SACRIFICE AND BEING

Prajāpati's cosmic emission and its consequences*

BRIAN K. SMITH

I

This is a paper on beginnings. Specifically, my topic centers around conceptions of conception in Vedic ritualistic texts—and around the different set of ideas in those texts regarding the origins of true being and the ontological role the sacrifice (yajña) plays. In the beginning I will be concerned with two key notions of excess which regulate the Vedic metaphysical economy; two ideas which provide the limits and boundaries of the conceptual space inside of which all true being, all ontological formations are located. I then will turn attention to a group of cosmogonic myths which feature Prajāpati, the creator god par excellence of Vedic ritualism. This god’s primordial procreative act is the “emission” or emanation of the cosmic elements from his own body, a creation on the grandest scale but one that transgresses the boundaries of ontology. These myths articulate a prototypical blueprint which also is replicated at the human level. Patterns of universal creation are repeated in Vedic passages dealing with the structure of human beginnings.

That creation of the individual should be presented as a microcosmic repetition of the creation of the universe might seem singularly unremarkable to students of religion, especially to those who have read one or more of Mircea Eliade’s many publications on the subject of cosmogony. As that great scholar never tires of reminding us, for homo religiosus “every creation has a paradigmatic model—the creation of the universe by the gods.”

What redeems the Vedic case from the jaws of the archetypical is a radical disjuncture between “creation” and “cosmos.” At the level of universal beginnings, Prajāpati’s creative emission is not a cosmogonic act but rather what one scholar has provocatively labelled a “profane act.” Cosmic procreation does not result in a
ready-made cosmos, an ordered universal whole, but in a problematic excess that must be moderated. Similarly, at the level of individual beginnings, birth and "anthropogony" are distinct and separate moments, the first being only the necessary precondition for the second. As cosmic creation is not cosmogony, so too is human reproduction not the production of a true human being.

It is not only characteristic but even definitive of Vedic ritualism that between procreation on the one hand and cosmogony and anthropogony on the other is inserted a set of constructive activities, that is, a set of rituals. Between Prajāpati's creation and the origin of cosmos are divine sacrificial acts which give form to a formless emission. Between creation of the individual and the origin of the human being are also ritual acts which fabricate a true human being out of a humanoid. Cosmogony and anthropogony are activated and actualized by sacrifice (yajña), by ritual action (karman); they are not immediately realized by mere divine or human procreation.

In Vedism, ritual activity at all levels does not merely "interpret," "symbolize," or "dramatize;" it constitutes, constructs and integrates. Ritual forms the naturally formless; it connects the inherently disconnected; and it heals the "sickness" of excess which is the state toward which all things and beings perpetually tend.

All constructions of ontologically viable forms, all productions, indeed, all life, lie between what Jean-Marie Verpoorten has called "two symmetrical excesses." The first is jāmi, an "excess of resemblance" describing the unproductive condition of homogeneity or redundancy. In Vedic texts, the word is applied in various contexts. Jāmi sometimes is used as a kinship term to describe persons with whom one is too closely related to marry. In ritual terminology, jāmi designates rites which are redundant and fruitlessly reduplicative within a ritual sequence. In all cases, however, it is the unproductivity of excessive resemblance and undifferentiation that is denoted. This is brought out with clarity in a passage from the Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa which likens jāmi to homosexual union:

Devoid of pairing (amithuna) and productivity (aprajanana) is jāmi, as is the fruitless coupling of two men or two women ... That, on the other hand, which is devoid of jāmi is a true pairing (mithuna), a true generation (prajanana) (JB 1.300).