Agni hotra--the Fire Sacrifice
Category : October/November/December 2003
Published by Anonymous on Oct. 01, 2003

FROM THE VEDAS

Agni hotra--the Fire Sacrifice

Oblations to the Blazing Splendor, Messenger of the Gods!

The most appropriate Vedic symbol for the lordship of the Lord is perhaps the figure of Agni, the friend of Man, the mediator, the sacred and sacrificial fire, and at the same time the fire that is in the Sun, in burning things, and in the heart of Man, everywhere the same and yet everywhere different, having varied and even almost contrary effects. The devotion to Agni does not represent nature worship, much less pantheism; it is the recognition of an underlying polymorphic reality that softens wax and honey but hardens mud, dries up plants, may bring life or death, and always transcends all our powers, mental as well as physical. Agni is near to Man, kindly disposed, intimately bound up with his life, the guest of his dwelling, the wise Lord who knows all things, the eternally young, the strong and powerful to whom one offers sacrifice and who is able to shower one with blessings. If modern Man does not follow what has been said, let him wait until winter and evening, kindle the hearth, and simply gaze at the live coals, and he will surely understand that the lord is he who breaks his isolation without disturbing his solitude. He is powerful and yet accessible to Men, full of goodness and mercy, inspiring devotion in such a way that Man approaches him fearlessly as a friend, not as an abstraction or a distant and formidable deity. The lordship of Agni is not seen as the imposition of a divine will, but as an expression of the normal and beautiful order of reality.

Raimundo Panikkar

I magnify God, the Divine Fire, the Priest, Minister of the sacrifice, the Offerer of oblation, supreme Giver of Treasure. Rig Veda, 1.1.1

All set for the kindling of the sacred fire, we hymn you, O Lord, with our verses, invoking your powerful grace. In your praise, O Lord, who reach highest heaven, we compose our song, eager to obtain your treasure divine! Priest among Men, may he offer due homage to the heavenly beings! Great, O Lord, is your renown. Through you, O blessed one, worthy mediator, may we complete the sacrifice! The poets exalt you with their hymns--you whose undertakings are ever successful. Grant us great vigor! As the spokes are bound by encircling iron, so you encompass the Gods, O Lord. I yearn for your bounty! Rig Veda, 5.13.1-6

Agni extends the sacrifice to heaven: his forms are scattered everywhere. Rig Veda, 10.80.4

O Lord almighty, enkindled on the altar, confer upon us your treasures--you who gather all things into one, even what comes from the stranger! Gather together, converse together! Your minds be of one accord, just as in harmony the Gods of old took their ritual shares of oblation! United be your counsel, united your assembly, united your spirit and thoughts! A single plan do I lay before you; a single oblation do I offer! United your resolve, united your hearts, may your spirits be at one, that you may long together dwell in unity and concord! Rig Veda, 10.191.1-4

It was you, O Agni most ancient, whom the ancients of old, observers of Cosmic Law, enkindled for their aid, O God created by life-power, the shining, the adorable, the one who brings comfort to all Men, worthy of worship, God of the hearth and home. It was you, O Agni of the flaming hair, whom the peoples enthroned as their foremost guest, the master of their households, O God of the lofty ensign, of manifold shapes, the winner of stakes, our kindly protector and helper, devourer of ancient forests. It is you, O Agni of manifold shapes, who imparts life-power to each race of Men, as in days of old, O God highly praised! By means of this, your life-power, you control all sorts of food. That light of yours, when you shine forth, blazes indomitable. It is you, O Agni most youthful, whom, once enkindled, the Gods have chosen as messenger, conveyer of oblations. You, O God of vast range, situated in oil and nourished by offerings, the Gods have made their bright Eye, the inspirer of thought and fancy. It is you, O Agni, whom Men through the ages have sought with sacred oil and with fuel easy to kindle. Thus, imbued with strength, your size increased by the plants, you spread over all the world. Rig Veda, 5.8.1-7

It is you, O sweet-spoken Agni, the immortal, whom the God-loving seek first to

win with their prayers--O you who remove far all hostility, unerring friend and master of the home! Remove, as our helper, all poorness of thought; drive far all sorrow, all evil intention. Deal kindly, O Agni, son of strength, at evening with him whose salvation, as God, you provide! Rig Veda, 4.11.5-6

O blazing splendor, purifying flame, joy of all hearts, with cheerful songs we venerate you, the cheerful one! Rig Veda, 8.43.31

You, O Agni, are the righteous, the truthful, the mighty, and most wonderful. You are indeed manifest to all: you, O Agni, are omnipresent. Men rank Agni highest for grace and joy, for grace and joy reside undoubtedly in sacrifice. You, who are heaven, the ruler and divine one, we human beings invoke with song. Shukla Yajur Veda, Satapatha Brahmana, 4.1.34

Raimundo Panikkar, 82, holds doctorates in science, philosophy and theology. His anthology of verses, The Vedic Experience, excerpted above, is the result of ten years spent in Banaras translating with the help of Vedic scholars.

The Vedas are the divinely revealed and most revered scriptures, sruti, of Hinduism, likened to the Torah (1,200 bce), Bible New Testament (100 ce), Koran (630 ce) or Zend Avesta (600 bce). Four in number, Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva, the Vedas include over 100,000 verses. Oldest portions may date back as far as 6,000 bce.