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Book Review: "Religion in a New Key"

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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 ...

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when one puts epoché aside, one is no longer engaged in the academic study of religion" (p.218).

The study of religion must move into the "post-modern" situation, these lectures say. And so it must, taking account of dialogue and examining, among other things, the relation of the traditional religions to emerging "globalization" – and the concomitant environmental devastation. These lectures say a great deal about that situation. They are wonderfully broad in scope. They reveal an

engaging openness to manifestations of spiritual life. They fail to establish two key distinctions, in the opinion of this reviewer – between religion and spirituality and between dialogue and its interpretation – but in other respects they constitute a stimulating and useful introduction to the contemporary study of religion.

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Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna. Lex Hixon. Boston & London: Shambala Publications Inc., 1992, 314pp., index.

IF THE TITLE leads you to expect a historical account of the meeting of the well-known Bengali mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886) – the "Great Swan" of the title is how Hixon renders *paramahansa* – with various people of his time, you are setting off entirely on the wrong foot. There is nothing really historical in this book at all. In the *Introduction* we are told that "*Great Swan* can be regarded as a contemporary commentary on *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and *The Great Master*, the root texts" of the Ramakrishna tradition. In fact, it is an imaginative interpretation – too imaginative and over-interpreted. Early in the book, towards the end of the *Introduction* in fact, it is asserted that Ramakrishna is "an Einstein of the planetary civilization of the near future". If this description induces sinking feelings in the scholarly reader as to both forthcoming style and content, they are well justified.

No attempt is made to present a critical study of the Master's teachings or meetings (after all commentaries can be "critical" in the positive sense of this term). Thus the book is useless as a source of information or towards any scholarly end. Well, perhaps it scores on "atmospherics", conveying effectively the Master's persona and presence in different moods and situations. Not for me, it didn't. Here's an example of the style: "[Ramakrishna's] body trembles subtly for a few

minutes, particularly the thumbs, as if a powerful electrical current is consciously focusing and adjusting itself through the entire nervous system. Then the human form becomes perfectly still, except for a wonderful smile playing continuously across bearded lips ... The figure appears to increase slightly in size, as if expanding into the boundless space of Divine Presence Ramakrishna's God-filled form is seated upright on the sumptuous divan, not leaning against its colourful bolsters and pillows. His beautiful meditative equipoise seems barely to touch the ordinary world of space and time" (p.121). Or how about this: "Ramakrishna is seated in the home of his beloved companion Ishan... Wherever he travels, the Great Swan is englobed by peace – *shanti, shanti, shanti*... A white sheet has been spread on the floor and white pillows place near our Master, who is wearing a white cloth and a white woolen shawl informally covering his honey-coloured body... Since this is a High Holy Day in Hindu tradition, Divine Ecstasy is streaming through the Paramahansa's very pores..." (p.193). If such purple prose does for you, you will happily die of suffocation over 300 unremitting pages.

The cumulative effect for me was to totally obliterate Ramakrishna's humanity, and consequently to render him quite inaccessible, whether as teacher, guide, model or friend. I fear I can recommend this book to no one,