

Comparative Theology

Engaging Particularities Conference Papers

Boston College

Year 2008

Indian Ramnamis and African American
Slaves: Spiritual Sorority? A Study in
Theological Ethics “On the Ground”

Matthew Sherman
Boston College,

Indian Ramnamis and African American Slaves: Spiritual Sorority?
A Study in Theological Ethics “On the Ground”

Matthew Sherman, Boston College

In the face of active repression at the hands of local heirarchs, the Ramnami Samaj and the “evangelical” African American slave community fostered religious beliefs and practices that granted them the agency denied them by society at large. What follows is an investigation into these two traditions, primarily using Ramdas Lamb’s *Rapt in the Name: The Ramnamis, Ramnam, and Untouchable Religion in Central India*, and Albert Raboteau’s *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*. Certainly, both the *samaj* and the slave community are socio-culturally particular, but it is in and through these particularities that they exhibit similar religious and moral functions. Also, in a wider sense, what follows will be an investigation into the creation of “just society,” that is, the creation of a moral and spiritual order that upholds humanity, nurtures spiritual strivings, and actualizes participation.

The moral and spiritual order of the Ramnami Samaj

The Ramnami Samaj of Central India has been in existence for one hundred years, and was founded on one key principle: Nothing is more important than devotion to Ram, chiefly expressed through the practice of *Ramnam*, the chanting of the divine name. In the view of the Ramnamis’ founder, Parasuram, gaining the graces of Ram—the pinnacle of devotion—was best attained through complete faith in chanting *Ramnam*.¹ Moreover, Ramnamis understand Ram via his characterization as derived from the *Ramacaritmanas* (the “*Manas*”).² The choice of using *Ramnam* and of the *Manas* as scripture was surely not unique to the Ramnamis; devotion to the *Manas* was common in Parasuram’s region, as was participation in *bhakti* (devotion) via chanting. Such chanting was a central practice of such sects as the Kabirpanth and the Satnami Samaj, both in

¹ Ramdas Lamb, *Rapt in the Name: The Ramnamis, Ramnam, and Untouchable Religion in Central India* (Albany: State University of New York, 2002) Pp. 61-63.

² Lamb 37.

existence more than a century before the Ramnami Samaj.³ Thus, Parasuram's devotion to the *Manas* and chanting *Ramnam* was, in some ways, pre-ordained by the culture of his day.

The *Manas*, therefore, became a formative influence in the distinctive philosophy of the Ramnamis. This is notable because, in contrast to the Sanskrit version of the Ram story, the *Manas* largely depict Ram as an unequalled divinity, worthy of praise from all humans in the form of *Ramnam*. As the *Manas* say, "One Ram is the object of devotion"⁴ Of note, the *Manas* are written not in the sacred Hindu Sanskrit, but rather, in medieval dialect, another feature that made them more widely accessible than other texts.⁵ The *Manas* even feature characters of low caste as some of their primary figures and deliberately de-emphasize caste prescriptions of *varnashrama-dharma*.⁶ Nonetheless, the *Manas* also depict Ram supporting the importance of Brahmins: Ram is referred to as the "protector of Vedic boundaries" whose devotees must "endure suffering for the sake of *brahmins* and cows"⁷

Here, it is fitting to note that Parasuram was one of the only literate members of his largely outcaste movement, and he taught the *Manas* to his followers by making its verses an integral part of *Ramnam*.⁸ In part due to the largely non-literate origins of the Ramnami Samaj, then, such caste-friendly verses as the one above could be disregarded, and some Ramnamis did not even know such verses existed. Instead, the *Manas* were/are⁹ used as storehouses of wisdom verses leading the worshipper to complete faith in Ram.¹⁰ For those who are literate, their literacy empowers them to peruse the *Manas* in search of those verses that comprise their corpus of non-orthodox, more democratic beliefs.¹¹ As Lamb explains, "In [the Ramnamis'] view, the authoritativeness of a verse

³ Lamb 45-60.

⁴ Lamb 42

⁵ Lamb 37.

⁶ Lamb 40.

⁷ Lamb 40.

⁸ Lamb 64.

⁹ As the *samaj* was historically situated yet persists to the present day, tense is difficult to maintain when writing of it.

¹⁰ Lamb 116.

¹¹ Lamb 117.

or text is determined...by its content.”¹² The *Manas* themselves are of course quasi-sacred, but one need only understand their overall message, for it is most important not to have knowledge of the book, but rather, complete devotion to Ram.

As may be predicted, Ramnamis eschew caste and religious hierarchy.¹³ For the Ramnami Samaj, freedom from social stigma and a democratization of access to God are essential, and thus, the *samaj* actively ignores the caste system and has largely set up a parallel moral universe that is liberating for all its members. This community is not without opposition, for, even from its origins, the Ramnami Samaj would find its members robbed or beaten by caste-Hindus, who found Ramnami ways a desecration of Lord Ram.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Ramnamis resist such violence through faith in Ram and through communal solidarity, often exhibited in their nightly chanting and in their festivals.¹⁵ Since its origins, the Ramnami’s communal *Ramnam* devotion, known as *bhajan*, has been a re-envisioning of Indian society, as they “...huddle close together, man and woman, parent and child, drawing no lines of separation between the sexes, between people.”¹⁶ Regardless of education or social standing, *bhajan* allows each worshipper to creatively contribute verses to collective *Ramnam*. In fact, without everyone’s participation, *bhajan* could not transpire.¹⁷ Furthermore, Ramnamis endorse the practice of creating food reserves for times of famine and for people in need. Thus, the members of the Ramnami Samaj look out for one another.¹⁸

Ramnamis also reject purity rituals and inscribe tattoos on the body. These actions are physically polluting in orthodox Hinduism, and such actions are the Ramnamis’ public statement that all that matters is faith in the power of Ramnam, not ritual, not caste, and not bodily

¹² Lamb 118.

¹³ In orthodox Hinduism, the “untouchables” that constitute much of the Ramnami Samaj are seen as ontologically polluted due to the unworthy merits of a past life, and are thus unfit for contact with higher castes and traditional rituals and holy grounds.

¹⁴ Lamb 65-66

¹⁵ Lamb 65-7.

¹⁶ Lamb 64.

¹⁷ Lamb 120.

¹⁸ Lamb 70-1.

appearance.¹⁹ In fact, the use of tattoos is a Ramnami's way of surrendering earthly beauty to the beauty of faith in Ram.²⁰

In a sense, then, the Ramnamis have created a religious and moral universe that alters both social (hierarchical) and physical (bodily) appearance, bringing all into greater equality and allowing all to seek personal connection with Ram through *Ramnam* and guided by the *Manas*.

Along these lines, the *samaj* is home to many unorthodox social and cultural arrangements, as seen by the following two illustrations. First of all, within the *samaj*, gender restrictions can be lifted: While the *mukut*, a Ramnami head covering, is traditionally worn by men, some women have chosen to break with tradition and wear their own *mukuts*.²¹ Secondly, the *samaj* allows one to eschew cultural custom: A Ramnami named Ramtaram, after ignoring a purification custom appropriate to a full moon, justifies his deliberate rejection of such a custom as follows: ““Oh, I don't bother with such restrictive customs: for one who chants Ramnam, no other observance is necessary.””²²

Nonetheless, the aforementioned task of spiritual liberation is the result of a lifetime of searching; in a more temporal sense, the *samaj* also tries to be a haven not only from the prevailing social order, but also from the diurnal labors of its members.²³ As Ramjatan, a Ramnami *sadhu* (i.e. a monk) remembers, it was *bhajan* that, during a period of depression concerning his physical blindness, would help him to temporarily forget his concerns.²⁴ Such healing worship is often in the form of communal, nightly *bhajan* in the villages and, on a grand scale, in the form of the *mela*, or festival. *Melas* occur every few months and encourage the gathering of many a Ramnami for

¹⁹ Lamb 65.

²⁰ Lamb 87-89.

²¹ Lamb 95, 159.

²² Lamb 180.

²³ Lamb 98-9.

²⁴ Lamb 156.

communal eating and *bhajan*.²⁵ Moreover, since *bhajan* rhythms differ from region to region, the *melas* are a chance to enjoy community, diversity, and individuality. As such, *melas* are great affairs with much rejoicing, at which all are welcome, Ramnami or otherwise. Such celebrations might also include storytelling and commentary on the *Manas*.²⁶ The largest such gathering is the yearly Bhajan Mela, which can last for days on end. In this way, Ramnamis are able to reinforce the role of the *samaj* as a family of worshippers, sharing at table, and sharing their villages/homes with each other for the sake of chanting Ramnam. Moreover, these *melas* often attract, sometimes even as participants, non-Ramnami untouchables and sometimes even caste-Hindus. Thus, the *melas* further create a microcosm running parallel and contrary to the strictures of orthodox society. Furthermore, whether as readers, performers, chanters, cooks, or hosts, Ramnami gatherings provide chances for all to actively contribute to communal well-being. *Samaj* members find self-actualization, sisterly fellowship, and spiritual fortitude in these gatherings, to be sure, but, perhaps most importantly, they find a refuge from their daily toils and worries.²⁷ In Lamb's words, though "...looked down upon by many...Ramnamis find tremendous inspiration at the *mela* and return home having reaffirmed their commitment to the sect, to their way of life, and to the practice of Ramnam."²⁸

In sum, the *samaj* opposes the prevailing Hindu caste orthodoxy by creating a parallel universe wherein equality is real, liberation is attainable, and mundane toils are secondary.

African American slave religion and the Ramnami Samaj: convergent functions, divergent social realities

²⁵ Lamb 108.

²⁶ Lamb 107-8; 144.

²⁷ Lamb 97-112.

²⁸ Lamb 112.

Just as Ramnami beliefs were syncretically fashioned from local culture and wider Hindu cosmology and traditions, so was African American slave religion.²⁹ African American spirituality for certain had its roots in indigenous African practices. Christianity, introduced from white slave owners or (most often) evangelical Christian missionaries, was not prevalent until the nineteenth century. Those practices that existed prior to (and during) Christianization consisted of voodoo, witchcraft, dancing, ancestor veneration, and singing, rooted in mostly West African tribal traditions. These traditions, if not persisting outright, took on Christianized forms in the religious practices of “converted” slaves.³⁰ Slave religion, syncretic in origin, bears a resemblance to the Ramnami tradition, which emerged from a syncretism of local custom and philosophy, as well as Hindu cosmology and scripture.³¹

By the nineteenth century, revivalistic evangelical Protestantism, with its emphasis on experiencing conversion of heart and on the primacy of the Biblical message, propagated a religious program that was able to connect with the southern slaves on a large scale. As one slave explained, “This is my religion, and it is based on the greatest book in the world, the Holy Bible.”³² Unlike other Christian movements, revivals placed primacy not in liturgical tradition, intellectual understanding, or clerical hierarchy, but in the all-important reality of being converted to God. Such a conversion experience, revivalistic Christianity taught, could be sought and attained by slave and free, white and black alike. In the words of one slave preacher, “De Lawd make everyone to come in unity and on de level, both white and black.”³³ Surely, this is an analog to the Ramnami emphasis on complete devotion to Ram, over and against caste and ritual prescriptions. Moreover, just as the *samaj* encourages *Ramnam* as a widely accessible tool for contact with God and an

²⁹ In this paper, references to African American “slave religion” and “slave community” will mean, specifically, the religion and communities fostered by American evangelical Protestantism.

³⁰ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) Pp. 44-87.

³¹ Raboteau 96-128.

³² Clifton H. Johnson, ed. *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-slaves* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969).

³³ Raboteau 232.

effective means of educating the illiterate with scripture, so evangelical Christianity encouraged preaching the Gospel³⁴ message to large numbers, urging all—literate or illiterate—to find God in their hearts.³⁵

Additionally, evangelical Christianity, with an emphasis on internal conversion, allowed an illiterate population to create a “scripture of the heart.” As one former slave explained, “I read Jesus in my heart, just as you read him in de book.”³⁶ Just as Ramnami devotees came to memorize selected verses from the *Manas*, so African Americans came to memorize Bible verses.³⁷ Just as Ramnamis favor (and shape) parts of the *Manas* that speak of devotion to Ram and universal access to the divine, so did African American slaves favor those Bible passages which favored liberation from oppression (such as the Exodus story), Jesus as the way and the truth, and a God who loves all his children equally.³⁸ Just as Ramnamis disregard those verses of the *Manas* that teach about caste hierarchy and prescribed ritual, so did African American slaves ignore those verses of the Bible that prescribed the necessity for slaves to be obedient to their masters. Charles Colcock Jones discovered this reality acutely through an 1833 sermon: “...when I insisted upon fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away...some [slaves] solemnly declared ‘that there was no such an Epistle in the Bible...!’”³⁹

With conversion of the heart as its primary goal, and with an emphasis on preaching/hearing the Biblical message as the key to understanding God and converting to his love, African American religion was democratized in much the same way as was the Ramnami Samaj. Slaves could, and did, preach as well as any of their white brethren. Slaves would even make a distinction between

³⁴ In Christianity, “the Gospel” refers to the message (literally “Good News”) of Jesus, and is taken to mean generally one and the same message as that of the Bible.

³⁵ Raboteau 128-133; 148.

³⁶ Raboteau 242.

³⁷ Raboteau 235.

³⁸ Raboteau 320.

³⁹ Raboteau 294.

“white church,” where they heard only a message of obedience to their masters, and “real church,” where the Christian message of liberation was preached.⁴⁰ Such worship would, like Ramnam, take place at nightly gatherings, often in secret so as not to anger masters. At these gatherings, slaves would share their fears and their hopes, all would be invited to offer their prayers, and often those so inclined would preach or exhort about God’s message of hope.⁴¹

Surely, then, African American “church” was analogous to the nightly *bhajan* of the Ramnamis, with a worship style that encouraged mutual participation and with its granting of primary agency and leadership to the oppressed. Perhaps in even more direct correlation with chanting *bhajan* is the African American tradition of singing spirituals. Just as *Ramnam* was fashioned from chant styles prevalent in central India prior to the inception of the *samaj*, so was the spiritual tradition fashioned from long-standing African modes of song and communal worship. Most importantly, like *bhajan*, the singing of spirituals fostered the mutual participation of all. For example, one former slave remembered that he, after having been lashed at his master’s request, participated in a praise meeting with his friends, wherein they sang consolingly about the his recent punishment.⁴² Just as *Ramnam* encouraged individual participation and leadership in contributing to the verses sung and the rhythms used, so did African American spirituals encourage all worshippers to contribute to its improvisational lyricism, thematic individualization, and frequently changing rhythms.⁴³

Also, the African American slave community could, like the Ramnami Samaj, provide temporary relief from the quotidian concerns and physical woes of slave labor. As seen above, it was through the *samaj* and its devotional exercises that Ramjatan forgot the sorrow of his blindness.

⁴⁰ Raboteau 214.

⁴¹ Raboteau 217.

⁴² Raboteau 246.

⁴³ Raboteau 246-7.

As one former slave put it, “The spirit makes us move about and forget all our troubles.”⁴⁴ In this way, nightly slave worship and nightly *bhajan* function in analogous fashions.

Moreover, the *melas* were a pinnacle expression of the alternative society of the *samaj*, in which hierarchy and daily toils were forgotten for days on end. Likewise, the revivals of evangelical Christianity contributed to temporary relief from the struggles of servitude through a vision of equality before God. Sometimes lasting for days, the revivals often took place in the woods or fields of the plantation, and would feature continuous preaching and exhortation, communal worship and singing, emotional moments of penitence, and ecstatic moments of conversion. At these meetings, both masters and slaves worshipped side by side through prayers, song, and listening to scripture. The aim of these revivals was, of course, listening to the Word of God and seeking individual conversion of the heart. To this end, both white and black preachers would speak to both slave and free. Even more strikingly, these revivals encouraged all of the faithful to help their brethren to “experience” conversion, and thus, it happened that slaves would convert masters and masters would convert slaves.⁴⁵

Therefore, both the *mela* and the revival created an egalitarian moral world by limiting the criteria for spiritual “success” to be personal encounter with the divine and by creating a medium for that encounter which was accessible to all (i.e. *Ramnam* and conversion, respectively). This emphasis allowed anyone having the ability to share knowledge of the divine (e.g. through contribution to *bhajan* or through Christian exhortation) to have “authority,” despite the presence of social hierarchs at these functions. Thus, traditional hierarchy was temporarily leveled at both *melas* and revivals; in this way, the microcosm of equality and agency realized behind the walls of the *samaj* or in the slave community could, for a time, reign in society at large. At *melas* and

⁴⁴ Johnson 92.

⁴⁵ Raboteau 128-148; 215-217.

revivals, the *microcosm* fostered by the *samaj* and the slave community could actually become the *cosmos*.

Both Ramnamis and African American slaves worshipped in ways that suited their social situations well. Both communities sought refuge from a life of hard labor and oppressive hierarchy through egalitarian spirituality, manifested in oral transmission of scriptural truths, democratic forms of worship, and esteem for individual spiritual progress through faith alone. Thus, spiritual achievement was opened to the illiterate and the provision of religious agency empowered the traditionally oppressed.

Indeed, socio-cultural similarities between central India and the American south helped to create communities whose sociological and spiritual *functions* were quite analogous. Notwithstanding, there are notable socio-cultural differences between these two populations, which yield the following consequences: While the Ramnami Samaj could exist as a physical moral and spiritual order apart from wider society and with a philosophy that avoided traditional caste-Hindu cosmology, the slave community was more of a metaphysical moral and spiritual order, as the designs of white slave owners so often disrupted the liberty of slave religion.

In all, the discussion of socio-cultural particularities allows me to make two important observations: (1) The creation of any moral and religious order is a product of cultural and geographic forces, and is surely not generalizable as a universal human tendency; however, (2) it would appear that in societies with an established social and religious hierarchy, the moral and spiritual constructs of the lower social strata tend to create a microcosm (of varying adherence to prevailing religious orthodoxies) in which religious and personal agency is more democratically realized through community, song, and worship. The Ramnami Samaj and the African American slave community created egalitarian microcosms that served as mediums for personal agency, freedom from oppression, and balm for daily, physical toils. Hence, one might be able to conclude

that, for Ramnamis and African American slaves, “*the good life*” manifests itself in religious agency, which is the means to achieve not only spiritual liberty, but also a temporal realization of moral equality. For the Ramnami and the African American slave, to be *good* is to promote *freedom*, in every sense of the word.

Bibliography

- Freeman, James M. *Untouchable: An Indian Life History*. New Delhi: Indus, 1993.
- Frey, Silvia R. and Betty Wood. *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.
- Johnson, Clifton H., ed. *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-slaves*. Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969.
- Lamb, Ramdas. *Rapt in the Name: The Ramnamis, Ramnam, and Untouchable Religion in Central India*. Albany: State University of New York, 2002.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Viramma, Josiane Racine, and Jean-Luc Racine. *Viramma: life of an untouchable*. Will Hobson, trans. New York: Verso, 1997.