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Book Review: "The Asian Jesus"

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textual studies and H. H. Wilson's consideration of "living Hinduism."

Pennington then turns to the elite Bengali Hindu response in the biweekly newspaper *Samacar Candrika* beginning in the 1830s. The paper was anti-reformist and against modernists like Ram Mohan Roy and the rationalist monotheism of the Brahmo Samaj. It opposed the proposed ban on sati, and defended traditional Hindu ritual and popular religion (like Kalipuja), and made some appreciative remarks about the British (the justice system and infrastructure building), though it remained strongly anti-missionary. *Samacar Candrika* was thus a good example of the complexity of British-Indian interaction and power relations as "Hinduism" is constructed.

Finally, chapter six offers an expanded argument for retaining categories like "Hinduism" and "religion," despite their relatively recent and still contested construction. I found this the most interesting and valuable part of the book, with his call for a balanced recognition of their utility while simultaneously resisting any essentialism clear and persuasive. He rejects Timothy Fitzgerald's view that the category "religion" is fundamentally empty and theological, and offers a good critique of Russell McCutcheon's focus on religion as social

construct and seeming insufficient concern with the self-understanding of religious communities. In closing, Pennington acknowledges that the past is not merely past as far as Christian-Hindu tensions go. He refers to the 1999 murder of the medical missionary Graham Staines by Hindu nationalists and the Southern Baptist Convention's pamphlet lamenting the millions "lost in the hopeless darkness of Hinduism." He decries the excesses of Hindutva and points out that Christianity has in fact been indigenous to India for many centuries. He ends with a laudable call for ongoing scholarly inquiry which acknowledges past flaws and includes both engagement with and more accurate understanding of Hindu groups yet also continues to offer deeper analysis not constrained by insiders' self-understandings. I share his concern that some of the more deconstructive scholars in academe can contribute to the frustration and indignation felt by living religious communities, who then can lash out unproductively in word and act. Thus, this book has real value in saying something both about the past and the present.

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The Asian Jesus. Michael Amaladoss, S.J., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006, 180 + xi pages.

MICHAEL Amaladoss stands out as one of the most prolific and influential Catholic theologians in contemporary India. Currently director of the Institute for Dialogue with Cultures and Religions in Chennai, Amaladoss has held teaching posts in India and Europe, served such international bodies as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Roman Catholic Church and the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, and published very widely over the course of some thirty-five years. His work—and reviews of his work—have appeared regularly in this journal, most recently in 2002 and 2004. In *The Asian Jesus*, Amaladoss

speaks from this breadth of experience with a special self-consciousness of his identity as an "Indian" and, more broadly, as an "Asian Christian." "As an Indian and an Asian Christian," he writes, "I feel that Asian cultures and religions are not foreign to me. They are my heritage" (6). And so he writes this slim volume, not primarily for scholars, but for "the ordinary believing Asian Christian" who wants to reclaim that heritage and allow it more deeply to inform her Christian faith (8).

Given the intended audience, it comes as no surprise that *The Asian Jesus* does not engage in detailed enquiry or comparison on the topic of Christology. Instead, Amaladoss offers brief,

evocative reflections on nine Christological images which, he judges, have special resonance in Asia: Jesus the Sage (ch. 3), the Way (ch. 4), the Guru (ch. 5), the *Satyagrahi* (ch. 6), the Avatar (ch. 7), the Servant (ch. 8), the Compassionate (ch. 9), the Dancer (ch. 10) and the Pilgrim (ch. 11). Most of these chapters follow a similar structure, first developing the selected image in the traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and/or Taoism, then tracing it through the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament, and finally offering a few reflections on its significance for contemporary Christians. Each treatment stands more or less on its own, with the result that major themes and scriptural passages recur from one chapter to the next.

One can nevertheless discern a cumulative and holistic movement to the book as a whole. After an orientation in the first two chapters to the varied images of Jesus in Christian tradition and in the interpretations of "other Asian believers" such as Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Gandhi, chapters 3-6 develop different aspects of Jesus' ministry as an extraordinary teacher, proclaimer of the kingdom of God and founder of a new vision of human community and social transformation. Amaladoss goes on in chapters 7-9 to engage more directly with traditional Christian teachings about Jesus' divine person and saving work, arguing that salvation is best seen in terms of the divine Christ's solidarity in suffering with humankind and a reciprocal human solidarity with Christ and his compassionate, self-emptying love. Finally, through the images of "dancer" and "pilgrim" in the concluding chapters, Amaladoss draws attention to the intrinsic dynamism of Christian claims about Christ, about history and about the cosmos itself. Each name or image of Jesus, he concludes, "has its special appeal in particular situations to particular people at particular times. So we ourselves may move from one to the other in the varying circumstances of our lives" (165).

Throughout the volume, Amaladoss critiques a tendency on the part of some Christians to emphasize and universalize the dogmatic language of the great councils at the expense of a legitimate diversity of Christian expression. He strongly affirms the truth of the

teachings of Nicaea and Chalcedon, but limits their applicability. The definitions provided by these councils pertain primarily to the Greek contexts and controversies in which they arose, and they do not possess the broader, affective power of symbols such as "Guru" or "Dancer." Such an aversion to technical definition also influences the way Amaladoss draws themes from Hinduism and other religious traditions. In his chapter on "Jesus the Avatar," for example, he deliberately refrains from making systematic comparisons between Jesus and the way an avatar like Krishna is understood theologically in a specific Hindu tradition. Instead, he briefly surveys diverse understandings of the term *avatara* in Vaisnava and Saiva contexts, isolating a quite general notion of "divine manifestation" as the common thread that joins them (6-7, 105-106). Unlike the Greek idiom of natures and persons, he suggests, this distinctively Indian expression can more fully capture the "historical concreteness" and unique "density" of God's presence in the Christ-event, without excluding the possibility of other such manifestations throughout history.

Christian dogmatists are not the only ones who come under gentle criticism in *The Asian Jesus*. In the course of his exposition, Amaladoss also corrects various one-sided distortions of rich Christian symbols, such as when he challenges any privileging of asceticism, mysticism or meditative practice as the sole "Way" of religious observance (66-67) and when he points out how Gandhi's language of *satyagraha* tempers the narrow focus of some liberationists on political and socioeconomic revolution (103-4). As a North American Christian of German ancestry, I personally wish that Amaladoss had brought a similarly nuanced critique to the New Testament portraits of first-century Jewish leaders and Pharisees, who too frequently appear in this book as mere foils to Jesus' message of love and freedom.

Critique and nuance are not the major focus of the volume, however, nor should they be. A seasoned veteran of both intra-Christian and Hindu-Christian conversations, Amaladoss writes to claim these distinctively Asian images of Jesus for himself and especially for his readers. The result is compelling, enjoyable and instructive. Given its broad focus and accessible

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style, *The Asian Jesus* represents a particularly valuable resource for use in the undergraduate classroom.

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The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament. John J. Thatamanil, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, 231 + xxi pages.

JOHN J. Thatamanil, assistant professor of Theology at Vanderbilt University, offers readers a sustained comparative study of the 8th-century Advaitin teacher Adi Shankaracharya and the 20th-century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. As a significant contribution to the emerging field of comparative theology, his project works on at least three interrelated levels.

At a basic level, Thatamanil advances a strong claim about comparative method, defending "the human predicament" as a fruitful category for Hindu-Christian studies—sufficiently "vague" to treat otherwise incommensurable claims, but also sufficiently well-defined to permit substantive enquiry. Despite their considerable historical, social and philosophical distance, Thatamanil maintains, both Shankara and Tillich can be analysed in terms of ". . . (1) a diagnosis of the human predicament, (2) an etiology of the human predicament, (3) a prognosis, and finally (4) a therapy for treating and perhaps even wholly curing the disease" (17). Chapters 2 and 3 thus survey Shankara's accounts of suffering and *samsara* (diagnosis), beginningless ignorance as their cause (etiology), the teaching of nondualism (therapy), and the promise of liberation through self-knowledge in this very life (diagnosis). Chapters 4 and 5, in turn, develop Tillich's distinctive approach to comparable issues, including human estrangement from our divine ground (etiology), the consequent distortion of desire and tendency to self-destructive egoism (diagnosis), "ecstatic healing" through the gift of the Spirit (therapy) and the real, though never completely secure, possibility of sanctification (prognosis). Along the way, without papering over major differences, Thatamanil draws compelling parallels and thus convincingly demonstrates the

usefulness of asking questions of soteriology and theological anthropology across religious boundaries.

Taken only thus far, *The Immanent Divine* already represents a notable achievement, albeit one deeply (and explicitly) rooted in the prior contributions of Robert Cummings Neville and the Comparative Religious Ideas Project at Boston University. At a second level, however, Thatamanil also uses his comparative method to challenge the purportedly "unbridgeable chasm" that, according to many interpreters, divides the "dualistic" West from the "mystic" and/or "pantheistic" East. In his conclusion (ch. 6), for example, he argues that it would be "premature" to judge these two accounts of the human predicament as divergent expressions of one cross-cultural reality (against John Hick) or as incommensurably different (against S. Mark Heim). Instead, serious comparison reveals "a complex and overlapping pattern of similarities and differences" under the aegis of their shared category (182-83). More narrowly, Thatamanil also inveighs against reading the great Advaita teaching "I am *Brahman*" in terms of mystical experience. Shankara is, according to this interpretation, better understood as "an apophatic theologian who rejects the idea that ultimate reality can be experienced" (61). In the light of this particular comparative example, the reigning stereotype is reversed: it is the Christian, rather than the Hindu, who emphasizes individual, ecstatic experiences of the Spirit as an integral feature of the religious quest.

Readers of this journal are perhaps among those least likely to subscribe to the simplistic caricatures of East and West that Thatamanil adopts as his foil. But this study works on yet another level that makes it worthy of note: that is, as a constructive contribution to philosophical