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Briefly Noted

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70 Book Reviews/Briefly Noted

Another observation of his is worth considering:

That we are Hindus or Muslims or Christians largely depends on where we happened to have been born. It is extremely difficult to believe that truth suddenly changes across a border defined by a river or a mountain range corresponding to political boundaries of past or present empires."(p.67).

He appropriately quotes the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman: "a time will come that you will worship neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem, but in truth and spirit".

The author might sound provocative for some, but he is certainly persuasive without becoming polemic. What is fascinating is his candid and personal approach to the question of being cross-cultural, since he is by birth and training exposed to different traditions and cultures and he lives it himself feeling at home in this position without being threatened.

All the same the readers might also be puzzled by this pilgrim approach to life not having any fixed position. There are instances of sages, whom Ravi himself refers to, who were searchers after the Infinite. Such saints lived outside the structured traditions and inspired numerous visitors who became their disciples. One does not enter into "dialogue" with such masters, since they have reached another level, a higher level. One can only become their disciple. But these disciples created traditions around them based on their master, and normally we have to deal with such people in dialogue.

Being cross-cultural or crossing the borders does not mean that the boundaries are removed or the boundaries will disappear at any time. It is only one's ability to cross the boundaries, to be able to see things across the border with openness, not being threatened by the other, that is

called for. It is also significant to observe that people who have crossed the borders, who have a universal outlook, have developed a spiritual vision, which includes also a social security, inheriting a multicultural background, having access to diverse formations. Only such people could afford to engage in intercultural or interfaith dialogue. When more people have access to such a formation, the situation in the world should change. Does that mean training programmes in the centres of learning should include providing such possibilities? This has various socio-political implications which need not be discussed here.

But certainly Ravi's approach of inter-pilgrim dialogue challenges the well-meaning people of all traditions, and hence this publication merits the attention of the readers who are engaged in dialogue at various levels.

Anand Amaladass
Chennai

Briefly Noted

Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth. Gananath Obeyesekere. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, xxix+448pp.

Written by a Theravada Buddhist Anthropologist, this book's thesis is that in spite of differences regarding rebirth in India, Greek and small societies there are underlying structural similarities based on a shared belief in reincarnation which has a common elementary structure and ethical implications. Written for Anthropologists and Historians of Religion, the book seeks to show that ethical ideas of rebirth are not exclusive to India. The aim is to demonstrate to modern Western thinkers, who find the Indic notions of *karma* and rebirth to be radically different, evidence that these notions, far from being totally

foreign and unlikely, were strongly present in Greek thought - a major source of European civilization. Rebirth ideas were also present in small societies around the world prior to their Greek and Indian manifestations. What especially characterizes the Indian and Greek forms is the strong ethical ideas associated with rebirth thinking - the idea that the good or bad one does in this life has a direct effect on one's afterlife and on the state into which one is reborn. Through his careful and detailed reading of these seemingly quite different societies, the author convincingly shows that rebirth beliefs link Greek philosophers to Indian (Hindu, Buddhist, Jain) and Amerindian thinkers. The book thus builds a stolid bridge between Western European intellectuals (who find notions of *karma* and rebirth to be outrageous) and Hindu and Buddhist thinkers. While the author's major focus on the Indian side is more oriented toward Buddhism, his analysis of the Upanisadic sources of *karma* and rebirth is detailed and well done - as is his study of the Greek writings of Pythagoras, Empedocles and Plato.

In Hinduism the author finds no references to *karma* or rebirth in the Vedic Samhitas or Brahmanas, with the first significant mention appearing in the Brhadaranyaka and Chandogya Unpaisads before the 6th century B.C.E. One hundred years later these same ideas appear in Jainism and Buddhism along with the notion of the "unsatisfactoriness of existence" or *dukkha*. In each of these traditions *karma* or ethical action is seen to fuel rebirth in heaven, hell, animal or plant forms. Since rebirth in these various forms is endless thus the need for salvation or release (*moksa* or *nirvana*) is necessitated. The author finds the same thought pattern to be present in Greek thought, especially in Plato's *Phaedo* along with the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*. Even the key role of desire in Plato's thought closely parallels the role of desire in Hindu and Buddhist *karma-samsara* theories. The strength of this book,

however, is not just in its comparative Greek-Indic analysis, but in the placing of *karma*-rebirth thinking in the larger worldwide context of small scale societies in Siberia, West Africa, the Northwest Amerindians, the South Pacific and Australia. Obeyesekere claims that while rebirth ideas are found in all of these small scale societies (and thus did not originate in India), the ethicalization of these ideas occurs only in Indic and Greek thinking. The question of influence between Greece and India in the axial period is touched on but not developed.

This well researched and clearly written book greatly added to my thinking around *karma* and rebirth theory—especially in widening my awareness of parallel forms in Greek philosophy and in aboriginal societies. Highly recommended.

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Francis X. Clooney, "Theology and Sacred Scripture Reconsidered in the Light of a Hindu Text," *Theology and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Carol J. Dempsey, OP, and William Loewe (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), pp. 211-236.