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Book Review: "Loving God: Krsna and Christ, A Christian Commentary on the Narada Sutras"

Lance E. Nelson

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Loving God: Krsna and Christ, A Christian Commentary on the Nārada Sūtras. Daniel P. Sheridan. Leuven: W.B. Eerdmans, 2007, 216 pp.

CONTEMPORARY Christians, Daniel Sheridan believes, are in need of a catalyst. They are commanded to love God (Mt. 22:37), and have a tradition of doing so that goes back several thousand years. Yet, he argues, in recent times it seems that they “have forgotten what loving God means and can no longer recognize it” (5). They have forgotten, moreover, how to practice love of God and, all the more so, how to teach it, and are thus scarcely able to interact fruitfully with their centuries-long traditions of doing both. A catalyst would facilitate that interaction, and perhaps help Christians rediscover and revitalize their traditions of loving God. Sheridan offers, to play this role, a classical Hindu treatise on *bhakti* (loving devotion to God), the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtras*. The idea is that this tenth-eleventh century C.E. Sanskrit text, which encapsulates a rich heritage of loving the divine from another tradition, would remind Christians, if studied with sincere appreciation, that love of God can be a lived, all-encompassing experience, and not just an abstraction honored out of habit. It would help Christians recover and revitalize their own traditions of loving God, and then, having served its catalytic function, remain intact “as a classic in its own Hindu Vaisnava tradition with its own sublime integrity” (7). Sheridan believes that such an exercise may eventually lead further into an extended process of dialogue in which both Christians and Hindus participate, enabling them to “enhance both of their loves for God” (8). The present book aims to begin such a project.

In the manner of a traditional Hindu commentary, Sheridan translates and then reflects on the meaning of each of Nārada’s eighty-four *sūtras*, first providing a commentary that explains the meaning of the aphorism in the Hindu context and then a “Catholic reflection.” It is important to note that we have no classical commentary on this text in Sanskrit, though, as Sheridan notes, there are a number of modern translations and expositions in Indian languages and in English. This means that the “Hindu”

commentary is Sheridan’s own representation, as a thoughtful and sympathetic scholar of Hinduism, of the Vaisnava Hindu understanding. The Catholic reflections on each verse, taken as a whole, then become an extended meditation by the author on the possible resonances of the Hindu *bhakti* tradition with the Catholic Christian tradition of loving God. I say “meditation” because Sheridan is not engaging his reading of the *sūtras*—in comparative fashion, seeking objectivity—with the vision of a particular known Christian theologian or mystic. The Catholic reflections are very much his own and range widely over the history of Christianity, the author citing more than eighty Catholic authors from Clement of Alexandria through Dorothy Day and Rahner to Pope Benedict XVI. So one has the sense of an intensely personal internal dialogue of a Catholic scholar of Christianity and Hinduism holding together in discussion the thoughts of his lifetime of study of both traditions.

The insights that emerge from this reflection are many, but readers should not expect from this book an argument that marshals evidence toward a conclusion. It is very much a meditation, one that moves with the text in the manner of a Hindu commentary, gradually unfolding a meaningful teaching for those willing to apprentice themselves to it. What is that teaching? That “love of God needs to be cultivated in its own right as the heart and soul of what being a human person truly is, and of where Christian faith truly should lead” (6). There is little theoretical discussion, for example, of questions like, “Are these two loves the same?” or “Are they directed toward the same God?” Still, this is the mature work of a very thoughtful Christian thinker who is at the same time a fine scholar of Hinduism. For those interested in Christian (or Hindu) spirituality, it very much repays slow and careful reading.

Lance E. Nelson
University of San Diego