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Book Review: "Krishna and Christ"

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Book Reviews


It is a most gratifying sign of the times that scholars pledged to the propagation of their personal faith in the Catholic form of Christianity have felt impelled by a reverent interest in the scriptures that have inspired the Hindu mind through the ages. Gone are the days when the Hindu was a heathen to be rescued from hell fire. Gone indeed are the days when missionary enterprise in the field of education and health was motivated by the passion to recruit the lower classes at least of Hindu society into the fold. That political and economic motives mingled with noble motives is doubtless a fact of history. But the stories of the great martyrs, the great apostles of the faith, the story of St. Thomas "gospelling India", of St. Xavier, Japan, and Britto failing a victim to brute force, tell another side of the great story of the propagation of the faith. They did what they did for God and Jesus and were ready to die in the process.

De Nobili was perhaps the first to realize that Christianity must conquer the mind of the educated upper class and he strove hard to achieve this. Dom Griffiths has sought through intense brooding on the scriptures of India to effect a greater understanding of the Hindu mind, especially of Vedanta. This is a new and altogether welcome trend. The scriptures of all the religions, even of the most animistic are a record of man's striving to come to terms with the universe around. Kasmay Devaya Havisha Videma, the question posed thousands of years ago is not a Hindu question but man's question. And while many answers have emerged affording a profound meditation on the meaning of life. The historical occasion of the Mahabharata was on the dharma kshetra, kuruksetra is not as important to a true student of the scripture as the portrait it affords of a compassionate divine Acharya resolving the doubts of his sishya employing the well-known techniques of philosophic debate in India, of resolving the disciple's doubt by the use of rational argument. Death is not the thing to be feared. Dharma—in the sense of Asrama duties—may itself be surrendered and one could throw oneself absolutely on the mercy of God. Bodies are like clothes, getting worn out in time. The soul is immortal. The world around is but a phase in time. God will emerge, from time to time to establish dharma, righteousness.

Dr. Ishanand has a sound grasp of the argument of this great scripture. If a fault is to be found in his approach to this scripture, it is in his choice of the flute to symbolize Krishna. The fluting Krishna, the Muralidhara is the Hero of the Srimad Bhagavatam, where too the gopis, are symbols of the jivas seeking ecstatic communion with their Lord and God! The proper symbol would be the chariot; Krishna is Parthasarathi, the great charioteer of Partha, descended of the Pritus, and shrinking in imperfect comprehension of dharma from his duty to be discharged without thought of reward or benefit.

Dr. Ishanand's account of the New Testament is, naturally enough, fuller and more authoritative. To one reader at least the teaching of Christ can be regarded as complete when he comes across the affirmation, the Kingdom of God is within you, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, consider the lilies of the field, they neither sow nor do they spin! This last is a firm rejection of material progress.

Both the Gita and the New Testament proclaim the call to the life lived in terms of the Spirit. Civilization itself is the triumph of the spirit in Man. Dr. Ishanand has striven hard and, on the whole, fruitfully to bring out the essential harmony of the teachings of the two great scriptures and the need to bring them into our dealings with the problems of the modern Kuruksheta—fast becoming an adharma kshetra—that is this world.

The following minor points may be jotted down for purpose of correction in a future edition of this valuable book:
1) On p. 5, Max Muller, Ananda Coomarasamy and Radhakrishnan are referred to, among others, as indifferent contemptuous, or even hostile to religion...unqualified to have access to the inner sanctuary of religion. What evidence does Dr. Ishanand have of these scholars' indifference, etc.? 2) Again, "male criteria" and "female criteria"—of human values. Do criteria also suffer from gender? 3) On p. 7, Dr. Ishanand draws attention to the source of Islamic nationalism. "My Islam is my mother!" This kind of commitment is the root of religious strife. 4) Dr. Ishanand could have emphasized more clearly the current fact that the real conflict is not between Religion A and Religion B but between true religion and bogus substitutes, including militant materialism. 5) Dr. Ishanand, it is satisfying to note, is taking account of Sri Sankara Statement that Sruti which contradicts experience is worthy of no regard. 6) Scriptures should emphasize experience and not fact. Fact bound religion, as Arnold pointed out, is doomed. 7) Christ Value is ineffably more important than Christ-fact.

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