

The Spiritual Significance of Rama*

By Stephenie Madany

“...there are not only those Revealers who represent exclusively the ‘other world,’ there are also those whose attitude is at the same time divinely contemplative and humanly combative and constructive.”¹

It may be difficult for one who is not a follower of the Hindu tradition to comprehend the spiritual significance of Rama (the all-powerful God Vishnu, incarnate on earth) and his role as the archetype of the religious and spiritual life, particularly if one comes from a Christian background. In contradistinction to Christ, the “earthly career” of the *avatara*²—as recorded in the Sanskrit Ramayana—might seem too ephemeral and overly immersed in the problems and complexities of social, political and economic activity to serve as a paradigm for the spiritual life. Indeed, unlike Christ, whose purely spiritual life and consequent passivity in the face of worldly power led him to say, “My Kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36), Rama’s spiritual reality is enveloped in certain human and earthly veils. It is true that there are enough significant similarities between Rama and Christ to convince one of the common

* The author would like to dedicate this article in love to the memory of Ruh (d. 2011).

¹ Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam: A New Translation With Selected Letters* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2011), 85.

² Most scholars consider the *Ramayana* to be founded on traditional narrations of true historical facts, but clothed in a poetical and mythological dress and connected with legends of an entirely fictitious nature. For our purposes, it is not important whether the specifics of the epic are literally true. What is significant is how Rama is seen by himself and others, the emphasis placed upon his spiritual/religious/mystical insight and psychological acumen, and the emotional resonance that certain episodes of the epic convey to the reader.

interpretation of divine enfleshment in both religions;³ yet, because of his dual function as ‘prince’/‘king’ and ‘*avatara*,’ as the leader of the human being in this world and his or her guide in the hereafter, Rama can perhaps more easily be compared to Muhammad, the founder of Islam, who, although living in an entirely different traditional climate, was a prophet and at the same time a statesman, warrior, judge and a householder who engaged in social life with all that such activity entails. From this point of view, Rama is also akin to the Hebrew prophet-kings, to Solomon and David, and especially to Abraham himself.

Indeed, like the prophet of Islam and the other great Semitic revealers, there was in Rama’s earthly life violence and conflict. The whole story of the Ramayana, while it contains some beautiful touches of human affection is based on rapine and armed confrontation.⁴ Valmiki informs us very early in the epic that the world is imperiled by evil *raksasas*—i.e., demons—who, by means of violence and magical spells, threaten the sanctity and well-being of the other inhabitants of the planet.⁵ Born into the Kshatriya (king/warrior) caste as the son of King Dasaratha, Rama must—as his Dharma demands—wield violent force in order to combat evil and protect righteousness. Killing is the privilege, and indeed the holy duty, of the Kshatriya class, to whom, among the four castes, social governance is entrusted. Both protection and punishment are deemed equally vital to social welfare, without which society would fall apart; both seem to be accepted in the Ramayana as just and noble causes for violence as exemplified at several occasions throughout the text.⁶

Take for example, the destruction of the ugly, fearsome, and uncontrollably sexualized demoness Tataka, who poses both a physical threat to all who enter the Dandaka forest and, according to one author, “a sexual

³ For a more detailed analysis see, Noel Sheth, “Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison,” *Philosophy East and West* 52, no.1 (2002): 98-125.

⁴ In total, the *Ramayana* has nearly six thousand occurrences of terms denoting military action. See Torkel Brekke, “Between Prudence and Heroism: Ethics of War in the Hindu Tradition,” in *The Ethics of War in Asian Civilizations: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Torkel Brekke (New York: Routledge, 2005), 113-144.

⁵ See, for example, Ramesh Manon, *The Ramayana: A Modern Retelling of the Great Indian Epic* (New York: North Point Press, 2004), 10.

⁶ For a more detailed analysis see Raj Balkaran and A. Walter Dorn, “Violence in the Valmiki Ramayana: Just War Criteria in an Ancient Indian Epic,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no.3 (2012): 659-690.

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