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Book Review: "Christians Meeting Hindus. An Analysis and Theological Critique of the Hindu-Christian Encounter in India"

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Christian theology. As he sets Tillich and Shankara side-by-side, Thatamanil also notes flaws in their respective schemas: "In Sankara's case, failure to adhere rigorously to nondualism gives rise to a tendency to define away the world as unreal. In Tillich's case, his belief that freedom requires separation between God and creature gives rise to a tragic vision of human life as inevitably compromised by ineradicable ambiguity" (92). Both difficulties can, moreover, be traced to a common source: a "substantialist conception of ultimate reality" (166). In the interest of constructing an alternative, the book's final chapter mines the work of contemporary Christian philosophers Joseph Bracken and Neville himself, proposing a "dynamic apophatic nondualism" that re-casts divine ultimacy in terms of creative activity rather than substantial existence. By making such a metaphysical move, Thatamanil argues, one can preserve the best insights of both traditions without falling prey to what turns out to be simply more subtle and insidious forms of dualism.

Unsympathetic critics of *The Immanent Divine* will no doubt challenge Thatamanil's alternative. It seems dubious, at the very least, to suggest that the riddle of divine immanence can be resolved by appeal to a couple of contemporary North Americans. Why the laborious comparison, spanning twelve centuries, if a more compelling answer can be found so close to home? A case can be made, however, that authentic interreligious study

invariably leads the interpreter home, albeit to a home that has been de-familiarized and transformed by the comparative exercise. In the case of Thatamanil, this home is self-evidently the 20th-century liberal Protestantism of Paul Tillich and his interpreters. The great virtue of *The Immanent Divine* is not that it shakes off this tradition, but that it pursues the tradition's normative theological agenda in a comparative mode. When Thatamanil announces his desire to take up "Tillich's unfulfilled intention" to rewrite his systematic theology in dialogue with "the world's religious traditions" (8), the wisest course would be to take him at his word and to judge his constructive proposal accordingly.

Indeed, as is so often the case in these kinds of studies, it may well turn out that the final conclusions possess less intrinsic value than the comparison itself. It is precisely when Thatamanil is struggling with particulars—arguing the persistence of worldly activity in the life of the liberated self-knower, for example, or interpreting ecstasy as a mode of human living rather than as an isolated event—that his writing is most persuasive. These are the discussions that most strongly held my interest and to which I expect to find myself returning in years to come. The various parts of *The Immanent Divine* are thus, I suggest, ultimately and ironically greater than the whole.

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Christians Meeting Hindus. An Analysis and Theological Critique of the Hindu-Christian Encounter in India. Bob Robinson. Carlisle, Cumbria, UK and Waynesboro, GA, USA: Regnum, 2004, 392 + xviii pp.

THIS book justifiably earned a place among a small group of finalists for the Society of Hindu-Christian Studies book award for publications appearing between 2003 and 2005. The author, who teaches at the Tyndale Graduate School of Theology in New Zealand, earned a doctorate in 1992 at the University of London under the guidance of Geoffrey Parrinder. Although the

present volume grows out of that dissertation, it has been substantially updated and expanded to include literature through the year 2000. Robinson spent extensive time in India in the 1980s and 1990s in researching what has turned out happily to be a mine of information for scholars seeking extensive analysis and theological sources on a myriad of issues

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relating to the Hindu-Christian encounter. His intent is to examine as comprehensively as possible dialogue as it has been pursued especially in India during the last four decades of the twentieth century. This is a tall order to fill, and no one book can claim to exhaustively report on every aspect of such an encounter. But this book comes nearer than any other in attaining such a lofty goal. I would go so far as to state that the volume is breathtaking in both breadth and depth. The author has read, assimilated, and theologically evaluated a truly astonishing amount of material. Indeed each section of the book is a compact and theologically well-written essay in itself. The book will appeal especially to those interested in the philosophical and theological encounter of Hinduism and Christianity. Though pp. 41-53 take up various forms of informal dialogue, e.g. mutual participation in festivals and worship, literature and art, the book for the most part treats the encounter of theological ideas.

One of the guiding concerns of the book is to examine "why and how the practice of dialogue has come to displace, for some, previous attitudes of confrontation and monologue." (xi) To that end chapter 1, "The Path to Dialogue in India," examines the pre-dialogical history of a less than lustrous Christian missionary triumphalism and apologetic approach to Hinduism followed by various Hindu responses, especially during the last two centuries. The shift to dialogue that began in the early 1960s and picked up steam for the remainder of the century was made possible by a number of factors, listed in chapters 2 and 3, such as the desire to defuse inter-religious tension, common concerns for social justice and nation-building, the recognition of a shared humanity with members of other faiths, as well as a growing acceptance of religious pluralism as a fact of the modern world.

As with the rest of the book, already in the first chapter one comes away impressed by the thoroughness with which every idea, person, and mode of encounter is summarized, whether briefly or extensively. For example, the list of important literature on Christian theological reactions to the work of S. Radhakrishnan runs more than half a page long (12). One is helped along the way, too, by the author's learned and

very insightful commentary. And there is no trace of polemics from this evangelical Christian.

In the final two chapters the author establishes the need for a dialogue that is based on Indian Christology rather than on theocentrism or pluralism. Robinson's conviction is that the most useful Christology is one that will best promote understanding and dialogue between the two religions. He first takes up standard themes of cosmic Christology and the historical Jesus before examining the usefulness of various Hindu terms and categories to mediate a deeper awareness of the value and significance of Christ, not only for Hindus, but also for Christians. Christ expressed as guru, avatar, cit, sabda, prajana, and others are all considered, with reference to attempts by past and contemporary writers to make such connections. Also discussed are the possibility of seeing Christ primarily in the context of bhakti or advaita or social liberation. After all these Christological considerations Robinson surprises the reader by suggesting that "a wholly christocentric justification of Hindu-Christian dialogue is difficult to sustain. Some aspects of the trinitarian and pneumatological dimensions of a theology of religious encounter and dialogue may be even more appropriate than Christology" (336).

This is an excellent reference work for obtaining a reliable overview and theological evaluation of the best literature on a multitude of topics, whether it be comparisons of avatar and incarnation, a summary and evaluation of models of mission, an extensive summary and appraisal of the work of R. Panikkar and other important figures in twentieth century interreligious exchange, religious double-belonging, christocentrism vs. theocentrism, Hindu and Christian fulfillment theories and their rejection, the value of history and personhood in the Hindu-Christian encounter, the theological significance of religious experience, changing Catholic and Protestant assessments of Hinduism, or many others. One learns to appreciate the complexity of 'Hindu-Christian encounter' and its changing contours. We discover, for example, that in the first six decades of the twentieth century, i.e. prior to Vatican II, the official Catholic approach to

encounter with Hindus was more conservative and more hostile than Protestant attitudes.

The book has nonetheless two defects that will prove challenging to the scholar seeking to track down information. First, the bibliography sometimes lists only some of the important works of a given author while omitting other even more important writings, even though the entries missing have already been included in the footnotes. Julis Lipner, who is referred to several times in the book, is omitted from the bibliography altogether. Second, and even more problematic, is the index, which is much too

brief. In a book as comprehensive as this one, an extensive bibliography is absolutely indispensable for locating particular authors, literature, and ideas.

These flaws are relatively small when compared to the great accomplishment of this book. It is a theological resource that is to be savored and digested slowly.

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