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Book Review: "Three Hundred Verses of Bhartrhari"

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contrast between religious “absolutism” and “relativism,” and his claim that the Christian claim and indeed any claim to originality or uniqueness rests exclusively upon its claim to be “uninfluenced.” The examples he provides, such as the “absolutist” decision of the Catholic Church to remove Barlaam and Josaphat from the canon of saints in the 1960s, or the wholly derivative, fundamentally non-Hindu character of Gandhi’s doctrine of *satyāgraha*, are entirely unpersuasive (see 30-32, 52-55). Herman appears unable to sustain any notion of a genuinely original synthesis, or to concede the possibility of discerning between authentic and inauthentic influences. Intellectual influence is substantively identified with plagiarism, such

that a religious tradition that bears any “existentially significant” mark of another tradition can, seemingly, claim no integrity of its own.

Such a position strikes this reader as, well, absolutist. Hence, Herman’s volume never rises above the level of a relatively clear, intriguing and provocative thought-experiment. Readers seeking more credible historical reconstructions or more nuanced interpretative judgments are advised to look elsewhere.

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Three Hundred Verses of Bhartṛhari. With Sanskrit Text, English Translation, and Christian Commentary. Rev. Dr.-Dr. Jacob Kattackal. Department of Publications of Paurastya Vidyapitham. Vadavathoor, Kottayam, India. 2008, 216 pp.

BHARTṚHARI (7th century or early) was a famous and to some extent mythic author of a rich body of Indian poetry. He authored a most famous collection of (more or less) 300 verses known as the *Śatakṛayam* or even more simply “the Bhartṛhari.” This work is divided by three themes, *nīti* (right living, morality), *vairāgya* (detachment), and *śṛṅgāra* (desire, love). If treated as a whole, it offers a broad view of values basic to human and religious living. It is therefore a text ripe for comparative theological study.

Jacob Kattackal is a prolific author of many small books in English and Malayalam. Though unavailable to this reviewer, prior volumes on the *Īśa Upaniṣad*, the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, and *Bhagavad Gītā* by their subtitles promise text, translation, and Christian commentary. The current volume is the latest entry in this intriguing project of Christian-Hindu interreligious understanding.

Kattackal offers a new translation of the three hundred verses. He appends some careful notes on variant readings, but on the whole his translation is loose, often a paraphrase and at

times awkward. The reader interested in Bhartṛhari as a poet is advised to consult Barbara Stoler Miller’s admirable *Bhartṛhari: Poems* (Columbia University Press, 1967).

In this case at least, Kattackal’s “Christian commentary” is directly the practice of interpretation by the pairing of texts, the inclusion after each verse of Bhartṛhari of a Biblical verse or verses. No rationale for the choice of pairings is given at the verses, and there is no introduction or subsequent essay in the volume. In some cases similarity in theme seems the motivation, while in others contrast appears key. Three examples must suffice to give a feel for the project. A first paired reading seems to accentuate the futility of riches:

“A wealthy person is taken to be noble, learned, well-versed in Sacred Scripture and even virtuous — even though, in truth, he possesses none of these qualities! That wealthy person is requested to speak in public, and he is declared to be good-looking, even though the contrary is the truth! To put it bluntly, all the so-called

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virtues simply hang on the wealth or riches of a person!)" (*Nīti-śatakam* 33)

(Miller translation, verse 51 [p. 41]): "A man of wealth is held to be high-born / Wise scholarly and discerning / Eloquent and even handsome - All virtues are accessories to gold!"

Biblical verse: "I tell you solemnly: It will be very hard for a rich person (i.e., a person whose heart is attached to worldly wealth) to enter into Heaven. A camel can pass through the eye of a needle more easily than a rich man (man of attachment) can enter into Heaven." (*Matthew* 19.23)

A second seems to intend highlighting disillusionment with ordinary life, perhaps the difference in efficacy between karmic detachment and a devotion turn to the Lord:

"O Lord, I long for the day when I can root out all my *karmas* (sediments of all past actions), and keep myself utterly disinterested in the world; I yearn for living the life of a self-composed, sky-clad mendicant with the begging bowl in hand." (*Vairāgya-śatakam* 89)

(Miller translation, verse 185 [p. 137]): "O Beneficent Siva, / Behold a solitary man, / Free from desire, tranquil, / Drinking from his hands, / Wearing the sky as his raiment. / When shall I master the way / To root out the store of my karma?"

"Thy face, O Lord, I seek. Hide not your face from me. Lord, make your face shine upon Your servant. My eyes shed streams of tears." (*Psalms* 27.8-9; 119.135-136)

A third pairing may be intended to highlight a

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IN the 1990s Francis Clooney and James Fredericks made a stir among certain circles in

still greater contrast between a sentiment of Bhartṛhari and that of a Gospel author:

"As long as the woman is within sight, so long is she honey or ambrosia; but when she is out of sight, she is worse than poison." (*Śṛṅgāra-śatakam* 43)

(Miller translation, verse 125 [p. 93]): "Woman rests ambrosial / Within our vision's pale, / But woman vanished from our sight / Is greater bane than poison."

Biblical verse: "Make friends with the perishable worldly wealth so that, on leaving this earthly home, you may be welcomed in the Eternal Home, Heaven." (*Luke* 16.9)

That Kattackal gives us no guidance may in a way be a virtue of the project. In the reading of poetry and in comparative studies, there is merit in compelling the reader to think through the examples independently, as bare, unexplained juxtapositions that leave the work to us. It is our task to discover some consonance between Bhartṛhari and the Bible, some interestingly different perspective on a problem in human living, or some sharper difference between two worldviews.

Nevertheless, the book sorely needs an introduction or even a reference back to Kattackal's previous comparative studies if those contain explanations of his method. This would help us to understand Bhartṛhari's work, and also to know something at least of Kattackal's own wisdom regarding the pairings he makes and what he hopes to accomplish by them.

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theology and religious studies. In their respective books, *Theology after Vedānta* (1993)