



January 2004

Book Reviews: "Making Harmony: Living in a Pluralist World"

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Recommended Citation

Clooney, Francis X. (2004) "Book Reviews: "Making Harmony: Living in a Pluralist World";" *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 17, Article 15.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1324>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Making Harmony: Living in a Pluralist World. Michael Amaladoss, S.J. Delhi: IDCR and ISPCK, 2003, xiii + 186 pp.

MICHAEL AMALADOSS, S.J., currently the Director of the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions in Chennai, India, has also served in many other prestigious capacities: Vice-Provincial for Formation for the Jesuits of India; one of the four Assistants to the General Superior of the global Jesuit Order in Rome, for a period of 12 years; Professor of Theology at the Vidya Jyoti School of Theology in Delhi; visiting lecturer at numerous other institutions globally. For a generation and more he has been a leader in reflection on the interplay of theology, culture, society and justice in the Indian context, somehow finding time to author 20 books and more than 300 articles. *Making Harmony*, an excellent example of Amaladoss's recent thinking, develops three 1997 lectures into an interconnected series of six reflections: "Religions in Conflict," "A Pluralist Social Democracy," "Multiculturalism," "Can Truth Be Plural?," "One God and Many Religions," and "Living Together." The book's tone is conversational, practical, and vivid, enriched by examples from the contemporary Indian situation.

Amaladoss's underlying intention is enunciated clearly in his preface: "I am writing this book as a Christian. But I am not attempting a *Christian* theology of religious pluralism. I am not saying all I could say as a Christian to a Christian community. I am writing in such a way that other believers can listen, understand and respond to me. This is written in and for dialogue with other believers. This may be the kind of reflection that we must be doing in Asia today: inter-religious and

interdisciplinary, focused on life." (xiii) Though references to Christian and other religious beliefs are not lacking, they are introduced in passing; true to his word, Amaladoss does not delve deeply into the specifics of traditions, or into theologies presumed by any of the several traditions or by his own project. *Making Harmony* ambitions a conversation, inclusive of all Indians, and does not see doctrinal reflection the best way into the conversation; better to stay closer to experience and practice.

His primary strategy is to lay a sophisticated intellectual foundation for dialogue, rooted in and attentive to epistemological concerns. Instead of beginning with or focusing on potentially divisive religious issues, he interprets pluralism as neither governed by, nor threatening to, the core beliefs of any religious community. Properly understood, pluralism requires a sophisticated theorization of culture and truth as complex, provisional, and inherently inter-relational realities. Although Amaladoss keeps a light touch throughout, some analyses are comprehensive and require careful consideration. For instance, Chapter 4 views truth through multiple lenses: science, contexts, symbol, expression and communication, interpretation, narrative and ritual, commitment, intersubjectivity and, finally, in the tension between revelation(s) and necessarily relative expressions. A univocal notion of truth will fail to pass philosophical scrutiny, even before theological issues are raised. Moreover, for any understanding of truth and use of the language of truth to be credible, it must also

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be tested in light of political realities, economic factors, and current societal issues. The real test of religions in a healthily pluralist religious culture occurs at the level of practice, where doctrinal similarities and differences cannot be decisive. Living representatives of religions, in dialogue with one another, have to keep (re)constructing relationships that matter and persist.

Chapter 5, "One God and Many Religions," can serve as a good example of his pre-theological but theologically promising strategy. The chapter aims to show that "there is an element of diversity within the religions themselves articulated in terms of cosmic and metacosmic religiosity," and that "the various religions do make space for other religions within their own perspective." (117). The cosmic religions (local, rooted in specific cultures and largely unable to critique those cultures) are surpassed by the metacosmic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism after the Upanisads, Buddhism, Sikhism) that do rise beyond and enter into a critical relationship with their cultures of origin. In fact, the metacosmic religions seem to be the cosmic religions insofar as they have matured beyond their narrow, exclusive roots. These metacosmic religions have resources permitting them positive attitudes toward other religions; consequently, there is no need or right to imagine that Christianity and Islam and the various Hindu traditions must be in conflict with one another.

Does Amaladoss succeed in composing a guiding perspective for dialogue, grounded in philosophy, social sciences and current realities, while yet remaining genuinely pre-theological? Clearly, his presentation rules out any exclusive theology or ecclesiology that would devalue pluralism by undercutting or ignoring it. Yet too, and less expectedly, *Making Harmony* also escapes a pluralist homogenization of cultures and religions that would devalue actual religions by ruling out significant differences.

Proponents of harmony do not merely presume existent, essential commonalities, but must also keep constructing harmony out of what actually matters to the actual individuals engaged in the dialogue. At a very basic level, then, the conventional exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist models are all outmoded: "Religion is a relationship. It is an experience. People who have experienced relationships know that one person can relate to different people. Each relationship is different. One can compare them with reference to a particular element. But that element is not the exclusive characteristic of any one relationship, because in that case it cannot be a point for comparison. No one relationship need be normative to judge others." (137) Amaladoss thus envisions a pluralism that requires believers to remain committed to their own beliefs even while engaged in conversations with other committed believers. As a merely theoretical stance, pluralism is not a superior position, and Amaladoss should not be relegated to the pluralist camp.

Postponing the consideration of doctrines and creeds allows other modes of exchange to come to the fore, but a permanent deferral would diminish the particular traditions even as they enter the dialogue. Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, however described, remain rich intellectual and practical traditions, and it would be unhelpful to foster interreligious relationships that favor experience and openness while never getting to the more cherished and sensitive issues of doctrine and practice. The fuller theological argument built on Amaladoss's model has to find ways of allowing more specific and seemingly exclusive positions — the submission to Scripture, the arguing of truth claims, obedience to authority structures, the cherishing of distinctive practices, visions of a just society, and even claims about the supreme value of one's own tradition — to matter in the dialogue.

This further, more explicitly theological dialogue can be initiated perhaps by noting how doctrines and practices function in community formation, in shaping believers, over generations, as certain kinds of people. The full dialogue needs to attend to who the believers are and to their basic instincts and sentiments, and for that it needs to preserve a space wherein individuals and communities deepen their own formative learning, while yet learning to engage the

formative processes of the other traditions. *Making Harmony* is a thoughtful and rich entrance into pluralism and dialogue, best understood if we take seriously Amaladoss's claim that harmony will be the place where deeper dialogues and subsequent theological exchanges can then occur.

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Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions. Edited by Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg. London: Routledge-Curzon and Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002, ix + 241 pp.

ALTHOUGH religious pluralism in India was previously examined in *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, edited by Harold Coward (SUNY Press, 1987), a gap in scholarship has existed in that no focused analysis has been made of how Protestant Christianity has interacted with India's many religious traditions in the modern period. The book under review, which resulted from a conference of scholars from England, Denmark and the United States held at Oxford in 1999, successfully fills that gap. As Judith Brown remarks in her introduction, India's history has been marked by a religious pluralism in which converts to Christianity carried with them much from their former beliefs and cultural practices.

Although Syrian Christianity had been in India for centuries, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marked a new drive to convert Indians by missionaries arriving from Europe and America. For the first time in India's history, Christianity was the religion of the rulers. Christianity was also strongly present in the new schools set up in India, and through these schools influenced many key leaders of the Indian Renaissance and Independence movements. Thus,

Christianity became a powerful presence and a cultural catalyst in India, especially with the aid of modern printing presses that produced large numbers of books and pamphlets on social and religious issues in English and in India's vernacular languages. Within this context, the essays in this book explore some of the ways Christianity has interacted with India's many religious traditions. The focus on Protestant Christianity is adopted partly because of the connection between Anglicanism and India's Imperial rulers.

The first three chapters deal with the world of "High Culture" among Hindus and Muslims. Although there were few converts to Christianity from among educated, sophisticated Indians of high social standing, these Indians developed an awareness that their traditions were being challenged by Christianity and secular forces from the West. Educated Hindus did not just react but used Christian insights to reinvigorate elements within their own traditions, as Gandhi did in reworking the meaning of themes such as charity and sacrifice. Actions of missionaries in setting up institutions of education and social welfare were emulated by some Hindus in the restructuring of their own traditions – as, for example, by the