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Book Review: "Gandhi on Christianity"

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BOOK REVIEWS

Gandhi on Christianity. Robert Ellsberg (ed). Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991, 117p.

THE BOOK UNDER review includes an editorial, an anthology of writings by Gandhi, and articles by scholars on the theme. Robert Ellsberg, editor of Orbis Books, highlights the two-way nature of the relationship between Gandhi and Christianity. In this respect the structure of the book is in tune with the main thrust of this Bulletin. He is also bold enough to suggest that the "center of gravity of world Christianity is shifting from Europe and the north to the peoples of the south—the poor of Latin America, Asia and Africa, for whom God, as Gandhi used to say, must appear in the form of bread." Selections from Gandhi's works are never easy to arrange. Ellsberg groups the extracts under the following heads; Encounters with Christianity, The Message of Jesus, Mission and Missionaries, and All Religions Are True. Even those familiar with oft-quoted passages will find surprises here. For example: "I have never been able to reconcile myself to the gaieties of the Christmas season. They have appeared to me to be inconsistent with the life and teaching of Jesus." (p. 23), and mention of his dislike of the second stanza of the British national anthem (long since dropped). The selections speak for themselves. It is scholarly articles which invite comment in this short review.

Diana Eck, currently moderator and Chair of the W.C.C. Working Group on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths, examines "Gandhian Guidelines for a World of Religious Difference." She begins with *anekantavada* (the many-sidedness of truth), a very pointed antidote to exclusivism. She then deals in turn with *sarvadharmasamanvatva* (having equal regard for all faiths and creeds), the imperfection of all religions, experiments with truth, ahimsa as the way to truth, friendly study of the world's religions, and deeper understanding of our own faith. She wisely notes that each faith speaks

with many voices, and raises the question whether one should only study a tradition "through the writings of known votaries." But no doubt Gandhi did not concern himself with problems that beset the comparatist today. In particular he did not reflect overmuch on how feasible it was to enter the religious life-world of 'the other'. But Gandhi would certainly have agreed with Diana Eck's view that "We are responsible for the image of one another." Among the lessons of *satyagraha* the importance of a common task could have been mentioned for it is in this context that both encounters and dialogues not only find their proper place but can even be transcended.

Fr. Ignatius Jesudasan S.J.'s paper on "Gandhi's Way of the Cross" finds in Gandhi a challenge to Asian theology. He is on target with his insight that Gandhi responded most of all to Christ's ethical teaching but that he was able to see a link between ethics and faith. He expresses this neatly: "Praxis is the empirical measure and criterion of faith." (p. 97) But his claim that Gandhi "reinterpreted karma as a social and communal expression of sin and salvation rather than an isolated, individualized relationship with God" (p. 99) raised several question marks. To take just one, is karma necessarily tied up with a relationship with God? If it had been such, could it have featured in non-theistic philosophical systems? Gandhi certainly sought to make "religious faith an ally and an instrument in the social and political liberation of human beings." (p. 99) But Fr. Jesudasan's reference to 'anonymous Christianity' may be less than helpful. It may be recalled in this connection that Gandhi did not find in religious pluralism any essential obstacle to inter-religious understanding. Above all, would anonymous Christianity (or anonymous Hinduism for that matter) be compatible with *swadharmā*?

34 Book Reviews

Jim Douglass' orientation is that of a Christian peace-activist who finds in Gandhi a challenge to Christian discipleship. As he puts it, "The logic of non-violence is the logic of crucifixion and leads the person of non-violence into the heart of the suffering Christ." (p. 106) To see the connection between non-violent action and redemption as Douglass does, however, is to reinforce Gandhi's insistence that redemption can never be once for all, and if anything illustrates this in Gandhi's own lifetime it was the history of Calcutta and the rest of Bengal during the months and years following Gandhi's fast unto death (an event of which Douglass makes special mention).

In conclusion the challenge of Gandhi to Christian mission is taken up by Bob McCahill,

a Maryknoll priest with 16 years experience in Bangladesh. Mission as sharing, as service, provides its own witness. The approach personified in Fr. McCahill is deeply in tune with the alteration in attitude that Gandhi recommended to missionaries of an earlier generation.

All in all this volume which is addressed to Christian readers encourages a further dialogue between Gandhi and the so-called Christian world, a dialogue which can well take up issues which have arisen since Gandhi's time.

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Christ as Common Ground: A Study of Christianity and Hinduism. Kathleen Healy. Foreword by Bede Griffiths. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1990, xiv + 218p.

SISTER HEALY EXPLAINS in her preface that this work is an "outgrowth of six years of study of the relationship of Christianity and Hinduism in India." She spent fourteen months in 1976/77 at the University of Madras as Fulbright Professor of American Literature, and spent most of 1980 as a research-scholar in India, conducting interviews with "innumerable theologians, philosophers, swamis, gurus, sannyasis, and 'ordinary people'." The author explicitly states that her book is "in no sense a 'survey' of dialogue between Hindus and Christians in India." She expresses her "firm conviction that the spiritual union of East and West is crucial in our world. Western Christians can no longer isolate themselves within the intellectual and geographical limitations of a narrow tunnel view of Christianity." She also notes that "it is of primary importance for Christians to discover why millions of Hindus worship Christ, but often view the Christian church as 'Churchianity'." Sister Healy wishes to offer some guidance and show "a direction acceptable to Hindu and Christian alike." Sister

Healy singles out Raimundo Panikkar and Bede Griffiths as having been particularly helpful in her enterprise and acknowledges her indebtedness to their ideas.

In Chapter I, "The Challenge to find a Common Ground," she identifies as the common ground on which a Hindu-Christian dialogue can develop "the Christ who existed from the beginning" on whom "Christians have no monopoly." (8) She carries those ideas further in the next chapters "Christ beyond Christianity: Jesus Christ, the Hindu, and the Church!" and "Toward a More Universal Perspective: Spiritual Interchange between Christian and Hindu," in which she provides a kind of survey of the Indian situation, quoting extensively the interviews which she had conducted. She states that "dialogue between Christian and Hindu today is not a choice for the Indian Christian but a necessity." (p. 35)

Her own creative contribution to Hindu-Christian dialogue begins with chapter IV "Foundations of Spiritual Fecundation," making use of one of Panikkar's favourite images.