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In Memoriam: Selva J. Raj (1952-2008)

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IN MEMORIAM

SELVA J. RAJ (1952-2008)

SELVA J. RAJ was a man dedicated to life and work in all its breathtaking complexity. At the time of his untimely death of a heart attack on March 14th, he was the Stanley S. Kresge Endowed Professor and Chair of the Religious Studies Department at Albion College. In addition to tirelessly serving on a lengthy list of campus-wide, national, and international committees and boards, Selva was co-chair of the Comparative Studies in Religion Section of the AAR since 2001; he rekindled the Conference on the Study of Religions of India in 2004 and served as its annual organizer; he was president of the Midwest AAR from 2003-2005 and president of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies from 2000-2002. Selva thrived on intellectual exchange; he presented, on average, eight papers a year at national and international conferences and served as instigator and editor of seven scholarly volumes and wrote over two dozen articles. Selva was a dedicated teacher with an enviable reputation; on five separate occasions Albion students honored him with college-wide teaching awards. Selva received his Ph.D. in 1994 from the University of Chicago and, before coming to the U.S. in 1985, he lectured in philosophy at Morning Star College in Calcutta and worked among the poor with Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity as well as with tribal communities in North India. He received his M.Phil. in 1981 from Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth in Pune and his B.A. in 1975 from the University of Calcutta.

Lest the larger-than-life Selva overshadow the friend and colleague loved by so many of us, I ask that you indulge my need to continue on a somewhat more personal note – one that furthermore ties into the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies and, interestingly, this very issue of our journal.

The last time Selva and I talked, less than a week before he died, our conversation revolved around Paul Collins' *Christian Inculturation in India*, the book Eliza Kent asked me to review for this issue of our journal. After I finished the

book, I called Selva and learned that he had yet to read it. So I quickly wrote my review and sent him my copy. Once he received it, we discussed – in what neither of us dreamed would be our final conversation – the vital importance of his work to which Collins' publication offers testimony.

OK, more accurately, I was the one who waxed enthusiastically about Selva's contribution to our field, particularly to the importance of grassroots Hindu-Christian interchange as highlighted in the conclusion of Collins' book. Selva humbly listened and, on one occasion, laughingly remarked that I should be his.... manager? Agent? Cheerleader? Neither of us could quite conjure up the right word. I find myself searching for it still, albeit in a very different light. Although the importance of Selva's work speaks for itself and needs no external agent, many of us feel honor bound to recall and extol Selva's multi-layered legacy – for the sake of his memory, for the good of our community, and for ourselves.

On that note, allow me to elaborate on what I only mentioned in passing in my review. Collins concludes his extensive study by arguing that our assessment of inculturation must recognize it for what it is: a dynamic process that is necessarily "provisional and contemporary." Collins notes that most churches have given only "lip service" to this dynamism, allowing liturgy to stagnate and ossify. Rather than proposing his own solution to institutional shortcomings, Collins ends his book by giving Selva Raj the last say:

The success and efficacy of popular inculturation call for the re-imagining and reformulation of institutional adaptive initiatives, if it is to foster genuine and fruitful dialogue. Institutional inculturation would better serve the interests of interreligious dialogue if it were to shed its inherent elitism and

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institutional character and become truly inclusive in perspective, membership and rituals. Such initiatives could benefit by becoming a more collaborative effort, not merely among Hindu and Catholic leadership, between Sanskritic Hinduism and official Catholicism, but also among the laity, Hindu and Catholic alike. In this regard, popular indigenisation could act both as a corrective and as a model for indigenisation that is neither arrogant nor one-sided (Raj. 2005. "Two Models of Indigenization in South Asian Catholicism" *Vidyajyoti* 69: 429).

Selva's appeal has two immediate layers of significance. He asks clergy members to reframe their understanding of indigenization by taking seriously the practices and beliefs of those they deem beneath or outside their clerical fold; this in turn requires scholars to pay attention to these same practices and beliefs in order to accurately frame indigenization as an organic, dynamic process. I wish to suggest that this "corrective and model" for staving off institutional arrogance and myopia might be an apt reflection of Selva himself – as someone who tirelessly forged connections with people, often in the face of institutional elitism and

inertia. In other words, as I see it, Selva embodied his scholarly plea for truly inclusive, collaborative, and humble interchange.

This gift of Selva's is obvious in his early work with the neglected poor of Calcutta and with north Indian tribal communities. When we knew him, as a scholar, collaborator, friend – and as a vital member and president of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies – these themes of inclusivity, and collaboration continued to resonate. Selva was in his element when organizing conferences, editing volumes, or planning evenings on the town; his enthusiasm for gathering people from far and wide for scholarly and social exchange was unparalleled. Through all that he organized and accomplished, I believe his dedication to challenging the artifice of elitism was foundational to his scholarly and interpersonal brilliance. Selva Raj was, in sum, tirelessly dedicated to humanization on all fronts.

Needless to say, Selva's towering wisdom, dedication, and kindness is and will be sorely missed for years to come. Yet much of him will live on through his writings, his many edited volumes, and through us, his friends, agents, and cheerleaders. We are, in essence, left humanized in his wake and for this we will be forever grateful.

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