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Book Review: "From Conversion to Fellowship: The Hindu-Christian Encounter in the Gandhian Perspective"

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From Conversion to Fellowship: The Hindu-Christian Encounter in the Gandhian Perspective. A. Pushparajan. Dialogue Series Publications No 6, Allahabad: St Paul Publications, 1990.

PUSHPARAJAN, READER IN Gandhian Studies at Madurai Kamaraj University in India, seeks to foster positive relations among Hindus and Christians in India by helping to hasten the maturation of the two religions in today's post-polemical environment, to encourage their positive encounter and dialogue, and to resolve the problem of their conflicting truth claims. The vehicle of his contribution is first of all a historical and theoretical analysis of three crucial problems which over the centuries have provoked controversy and hindered dialogue: the Christian desire to convert, the Christian critique of idolatry, and the conflict between the two religions' scriptural claims about themselves and other religions. Into this situation he then introduces Gandhi's thought as a superior alternative.

Pushparajan shows how missionary charges on the three issues – as originally expressed in polemical situations but also as refined by Heinrich Kraemer and others – not only provoked strong reactions, but often produced mirror responses from prominent Hindu thinkers such as Rammohan Roy, the great neo-Hindu reformer, and Swami Dayananda, the founder of the Arya Samaj: e.g. if monotheism is superior to polytheism, it happens that true Hinduism is really the world's oldest and most perfect monotheism; if idolatry is crude, it turns out that Hindus are not really idolaters, and in fact have a more spiritual notion of the divine than do people in the Biblical traditions; if one set of scriptural claims is true and all the rest false, it is the Hindu claims that can be shown truer than all others. Pushparajan's descriptions are detailed and well-ordered, and most readers are likely to profit from this information on the controversial period of Hindu-Christian relations.

Pushparajan regards this situation as an unfortunate stalemate which, though not vociferously fought today, still poisons the atmosphere of interreligious relations in India. He therefore proceeds to argue that on all three issues Gandhi called into question the presuppositions of both the missionaries and their Hindu antagonists, while at the same time offering views which are refreshingly different and still timely and valuable: e.g. there is no point in comparing religions in order to decide which is the better, since no one has provided or can provide decisive historical or theoretical evidence in this regard; religions are not liable to that kind of comparison, so there is no point in seeking conversions on that basis. Gandhi believed that idol worship has a true and deeper meaning which Indians ought to embrace unapologetically, even if Christians do not appreciate it. No Scripture succeeds in capturing the whole truth about God and salvation and the apparently contradictory claims of various scriptures are actually parallel gropings toward the same truth.

Insisting that Gandhi was not a systematiser but one who maintained a practical stance on all issues, in support of Gandhi's views, the author appeals to Gandhi's own religiosity; his understanding was based not on analysis alone, but 'on a most serious attempt to lead a scrupulously religious, that is, pure life' (p.308). Therefore, in his wide variety of writings and speeches, Gandhi surpassed the achievement of the comparative study of religions which merely emphasises 'a particular scripture, theory, belief or practice as a parameter for judging all other scriptures, theories, beliefs and practices' (p.308). (Unfortunately, Pushparajan does not elaborate on the basis

for this intriguing description, so the reader is not able to assess it satisfactorily.)

The strength of the book – in addition to its lucid and straightforward writing – lies in its clear historical presentation of the difficult problems mentioned above, its skillful relation of old controversies to the modern situation, and its reminder to us of the relative originality of Gandhi's approach. As a result, it is best taken as an urgent moral appeal to contemporary Hindus and Christians in India to avoid demeaning abstract arguments, to live humble and helpful lives, and to remain open to people of other backgrounds and beliefs whatever the historical differences and obvious dissimilarities might be.

It is hard to read this book without judging Gandhi a more sensible person than his squabbling predecessors and contemporaries. One wishes, though, that the author had been a bit more sympathetic with the figures with whom Gandhi is contrasted: they are presented as detached and clumsily theoretical in their concerns – more so than one would expect missionaries and neo-Hindu reformers to be – as if they had studied religions, drawn up theses, and only thereafter begun to think about real-life situations. Even if Gandhi is more highly thought of today, it is not because his aims were more practical than theirs; rather he had a different and evidently more timely agenda. One wishes the author had either elaborated that Gandhian agenda more broadly – e.g. what is the purpose of his thinking about religions in the context of the struggle for independence? – or had developed a theoretical defence of Gandhi's position.

Insofar as Pushparajan ventures in that direction his statements are insufficient. Too much of his analysis depends on a view of

religion and truth he attributes to Gandhi and takes for granted: 'no system of religious doctrines can be judged better or worse from the viewpoint of religiosity' (p.110); 'the characteristic point about Gandhi's views on the nature of religions is his recognition of Truth in all religions ... every religion constituted a revelation of Truth' (p.145); 'all religions are "equally true and imperfect" and they are "more or less" true' (pp.146-7); 'religion essentially consists in the pursuit of a Transcendent or Perfect life' (p.292). If such be true, then of course there is nothing much to fight about; all concerned will more profitably devote themselves to other and more important social and political concerns.

But most religious people have insisted on a super-human or pre-human origin for their religion, some kind of decisive divine intervention which sets their faith apart from that of others as truer, more efficacious, etc. Such claims are often made by people who see revelation as a grace and not a human achievement – and who at the same time readily acknowledge that there is no place for violence or competition in religious matters. Their religious passions, positive and negative, have to do with what they perceive to be sacred truth with which they have been entrusted. Given that the author has a contemporary and practical concern for today's India, we must therefore wonder whether Gandhi himself may not be a bit out of date in India's freshly tumultuous context; his view on religious harmony and its basis may be morally attractive but intellectually unpersuasive – and hence not as relevant in practice as one might have hoped.

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