



January 1991

Book Reviews: "The Yoga of the Christ in the Gospel According to St. John"

David J. Hawkin

Bibhuti S. Yadav

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hawkin, David J. and Yadav, Bibhuti S. (1991) "Book Reviews: "The Yoga of the Christ in the Gospel According to St. John";", *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 4, Article 9.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1047>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Yoga of the Christ in the Gospel According to St. John. Ravi Ravindra. Longmead, England: Element Books, 1990, 244p, \$8.95. (Ed.—We present two reviews of this book, the first by David Hawkin, a Christian Biblical scholar, the second by Bibhuti Yadav, a Hindu scholar.)

"IN OUR PLURALISTIC world", says Ravi Ravindra in his introduction to *The Yoga of the Christ*, "cross-cultural communication has become a matter of necessity for global survival." He goes on to claim that a new consciousness is emerging, and that one of its features is a "non-sectarian spirituality". His book is an attempt to contribute to the development of this new consciousness, and in particular to show how one of the central texts in the Christian tradition—the Gospel of John—contains truths which transcend religious and cultural boundaries. Ravindra believes that his interpretation of John shows that the exclusiveness which characterizes much of Christianity fails to understand the true meaning of texts such as St. John's Gospel.

Ravindra's own interpretation is very much influenced by his Indian tradition, and as such he intends it to pose a challenge to a reader from the Western tradition. His interpretative method is non-intentionalist, ahistorical and creative. He looks for the "inner and symbolic" meaning of the text, and freely harmonizes passages and draws parallels without regard to context or *genre*. This will no doubt be disquieting to those readers immersed in the historical-critical method as they struggle to come to terms with the interpretative results of this radically different methodology. But for many of them Ravindra's interpretive efforts will also have a familiar ring, for much of what he says is similar to heretical gnostic interpretations found in early Christianity. Consider, for example what he says about the incarnation: Christ came and dwelt in us "participating in us" (18), "divinizing all those who let the Logos abide in them" (19). Further, "the Holy Spirit descended on the head of Jesus, initiating him and making him the Chosen

One of God. *This is when Jesus became the Christ*" (23—emphases added). Christ has a "heavenly body; his flesh and blood are not of the same gross kind as of ordinary humanity" (80). This sounds distinctly Valentinian, as does Ravindra's view that Christ was "not really interested in teaching the masses who could not understand him or follow him" (25). Jesus, claims Ravindra, "seems to have gone out of his way to ensure that even when the multitude heard him they would not really understand" (149). Christ and his teaching are "naturally veiled from those who are of the flesh" (207), and he taught only the "select band of his own disciples" (46), those who have "a little spark of the new being" (66). Ravindra's book abounds with such gnostic echoes.

Ravindra writes from an Indian perspective; he wishes to contribute to "cross-cultural communication". And yet the perceptive Western reader will see in Ravindra's interpretation not so much a challenge from the East as a resurrecting of the gnostic challenge which faced the Church in the second century. For the historian this raises the question of the extent to which gnostic and Eastern thought are interrelated. For the theologians it raises the question of whether the early Church Fathers were right in condemning gnosticism as a threat to Christian faith. Ravindra's book thus raises far-reaching questions which cannot be confined within the strict boundary of Johannine interpretation and the question and the question of "non-sectarian spirituality".

David J. Hawkin
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. Johns, Newfoundland, Canada

Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin 4 (1991) 39-48

40 Book Reviews

THIS BOOK IS meant as a commentary on the Gospel of John. Ravi Ravindra has written this commentary for two reasons: to affirm his love for the Gospel and to reiterate his ecumenical concerns. In his view, the days of theological exclusivism and evangelical enthusiasm are over. A new global consciousness is at hand, the consciousness is spiritual and can only be understood in spiritual terms. Frames of reference which advocate the autonomy of unmediated difference or religious particularity will not do. We need to rediscover universal truths that are at the heart of the major works of religious traditions, a discovery that can only be stated in global terms. Ravindra has chosen the Gospel of John to illustrate his claims. He performs ecumenical praxis in the faith that all wells contain the same water, consistently invoking the Upaniṣads and the Gītā to 'elucidate' the texts of the gospel of John. He has written this commentary in the hope of promoting religious understanding, in this case between Christianity and Hinduism.

Unfortunately, Ravindra does not deliver what he promises. A commentary should have at least two things: it should not alienate a text from its context, and it should display hermeneutical rigor. Ravindra's commentary does neither. His aim is to understand the gospel of John in an ecumenical spirit, convinced as he is that all wells contain the same water. But he succeeds in decontextualizing the issues, reducing the Gospel to the plasticity of neo-Vedānta. Rather than changing water into wine, he empties the Vedāntic pails into the Christian well. To use another metaphor, Ravindra does not let Jordan be Jordan. He keeps on spilling Ganges water into the Jordan until the latter is reduced to a river only in name. This is not all. Ravindra practises reductionism on the other side as well. His Ganges is without a historical texture or traditional contents. It is filled with artificial water in which neo-Vedantic salt reins. Ravindra's work forces us to ask an old question: Is commentarial thinking possible if one displaces the texts from their contexts?

Decontextualization leads to confusion of categories. Ravindra is constrained to interpret the mission of John the baptiser in terms of *buddhi*, one of the central categories in the

Bhagavad Gītā. The reason why John is uniquely able to recognize Jesus as Christ is because he has *buddhi*, intelligence that stands between and mediates the human and the Spirit (*Puruṣa*). However, the equation of Gītā's notion of *buddhi* with John's recognition of Jesus as Christ is misleading. *Buddhi* is generally associated with egocentric cogito; it means the instrumental reason (*sādhana*) which the self-centering ego uses to materialize its ends (*adhyavasāya buddhi*). This notion of *buddhi* is not unique to the Gītā but is shared by almost all the schools of Hinduism, including Vedānta. Is this how logos is understood in the gospel of John or how Jesus is recognized as Christ? We think that *buddhi* may more appropriately be used to connote the cogito that Adam used to declare his egocentric independence (*ahanta*), thus alienating his will from the will of God. The logos in the gospel of John overcomes the alienation that the concept of *buddhi* generally signifies.

We note that the Gītā also uses *buddhi* in association with *sāmānvaya*, meaning integrated intelligence. As a compound, *sāmānvaya buddhi*, means integration of *karma* and *jñāna*, including the reconciliation of human will with the will of God. Arjuna refuses to engage in organized violence, questioning the liberative efficacy of a society that needs a war for its historical existence. Kṛṣṇa then tells Arjuna that the human will is good if it is surrendered to the will of God. God has willed himself into the caste structure of society, it is through the uniqueness of this structure that God lives in history, and that Arjuna has *sāmānvaya buddhi* if he is willing to find and die for Hindu society as an end in itself. Not to do so would be to be alienated from, not reconciled to, the body of God. Is this the kind of social body for which the logos in the gospel of John became flesh? Is the equation of logos and *dharma* reasonable? The Gītā does not talk of universal spirituality; it talks of social particularity. One could also say that the logos, according to the gospel of John, became flesh not to spiritualize salvation but to socialize it. The difference is that the gospel insists that salvation is social, that all human beings are equal before God, and that they all have the right to social equality on religious grounds.

Ravindra's book has little to contribute to our knowledge of Christianity or Hinduism. He exhorts, in the opening pages, that we 'rediscover' the truth of religious tradition. But he offers no serious reflection on the texts and traditions of the religions in question. Instead, his work is representative of the spiritual stance that dominates the ecumenical discourse today, especially Christian-Hindu dialogue. Some Christians talk of the 'anonymous' and 'cosmic' presence of Christ in Hinduism; others, especially Indian Christians, have embraced a Yogi Christ who can be encountered through a swami form of life in an ashram. The historical Jesus has gone with the wind, his social commitments displaced in a metaphysical or mystical space. Fearful of theological exclusivism, they now reiterate a spiritualism that has no historical or social contents. Neo-Vedāntans are not far behind. Cosmopolitan and Westernized, they have no regard for the vernaculars and the toiling millions of India. Neither do they have interest in hermeneutical rigor or access to serious texts in Sanskrit and Tamil. They do talk of 'Yogi Christ', keeping the historical Jesus on the border of hierarchical society. Transcendental unity of religions for them is far more important than religious struggles for social justice. They do talk of spiritual equality, which is only possible in a metasocial space. The neo-vedāntic discourse on universality has no regard for textual fidelity, not even for technical reflection, that classical Vedānta did to devalue the category of difference (*bheda dikkara*).

Ravindra has noble aims, although not the right tools. It is entirely reasonable, perhaps

unavoidable, that a Hindu will approach a Christian text through his own frame of reference. The vice versa is just as reasonable. Human beings after all are only all too human. But it is unreasonable for a Christian ecumenist to ignore the technical categories and textual traditions of Hinduism. By the same token, it is also unreasonable for a neo-Vedāntin to fill the Ganges with artificial salt and then dump it all in the Jordan. There is a great truth in the last chapter of Ravindra's book: Let not him who seeks cease until he finds. The expression is promising only in the sense of how the themes and issues the author raises should not be pursued in the way he has. There is no guarantee that the truth will ever be found. But it behooves us all to recognize that great texts speak of truths in context. That means hermeneutical rigor and methodological competence. The quest of spiritual universality through ecumenical discourse is no exception. There is no use in pseudo-Westernized Hindus talking to pseudo-Vedāntized Christians, and vice versa. That is apologetic discourse, and both Christianity and Hinduism lose in the process. Meanwhile there are signs in India saying that social justice—and not spiritual universality—is the need of the hour. Christ cannot afford to do yoga in ashrams on high mountains any more; he must return to Jesus in civil society. And Kṛṣṇa will have to speak once again, this time a Gītā that guarantees social equality on religious grounds.

Bibhuti S. Yadav
Temple University
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania