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Book Review: "Hinduism and Christianity"

Anand Amaladass

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BOOK REVIEWS

Hinduism and Christianity. John Brockington. London: Macmillan, 1992, xiii+215pp.

IN A SERIES of monographs on themes in comparative religion under the general editorship of Glyn Richards the first published title is *Hinduism and Christianity* by John Brockington. This volume contains a selection of themes from Hinduism and Christianity. It is intended for many Christians in Europe and America whose everyday experience does not include the existence of several major religions. Obviously in a volume of about 200 pages one cannot expect a detailed discussion on the selected themes. But still it tries to focus on the central concerns of both religions.

Both in the introduction and in the concluding paragraph of the book the author states that his style of treatment is intended to illustrate how both these religions reveal a substantial degree of internal diversity and adaptability, which is part of their strength. This is more and more coming to the foreground due to the increased awareness of each other and it will become mutually enriching to the extent the partners in dialogue are ready to learn from each other. The approach of the author is quite balanced since he is aware of the earlier studies with a rather unbalanced comparison between the two, usually to the detriment of Hinduism.

The themes treated in this book are: the nature of the Divine; divine interaction with humankind; authority and mediation; devotionalism and personal piety; meditation and asceticism; social values and morality; teleology: meaning and ends. The final chapter provides a summary survey of the contacts over the centuries between the two religions.

However, one has to admit that in such attempts of comparison one cannot do full justice to two traditions, since the themes themselves have their own background. A particular theme may take priority in one tradition while the same theme may not be fully developed in another tradition, even if it is of central concern for

both. So juxtaposing the development of a theme in two traditions will reveal this factor. But the lack of development of a particular theme in a given tradition does not mean much in comparison with another where this theme is well developed. Hence some statements of such comparative nature do sound ambiguous in this book. For instance, it is said that "there is virtually no trace within Hinduism of the fellowship at a common meal found in many other religions" (p.122), the author adds however that there is a limited exception to this in the distribution to worshippers of *prasada*.

It is true that the concept of table fellowship is well developed in the Judaeo-Christian worldview. But it is not quite right to say that there is no trace of it in Hinduism. The idea of community consciousness, common fellowship and sharing has found different expressions at different times in the Hindu traditions. For example the bhakti movements brought in a new consciousness of a community of believers who accept each other and share freely what they have.

Secondly, in chapter five on meditation and asceticism the history of Christian monastic tradition is quite systematic and succinctly presented. But the Hindu side stops with Sankara, with a casual mention of contemporary Sankaracaryas. Later developments of the ashram tradition within Hinduism such as the Ramakrishna mission or the Brahma kumaris do not find their due place (though both are mentioned in the later chapters in different contexts).

One should keep in mind that Hindu religion is a living tradition with all the possible varieties within that framework and a Hindu of today does not always think in traditional categories. The position of women in India is complex and includes the history of protest movements as found among the women of bhakti traditions.

Today's women's organization for liberation, for example, shows the progression from Manu's time. The caste issue has to be situated within the context of liberation struggle through the dalit movements where the voice of the *dalits* (oppressed people) cannot be ignored in Indian politics of today. Without such a historical perspective a study of a few themes in two religious traditions may not enable an impartial reader to appreciate the origin and growth of the themes with their respective historical contexts.

However, this book will be a handy volume for people who would like to enter into the world of two major religious traditions. It is informative and written with sensitivity and openness, without any claim to newer insights into the meeting of two major religions from the perspective of theological or philosophical hermeneutics.

Anand Amaladass
Madras

Religion in a New Key. M. Darrol Bryant. New Delhi, Bangalore, etc.: Wiley Eastern Ltd., 1992.

THIS SERIES OF lectures given in India by Darrol Bryant of the Department of Religious Studies of Waterloo now appears as a booklet proposing a distinctive approach to the study of religion. "The living dialogue emerging in our time", declares Bryant, "is a suitable vibrant key not only for living our respective faiths and lives but also for the study of the religious heritage of humanity" (p.4).

The metaphor is musical. The new key offered is "a tone that will permeate the study of religion" (p.56). One can now be inspired, enlightened and instructed by living contact with adherents of religious traditions other than one's own, sharing experiences and attempting dialogue - a term for meeting preferred by Bryant since it expresses "the encounter of a speaker and a listener, a listener and a speaker, in the process of communing one with another in relation to a ground that precedes and sustains them" (p.42).

The evolution of the study of religion is schematized, in this view, as "traditional", "modern" and "post-modern". "Traditional" study is described as that of a scholar within a religious tradition, "explicating the content of a given religious tradition by immersing himself in (its) sacred literature" (p.7). "Modern" study of religion is the scientific attempt to understand religions phenomenologically and comparatively, a study that emerged as Comparative Religion or the History of Religions. "Post-modern" study, for Bryant, now proceeds with a commitment to

the religions, understood as converging pathways to the experience of God/the Sacred/ultimacy. In this latter fundamentally religious approach to the study of religion Bryant acknowledges the tutelage of Mircea Eliade, Huston Smith, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Ursula King and Raimundo Panikkar. The contemporary student of religion, instructed by such precedents, must "cultivate an ear for the Mystery of the Beyond" (p.70).

No doubt there is a mystery at the centre of the study of religion; and no doubt also that a reductionist scientism is to be deplored, especially in the study of religion: it does not follow that an uncritical identification of spirituality with religion ought to shape the study of religion. A thorough scholarly objectivity will be required precisely to assess the influence of various spiritualities. Objectivity is clearly necessary on the part of those who confront and analyse religion in its more oppressive and oppressing manifestations. One thinks, for example, of some implications of spirituality and religion for the situation of Dalits in India; or one considers the involvement of religion with consumerism in North America.

Does the experience of dialogue show the way? In *Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (Orbis, 1989) Robert D. Baird squarely faced the question of the relation of dialogue to the academic study of religion. He carefully distinguished the two. "The academic study of religion", he wrote, "places a high premium on clarity of analysis ...