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Book Review: "Christ Across the Ganges: Hindu Responses to Jesus"

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***Christ Across the Ganges: Hindu Responses to Jesus.* Sandy Bharat. Winchester, U.K.: O Books, 2007, ix + 215 pp.**

IN recent decades a number of books and articles have presented to western readers modern Hindu understandings of Jesus. Their focus has tended to be on the views of classic nineteenth and twentieth century figures such as Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, among others, all of whom expressed great admiration for Christ. The great majority of these scholars writing about Hindu views have been Christian, and some of them, aiming their study at a Christian audience, have subjected Hindu understandings of Christ to the critique of Christian orthodoxy, pointing out just how this or that particular Hindu understanding of Christ did not measure up to the perception of Christ as Christians have traditionally understood him.

Sandy Bharat's book is different from this approach in two ways. First, though she began her academic career as a Christian student of theology at Exeter University in the UK, she has for some time identified herself as a Hindu. She refers to Paramahansa Yogananda as her Gurudev (v). Consequently, she does not allow Hindu understandings of Christ to be filtered by Christian interpretation and evaluation. Hindu perspectives on Christ are here given free rein and presented in all their strength and coherence. Second – and this is perhaps the book's greatest achievement – in addition to summarizing the views of the classical authors named above Bharat presents the positions of numerous contemporary Hindu figures – both famous and not so famous – not normally included in the literature. This considerably updates and enlarges our knowledge of the variety and depth of Hindu views about Christ. The interpretations of Jesus range from the few that are negative and dismissive (Sita Ram Goel, Ram Swarup) to those of K. R. Sundararajan and Anantanand Rambachan, who suggest that the time has come for Hindus to allow contemporary research by Christians to complement their appropriation of Jesus in Hindu concepts and

categories. Among other contemporary Hindu voices represented in this volume are K. L. Seshagiri Rao, Ravi Ravindra, Bibhuti Yadav, David Frawley, Mathoor Krishnamurti, Swami Dayatmananda, and the Himalayan Academy. And there are many more.

Much of the information gathered by Bharat is the result of responses to a questionnaire she first formulated in 1994. The first of the questionnaire's eight points was "What significance, if any, do you think Jesus has for Hindus around the world today?" Bharat then continues with various questions about the proper Hindu terminology that might be used for Jesus and the type of Hinduism with which he is perceived by the respondent to be most closely connected. She concludes by asking the respondents what they personally think about Jesus. Their replies are sometimes presented in their entirety. Some of the book's other quotations are from e-mail correspondence or first-hand conversations. Indeed so much of the book is devoted to quotations that the volume at times has more the feel of an anthology or survey than a systematic presentation of the historical development of Hindu views.

The underlying narrative is nonetheless loosely historical, tracing Hindu attitudes to Christ and Christianity from the ancient beginnings of the Hindu-Christian encounter through the Bengal Renaissance up to the present. Bharat also offers individual chapters on the Ramakrishna Mission, the Self-Realization Fellowship, and ISKCON as a way of presenting each's understanding of Christ.

Throughout the book the author raises significant questions and offers insights worthy of further discussion. She argues, for example, for the validity of Hindu experiences of Christ. Why shouldn't they count as much as Christian experiences? She concurs with the Ramakrishna Mission when she writes, "The very plurality of the Christ experience, within Christianity and outside its boundaries, invalidates any constraining theological or clerical net placed over the figure of Jesus" (63). She wonders, too,

when there is obviously so much Hindu interest in Christ, why there is so little Christian interest in Rama and Krishna. She shows a more provocative side when she notes a reversal in Christian and Hindu attitudes toward the other. Too frequently in the long history of Hindu-Christian encounter "the best of Hindus have dealt with the worst of Christians (149)". To some extent that situation has changed today, she says, as some Christians have grown more tolerant while a certain kind of Hindu has grown militant and intolerant. She speaks of "many Hindu voices sounding strident and closed and some Christian voices sounding soft and open" (151).

Bharat unfortunately does not always stay on course in her book, sometimes drifting into overt defenses of Hinduism and repeated assertions about the spiritual superiority of Hinduism over a narrow-minded and intolerant Christianity. In addition, I found problematic how, in making the case for the legitimacy of

specifically Hindu christologies, the author never explains the possible importance and significance of Jesus' Jewishness (though the question is raised in her official Questionnaire), a theme which in her book tends to be neglected as theologically and spiritually unimportant.

This volume helpfully includes, along with an index and glossary, an extensive bibliography up to 2005, a useful list of Online Bibliographic Resources, plus further Resources linking to people and organizations referred to in the book.

As Director of the International Faith Centre at Oxford till 2004 and a founder of the Network of International Interfaith Organizations, Sandy Bharat knows the richness, complexity, and problems that beset inter-religious perceptions. *Christ Across the Ganges* is written in light of that experience. The book is an always informative and a sometimes riveting read.

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