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Book Review: "God as feminine: Hindu and Christian Vision. A Dialogue."

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BOOK REVIEWS

God as feminine: Hindu and Christian Vision. A Dialogue. Joseph Sebastian. European University Studies: Series 23, Theology, Vol.523. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995, 458pp.

THIS BOOK IS basically a doctoral dissertation submitted to the Gregorian University in Rome, published now under the title *God as Feminine*. Amidst the present-day quest for gender justice in different religious traditions, this volume is a welcome addition for bringing the question into focus and keeping the discussion alive. The aim of this study is "to further current theological attempts to include in the Christian language feminine images of God". Hence the author takes note of "the attribution of feminine images to God in the Christian traditions, and views Hindu (Bharati's) concept as feminine in that light" (p.2).

It has three parts: The first part deals mainly with Bharati's writings, especially his devotional poems, which are analysed and thematically presented. The second part elucidates various metaphors and images of God as feminine from a few chosen Christian traditions with special reference to Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century English mystic. The third part compares these two religious traditions in their understanding of God as feminine and proposes a better language about God acceptable to both of them.

Though a Hindu vision of God is mentioned in general, it is only the Hindu Tamil poet Bharati's understanding of God that is presented – taking Bharati as a typical poet rooted in Hindu tradition. On the one hand, it is ambiguous to view the whole tradition from the works of a single author who was conditioned by his own limited understanding of even his own tradition. On the other hand, in the Indian tradition it is not the historical personalities with their

unique contribution that stand out prominently, but the link with the hoary past – the unbroken succession of teachers who transmitted the truth – is highlighted. And in that sense even a single author could be taken as a mouthpiece of a given tradition. As a matter of fact such an understanding of tradition is not sufficiently emphasized here. Alvars and Nayanmars are brought in as influences on Bharati. But Alvars themselves had their predecessors. A historical perspective could have enhanced the understanding of the Divine as feminine in the writings of Bharati and provided a hermeneutic tool with a larger horizon for interpreting the poet's works.

Part two gives rather an elaborate presentation of the Christian tradition. Beginning with the biblical vocabularies expressing the divine feminine the author lists several texts from the Bible and presents the historical overview of the patristic and mystic traditions. It is quite systematic and impressive.

But in bringing together the two major traditions, Hindu and Christian, the points of convergence are not that striking. God as "mistress" in Hindu and Christian sources is not understood in the same way (p.361). God's love, His care and concern, endearing, enduring like the mother, etc., is all very clear. They are peripheral. But the crux of the feminine image is not touched in the Christian tradition. Hence a reluctance is felt within the Christian tradition even today to accord women certain roles and positions in the church which have so far remained as male prerogatives.

The author pleads for a re-examination of Christian God-language – especially in

the context of enclavation in India. The attempt is praiseworthy, where the need for a prophetic critique is admitted. But the change of metaphors cannot happen in a vacuum. First of all the socio-cultural factors that condition the thinking pattern of a believing community are to be examined to see whether such a change of metaphors is feasible. That is not done, since the scope of the book is limited to convergence and divergence in the vocabulary and images designating God in both the traditions. Secondly, one has to go into the theological implications of these metaphors before introducing feminine images of God into the Christian tradition patterned on the Hindu model. That is not done either.

But the book serves as a good source for

further research. The poet Bharati's works are very well analysed and documented – probably for the first time from this perspective. It is interesting to mention that Bharati himself, a Hindu poet, composed a poem on Jesus Christ, which is quite significant while comparing Christian and Hindu images of God as feminine. The poem concludes thus:

Magdalene is the Eternal Feminine,
Jesus Christ is unending *dharma*,
Draw we close to the symbol;
look, an inner meaning glows.

(Cf. Prema Nandakumar's article in this volume.)

Anand Amaladass
Madras

Mother of the Universe: Visions of the Goddess and Tantric Hymns of Enlightenment. Lex Hixon. London: Quest Books, 1994, xiv + 223 pp.

LEX HIXON'S BOOK *Mother of the Universe* can loosely be called a "reworking" of the reflections and songs of the eighteenth-century Bengali Mystic Ramprasad Sen. Ramprasad was a poet and saint, famous in Bengal for his devotion to the great goddess of Hinduism. Hixon's poems are not based on the original Bengali of the poet, but rather on a translation of them, rendered into English by Judanath Sinha. Hixon has then revised and expanded them, with the aim of explicating Ramprasad's verse, with reference to his own experiences. In this sense, Hixon says, "rather than ... scholarly footnotes, the expanded poems themselves contain commentary on the esoteric Mother Wisdom of India" (p.xii). The resulting "contemplative visions" then are designed especially for the English reader who may appreciate Hixon's "Western sensibility

about language and meaning" (p.xi) (whatever that may mean).

Mother of the Universe can best be situated in the larger schema of Goddess literature if one reads the preface to the book carefully. There Hixon confides that he was attracted to the Hindu Goddess tradition by what he feels is the natural power of the feminine metaphor, and received a formal initiation at the hands of Swami Nikhilananda, a prominent disciple of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi. He perceives himself as a committed devotee of Mother Kali, who can now "approach and envision the Great Goddess naturally, as if I had been raised since childhood in the Divine Mother tradition of Bengal" (p.xi). His book, as a result, is clearly a religious exercise, infused with devotional purpose, and his hopes for it are quite ambitious. He says, "This book can serve as a non-doctrinal, non-official scripture of the Goddess" (p.xi), and his