

Email exchange with Dr. Patrick Olivelle

Dr. Patrick Olivelle is Professor Emeritus of Sanskrit in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and past President of the American Oriental Society. Author of over 30 books and 50 articles, Olivelle's books have won awards from the American Academy of Religion and the Association of Asian Studies.

Hair offering question

Inbox

Debra k <debradesign613@gmail.com>

11:07 AM (2
hours ago)

to jpo

Good morning,

I am a student trying to research the religious meaning behind the tonsuring/hair offering in India.

I purchased and read your book "Language, Texts, and Society- Exploration in Ancient Indian Culture and Religion" and was wondering if I could ask you a quick question on some information in the book about hair offerings in India.

Thank you,
Debra K

Olivelle, J P <jpo@austin.utexas.edu>

11:15 AM (2
hours ago)

to me

Yes of course.

Debra k <debradesign613@gmail.com>

11:41 AM (2
hours ago)

to J

Thank you!

I found this page in your book:

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LANGUAGE, TEXTS AND SOCIETY

He [the sacrificer] then shaves his hair and beard, and cuts his nails. For impure, indeed, is that part of man where water does not reach him. Now at the hair and beard, and at the nails the water does not reach him: hence when he shaves his hair and beard, and cuts his nails, he does so in order that he may becoming pure before he is consecrated.⁴⁴

According to this interpretation, hair and nails are impure because they do not absorb water, the ultimate means of purification, whereas according to the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (6.1.1.1-2) they are impure because they are dead skin.

A significant and informative contradiction within the native tradition occurs, however, when what is said to be equivalent to feces is offered ceremonially to gods and goddesses (Hershman 1974). This happens, as we have seen, especially when young children are shaved for the first time. How can the same substance be regarded as excrement in one ritual setting and as a substance fit for the gods in another?

The sexual symbolism of hair that I discuss below may provide one clue. If at some level of its symbolic complex hair represents the fertile sexuality of its owner, then we can see how it can be at the same time both a sacred offering and excrement. Indeed, sexual fluids, especially male semen, are at one time said to be the most refined part of the body and of food, even the carrier of personality from one birth to the next,⁴⁵ and at other times bracketed with urine and feces as impure substances. A common way to indicate the depravity of a particular act, for example, is to say that if a man does it "he, in fact, offers to his ancestors semen, urine and excrement."⁴⁶

I was just wondering if I am understanding the text on the page correctly- that the hair itself is actually considered an offering to the god (despite the hair also having the status of impurity in Hinduism)

Thank you

Olivelle, J P

12:00 PM
(1 hour
ago)

to me

Yes, it is perplexing. Hair, however, has a complex symbolism. It is at one level impure, and at another level can be viewed as a substitute for the person. Its sexual symbolism is important in this regard. So, even today in a temple like Tirupati you have people going there and shaving their heads and offering the hair to the god. There are ritual barbers there to do the cutting.

So you have understood what I say correctly. Hair is multivalent in its symbolism, and it cannot be reduced to any one of its symbolic meanings.

Best,

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Debra k <debradesign613@gmail.com>

Jan 19, 2022,
10:15 AM (1 day
ago)

to J

Good morning,

Thank you again for your help on understanding this properly
I had a question on something that seems to be a bit of a misunderstanding

I was discussing the topic of tonsuring with my teacher and she mentioned that in the 1990s there was some sort of debate about the use of temple hair in wigs for Jewish women that covered their hair for modesty. Some Rabbis at that time came out stating that it is forbidden to use any hair that is an offering to a god.

There was an interview at that time with someone that was part of the Council of Hindu Temples, the late Dr. Anand Mohan, he was the secretary- treasurer of the council (I don't think that he was a religious figure like a priest but he was a professor of politics and philosophy at Queens college)

My teacher had a copy of the interview

These are a few paragraphs from Dr. Mohan's interview:

Q: I understand from what you told me that the tonsure hair cutting practice is absolutely not a sacrifice to the gods. Last week someone I know was in Tirupati and asked some pilgrims explicitly what they mean when they say the hair is an "offering", and they said that they mean the hair is an offering to the god, and even when asked a few times they insisted that it is indeed an offering to the god and by that they mean a real offering, that the hair is going to the god.

A: There are twenty languages spoken by the pilgrims, they come from India, from various places, and to Westerners the meaning of "offer" is different, no matter how you explain it a westerner won't understand it the way it really means. The meaning of "offer" is not the same in the ancient languages and in Indian – "offer" means "surrender" "renunciation" so they are saying yes they surrender to the gods and the gods "receive" the surrender, but that means that the gods are happy with it, like you may say someone "got the meaning" of what you say it doesn't mean he physically gets it, it means he understands it. The same thing when a pilgrim says they "offer" to the gods it means they surrender their inner selves to the gods and the gods understand and accept their surrender – "accept" meaning agree

...

If you want to call it an offering it makes sense but what it means in the Hindu religion is different.

Q: Like we might say G-d "accepts" our repentance

A: Yes, yes. It is like that. There is no parallel word in the West for "offering" in this sense. It means "we surrender our ego". The pilgrims they don't know English well, they say it the way they can.

Everything they do, it's an "offering" to god. By worshipping god you become one with god so you give up your ego to god in that sense. The first prayer is SHIVA – "we become one with you".

The haircutting is done outside, then they take a bath and go inside and then they offer coconuts and fruits to the god, but the haircut is nothing holy it is nothing sacred, not at all,

my wife took my daughter when she was 6 months old to Tirupati, and the hair was offered, and if you talk to these pilgrims they will say whatever they say but what they mean is that they are renunciation their prized possession and the gods accept their renunciation, meaning the gods agree and are happy about it.

Q: Is it possible anything changed in the procedure in the past 15 years?

A: No, no, nothing has changed at all. It is all the same way it was always done. Nothing has changed.

I was very confused when reading this interview because it contradicted a lot of what I found in my research!

It seemed clear to me from the many books and articles that I found online that while there is a concept of removing ones ego when tonsuring, the haircut is considered holy and sacred and the people think of the hair itself as an actual offering to the god (even though the hair is not actually brought in to the temple)

And many times in the mundan ceremony or the Veni Daan, some locks of hair are actually physically offered to a god (thrown in to a holy river etc..)

Is what the late Dr. Mohan wrote correct about the tonsuring in Tirumala? Is it just meant to "surrender the ego"? or is it both to remove the ego and also to offer the hair itself to the god?

Or is it a misunderstanding of the religious meaning behind the tonsuring?

This interview does seem to also contradict what you wrote in your book

Thank you,
Debra

Olivelle, J P

8:46 AM (1
hour ago)

to me

Well, there is revisionism everywhere. Here is one example. There is no surrendering of ego in a simply act of pūjā, but a surrendering of a offertorial object — in fact the technical discussions state that the “svatva” (ownership) of the object by the person is abolished, and that svatva is transferred to the person to whom the offering is made. In this case, the divinity.

Best,

PO

Debra k <debradesign613@gmail.com>

9:11 AM (1
hour ago)

to J

Good morning,

Thank you for the response

But I am afraid that I did not understand your answer so if you could please clarify it in simple language so that I could understand it, I would greatly appreciate it

Sorry to trouble you

Thank you once again,
Debra

Debra k <debradesign613@gmail.com>

9:33 AM (1
hour ago)

to J

I apologize- my English is not as high level as yours!

Is your response saying that Dr. Mohan is incorrect in what he is saying about the tonsuring in Tirumala, that the hair is not an offering to the god and it is just an act of "surrendering the ego"?

From what I understood from your book and emails is that the hair is an offering to the god

Am I correct in my understanding?

Thank you

Olivelle, J P

10:09 AM (26
minutes ago)

to me

Yes, you are. I think Mohan is simply trying to speak to a western audience who may be offended by this kind of rite.

Debra k <debradesign613@gmail.com>

10:20 AM (4
hours ago)

to J

Thank you very much for the clarification

Debra k <debradesign613@gmail.com>

1:20 PM (1
hour ago)

to J

I just had one more question on what you wrote before:

"There is no surrendering of ego in a simply act of pūjā, but a surrendering of a offertorial object — in fact the technical discussions state that the “svatva” (ownership) of the object by the person is abolished, and that svatva is transferred to the person to whom the offering is made. In this case, the divinity."

Is this also referring to the hair? Is tonsuring considered a type of puja and the hair does in some way transfer ownership from the person to the god?

Thank you for all this info

Olivelle, J P

2:17 PM (37
minutes ago)

to me

Yes, because you once owned the hair and now you give up that ownership.