion; here: the inability to perceive the līlā nature of the cosmos. From this inability results the instinct-like idea that the human energy must be sacrificed to a goal set above life, i.e. the justice-dharma, or in other words, it must be transformed into karma. This karmistic religion has, up to this day, determined human history in spite of the rebellions of salvation movements. Cf. Weber, Edmund: Karma und Werk: Zum Problem religiöser Gerechtigkeit. In: Religion und Weltgestaltung, 1991: No. 2.

[22] Skr. karma(n), n.: act, work, sacrifice; the effecting effected work; here: the energy wanting to fulfill the dharma.

[23] Skr. yama, m.: the god of death and justice.

for this addiction to self-decoration is the notion of his own imperfection, necessarily resulting from the forgetfulness of his own purposelessness. This idea progresses without end, never reaching the aim, because actually it is has already been attained. Instead of yielding beauty, such Sisyphean labor generates only the mask of ugliness. However, in order to be able to view one's own play-nature as beauty, one has to regain the pleasure in playing by remembering that there is no viable alternative to the freedom of play.

There is nothing but play. Kṛṣṇa realizes himself by playing. Thus Kṛṣṇa can only be himself when he plays himself. He cannot be otherwise. If Kṛṣṇa can do nothing but play, this implies that he can only be free.

If however Kṛṣṇa is made a symbolized figure, by clearly distinguishing between the Kṛṣṇa-performer and Kṛṣṇa himself (thus disguising Kṛṣṇa as a symbolic doll), then in the consciousness of man Kṛṣṇa is robbed of his existence within the temporal dimension, and his real manifestations within time are misrepresented as a symbolic non-reality. If the symbolic interpretation of the līlānukaraṇa were appropriate, then Kṛṣṇa would not reveal himself within them, but would show the Brajbāsīs sham-theatre and mummery.

However, in this case, Kṛṣṇa would also be incapable of manifesting himself as the Kṛṣṇa-performer, of meeting people in an open and undisguised manner, and of experiencing them as his own kith and kin, sharing in their pleasure and their pain.

The freedom of play that is made possible by the real līlās in the līlānukaraṇas grants man independence of that illusion which has forgotten the freedom of play and the play of freedom as basic existential feature of this world, thus considering itself chance or necessity, without recognizing that it is just driven by the game of delusion. This kind of self-deception arises when the human player has failed to find the way back to himself and thus believes he has to earn his own existence as karmakara.[24] But the freedom of play in līlānukaraṇa especially indicates the possibility to participate in the sacred interplay, free from the bondage of dharma. In theater play only can man become Kṛṣṇa's playmate, for only thus can he encounter him as he is and on an equal platform. Therefore, the līlānukaraṇa is a time-space in which men are plucked out of dharma that otherwise dictates their covered existence, subjecting them to the constraining process of meeting necessities. But the change of roles is a constitutive element of the līlānukaraṇas. Kṛṣṇa plays Rādhā, and the brāhmaṇa boys play the gop…s[25]. This intentional and unrestrained interchange of roles reveals playful freedom as an intrinsic feature of man. In līlānukaraṇa, the rāsa-maṇḍalīs[26] experience the transcendence of their daily dharma as well as its līlā genesis. They show men that in spite of the pleasure and pain arising from dharma they can not only play with the Holy, but can play the Holy itself. The Brajbāsīs' experience that their dharma, and the corresponding roles ascribed to them, can be overruled, whether they de-

[24] Skr. karmakara, m.: the paid worker.

[25] Skr. gopī, f.: cowherd damsel.

[26] Skr. rāsa-maṇḍala, n.: the circular arena for Kṛṣṇa's circular dance with the cowherd damsels; derived from this is rāsa-maṇḍalī (Skr., m.: the circular dancer) who among other things performs the rāsa-līlā (Skr., f.: circular dance).

sire it or not. They experience and keep in mind that there is free darśana and free pūjā[27] – entirely voluntary and spontaneous.

The creative force of free play is the imagination. The līlānukaraṇa supplies the imagination with space and time for visualization, and the imagination supplies the theatre with the opportunity for portraying the truth.

Will the Holy in its free and natural imagination continue to control the līlānukaraṇas in Braj, or will it be masked beyond recognition by the apparently unavoidable onslaught of the touristic entertainment industry,[28] Whatever the answer to this question, it is being asked for the first time by the modern world – and its current nirguṇa mentality determines the answer.

[27] Cf. John Hawley/Shrivatsa Goswami, ibid., 16. Whereas in the visible appearance of pūjā, in which a mūrti (Skr., f.: the Holy as deity) is taken care of, the mūrti rests and the pūjārī (Skr., m.: the priest) acts, in the appearance of līlānukaraṇa the (human) mūrti is active, while the pūjārī and the bhakta (Skr. m.: someone who is fully engaged with something or someone; here: a person fully attracted by the Holy) are passive. Undoubtedly the theatre performance involving everyone, which can still be seen on festive days and on pilgrimages, is the most appropriate form of līlānukaraṇa. The reduction of the spectators' direct participation is the price paid for a labor-divisional cultural society.

[28] The masking of the sacredness of the līlānukaraṇa and other types of manifestation of the Holy is officially supported in many places of pilgrimage under the slogan of touristic development. In India, an unholy alliance of pseudo-secularistic politics and a-religious intelligence is notable in this connection. While some further the commercialization of the Holy, others propagate the corresponding ideology of anti-religious symbolism. A radical anti-religious policy is presently considered inopportune due to the possible profit from marketing religion. Instead, the pseudo-secularistic forces in alliance with anti-religious communists concentrate on the weakening of mass movements that aspire for a seasonable culture of communication with the sacred.