



November 2013

## Book Review: *Christ and Krishna: Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges*

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### Recommended Citation

San Chirico, Kerry P. C. (2013) "Book Review: *Christ and Krishna: Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 26, Article 19.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1558>

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prayers, to parallel prayers, to praying together, provoking an experience of the spirit that theology has not yet caught up with.

I would like to make a critical observation, as well. Many of the Vaishnava assumptions about Christianity did not resonate with my own progressive Protestantism. For example, I do not believe that Christ's crucifixion is the primary locus of salvation, as some of the Vaishnava contributors seemed to assume. Indeed, I actively resist atonement theories that place salvation in the torturous death of an innocent man. Instead, I and others place the primary locus of salvation in the resurrection, God's resounding defeat of violence, evil, and

death. Also, as a progressive Protestant married to a female pastor, I would like to see the traditions discuss the role of women in leadership, explicating the theological, ethical, cultural, and political nuances that conversation would demand.

The editors of the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* have produced a fine volume of interfaith dialogue. It is informing and inspiring. I hope to review their next anthology from the conference, although I hope not to wait a full fifteen years for it.

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***Christ and Krishna: Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges.* Steven J. Rosen (Swami Suryadas). New York: Folk Books, 2011, 140 pages.**

**MUCH** has been written of the Christian theology of the “non-Christian” religions and “Christian” inter-religious dialogue, far less on theologies of religion from said religions and *their* understanding of inter-religious dialogue. This monograph is an exception, providing the reader not an extensive, disinterested examination of two deities in theological juxtaposition (actual discussion of these religious figures is relatively sparse), but most useful in that it reveals how one branch of Vaiṣṇavism currently seeks to understand Jesus and Roman Catholic Christianity within a broader Vaiṣṇava worldview, underpinned by a belief that all the world religions are essentially one to the extent that they reveal *sanātana*, or eternal *dharma* in the Vaiṣṇava mold. The import of a text may not necessarily align with

its stated purpose. Looking at the work at an angle, so to speak, will likely prove more useful than searching for similarities and differences between Christ, Krishna, and their representative traditions in the pages of this monograph.

The text answers the following questions both intentionally and inadvertently: How might Vaiṣṇavas, particularly those of the Gauḍīya tradition committed to explicating its teachings globally, understand Jesus Christ and, by extension, Roman Catholicism? What are some points of convergence between Krishna and Christ, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and Roman Catholicism? What constitutes some significant differences? How might Christian doctrines be articulated using Hindu categories, and vice versa? How might representative adepts model

inter-religious dialogue in the twenty-first century? And, equally important to this reviewer, what are some of the inherent limitations to certain forms of theological inclusivism that aver an underlying ontological unity despite outward religious plurality. “But make no mistake,” the author contends in the Introduction, “the essence [of religions] is the same” (5).

Steven J. Rosen (Satyaraja Dasa), prolific author and disciple of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, answers these questions through a winsome, if sometimes saccharine manner—that is, through a dialogue between two fictional characters, ideal types whose childhood friendship in what is now Bangladesh is rekindled through an encounter at the Triveni Sangam in Allahabad, the meeting of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati. Here is the plot twist: While one septuagenarian had continued on in the Vaiṣṇavism of his youth, eventually becoming Saragrahi Swami Maharaj, chief priest of the nearby Bhagavata Math, the other took another path upon moving to Mumbai, that of Roman Catholicism and membership in the Society of Jesus; “Father Francis ‘Frank’ Yona, S. J.” was born.

At the meeting of the three rivers, then, two friends first rekindle their friendship, reflecting on their shared childhood (chapter 1), ruminate aloud on the bane of theological exclusivism and religious conversion other than conversion from materialism to spirituality (chapter 2), discuss the identity of Jesus and characteristics shared with Sri Chaitanya (chapter 3), argue about the possible historical connection of Jesus to India (chapter 4), agree on the significance of non-violence and vegetarianism (chapter 5), delve into

transmigration and its under-development in Christianity (chapter 6), discuss the knowability of God’s nature through chant and other practices (chapter 7), and examine parallels between the mystical traditions of Catholicism and Vaiṣṇavism (chapter 8). Readily apparent should be the fact that Vaiṣṇava predilections frame both the protagonists’ conversation and this book. The text is useful in its articulation of core Vaiṣṇava theology and ethics, e.g. on the various paths of Vaiṣṇava bhakti, karma theory, and *sarva bhuta hita* (concern for the welfare of all beings), and scriptural supports for such teachings. Troubling is the fact that the Swami usually gets the last word, that Christianity ends up wanting, and that some of the assertions about Christianity are grossly inaccurate.

In the discussion of transmigration, for example, it is claimed by the fictional Jesuit that “most of the early Church Fathers...were advocates of reincarnationist thinking” (99). Suffice it to say, this would have been a surprise to those named Church Fathers, and the author fails to support this assertion with textual evidence. Rather than examine the significance of the cross, the nature of grace, and the role of divine judgment in the discussion of transmigration and karma (something that potentially could take the dialogue into interesting territory), Fr. Frank argues that, in the end, reincarnation was rejected because of political machinations of Justinian: “But he went so far as to manipulate certain doctrines and beliefs just to gain secular party” (101). Apparently Fr. Frank has been reading too much Elaine Pagels.

Commending the text is its format, where two friends, representing two specific traditions, are here presented in a conversation

wherein each seeks to discern parallels and differences in the other's tradition, relishing the spiritual riches of each as the dialogue wends its way from one topic to the next in conveniently (for the reader) short intervals. Each is pious and learned and is, in theory, at least, well matched. Their discussion is understood to be founded on certain shared views, in this case the verity of world religions *in se*, the centrality of a personal relationship with God through a unity of heart and mind, and the commendable belief that dialogue partners can learn something from one another. Here the book provides one model for inter-religious dialogue even if one disagrees with some of these first principles.

The text's chief flaw is not in the engaging way inter-religious dialogue is framed as a dialogue between old friends, but by the content of the discussion, by whose end one is left with the impression that more orthodox renderings of Christianity can only muffle points of convergence with more orthodox Vaiṣṇavism—and that for all the talk of pluralism and the integrity of the religions, Catholicism never quite meets the mark. Reincarnation? As mentioned, it was stamped out of Christianity during the Origenist controversy, leading to an underdeveloped karma theory. Vegetarianism? Jesus's likely original intent (so it is argued), present in early Christian communities, but lost after Constantine (poor Constantine!). The knowability of God's immanent nature? Profound in Vaiṣṇavism but comparatively lacking in a Catholicism that is more reticent on the subject. And so it goes. This is regrettable, for there is much to work with in oft-maligned “traditional” Christianity.

Perhaps this reveals a deeper problem with this form of Vaiṣṇava theological inclusivism and indeed of certain forms of Christian inclusivism as well: for all the purported openness of the theologizing tradition, the religious other is nevertheless found wanting and somehow “fulfilled” or “completed” through the other. Reading this text one is reminded of the work of Protestant missionary-scholar J. N. Farquhar a century ago. For all Farquhar's magnanimity towards the Hindu tradition or traditions, Christ and Christianity always emerge superior. (See, for example, *The Crown of Hinduism* (1920)). *Christ and Krishna* might prove beneficial in that Christians can discover what it is like to be measured by another tradition, something Hindus have been experiencing for centuries. For their part, Vaiṣṇavas will come away with a sense of some similarities between traditions. For the most part, however, they will remain largely unscathed, their doctrines re-affirmed, with a heightened sense of Vedic exceptionalism. But to this reviewer's mind, both interlocutors in any inter-religious dialogue enter a dangerous game. They both have something existential at stake; both risk being changed in ways unpredictable. If this be the case, then the fair representation of each side is absolutely critical. Would that a book employing such an accessible format be truly mutual, less misleading, and open to destinations unseen at the time of any dialogue's beginning. For inter-religious dialogue to be fruitful the end of the journey need not be gainsaid as a common destination.

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