
Peter Vethanayagamony
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1806
but also to its development under the well-known figure of Roberto de Nobili. Although Mecherry’s work, as a “micro-history,” centers on the figure of Ros, and the development of his accommodationist policies, there is much to be gleaned from it for those with broad interests in the sixteenth-century encounter of Europe and India, both political and religious.

Herman Tull
Lafayette College


IN Songs as Locus for a Lay Theology, Philip K. Mathai investigates the theological motifs and statements embedded in the hymns of two renowned Christian Malayalam hymnists, namely Moshe Walsalam Sastriyar and Sadhu Kochukunju Upadeshi from the present state of Kerala, South India. Mathai argues that the hymns that are analyzed in the book are still widely used and popular among the Malayalam-speaking Christians, both in Kerala and in diaspora, and have shaped and still reflect the Christian theology and spirituality of Malayalee Christians. The foremost contribution of this book is that the two hitherto lesser-known Indian lay theologians and musicians are introduced to western readers, along with the ethno-musical tradition they have crafted. The theological expressions and themes embedded and latent in their hymns are particularly examined. This work also provides insights into the Christian experience in the southern part of India, not simply as an extension of western Christianity during the colonial era but as Christianity was appropriated and lived by an Indian community in their particular cultural situation.

Chapter 1, “Socio-cultural and Religious Contexts of Travancore during the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” traces the religious, cultural and political context of these two hymnists that shaped the content and theology of their hymns. Pointing to the fact that Malayalam is the youngest of the South Indian Dravidian languages, Mathai maintains that these two hymnists were greatly influenced and shaped by the Tamil culture and by Tamil religious practices and piety, especially the Bhakti tradition represented by Alwars of Vaishnavism and Nayanars of Shaivism. He adds that the Hindu Bhakti tradition’s stress on trusting and serving a personal God has facilitated the hymnist’s understanding of the Christian Triune God; Christ and his work; sin; salvation; and the Christian life.

While Mathai is to be commended for his investigation of Hindu Bhakti traditions, he unfortunately does not bring to light the theology introduced by the western missionaries. Clarifying the missionaries’ theology would have assisted the readers of this volume in evaluating this theology and its appropriation by the Malayalam-speaking...
people. For instance, the motif of “total surrender” evident in the Hindu Bhakti tradition closely resembles the well-known Evangelical theology, particularly “Keswick Theology” which insisted that absolute surrender must be the prerequisite of sanctification. The “Keswick Theology,” commonly known as the higher life theology, maintains that through an act of total surrender and through faith in Christ’s deliverance, one enters a state wherein one is free from all known sin. Had Mathai discussed these theological similarities, the readers would be placed in a better position to distinguish what was taught by the missionaries from what was specifically appropriated by the Malayalee Christians.

The author could also have indicated that the introduction of Protestant Christianity in South Travancore should be credited to a person of dalit origin, namely Vedamannickam, whose original name was Maharasan. The author should also have accurately stated the date of the formation of CSI and the creation of South Travancore Diocese as the 27th September 1947 (not 1948 as stated in p. 50). South Kerala Diocese came into existence only on 2nd June 1959 with the bifurcation of the South Travancore Diocese into the Kanyakumari Diocese and the South Kerala Diocese. Furthermore, the author should have avoided using the pejorative term Shanar when referring to the Nadar community, its preferred term since 1921.

Chapter 2 “Doxology and Theology—Bhakti, the Indian Doxological Tradition of Songs,” confirms the ancient maxim lex orandi, lex credendi, which maintains that worship elements and beliefs are not discretely exclusive. Rather, they are integral to each other, and their relationship is dialectical and mutually formative. Mathai argues that “…song is the language of the heart and therefore the truest of the language of religion.” (168). After tracing the western theological tradition of hymns, he analyzes the hymns in the south Indian Bhakti tradition as sources of Hindu theology. He accurately points out, “Though the bhakti movement emerged with the alwars and nayanars, whose origin dates from the fourth century CE, traces of the bhakti concept have been found in earlier scriptures and tradition of southern India.” (71). The Alwar hymn, titled Nalayira Divya Prabhandam, and its translated title, the ‘Four Thousand Verses’, should have been accurately noted on p. 74.

Chapter 3 “Moshe Walsalam (1847-1916),” examines the theology reflected in the hymns of Walsalam. Pointing to the formal theological and musical training Walsalam had received, Mathai asserts that Walsalam’s musical composition and style, as well as his theological depth and breadth, are wide-ranging in comparison with the other hymnists studied. The author helpfully points out Walsalam’s choice words to express Christian theology, like thriyeekane instead of thrimurthy for Trinity (90) and jadam dharichu, for incarnation (97). The analysis of the most popular of Walsalam’s hymn, “Ninte Hitham Pole Enne,” (‘Lead me according to your will’) illustrates the theological conservatism of the hymnist as well as of the Christians he has greatly influenced.

Chapter 4, “Sadhu Kochukunju Upadeshi (1883-1945),” surveys the theological motifs reflected in the songs of Sadhu Kochukunju, who was neither formerly trained in theology nor in music. Yet, his deep spirituality and revival preaching, particularly his hymnal,
Aaswaasagiithangal, immensely shaped the spirituality and theology of the Malayalee Christians. The dominant other-worldly theology of Kochukunju is delineated by the author without offering any theological critique.

In the concluding chapter the author offers some comments and reflections from a post-colonial perspective, claiming that the theology reflected in these hymns is “a hybrid that mimics the dominant influence of Hindu and Western thought” (9).

The appendix III-IV offers the musical notes of two hymns from each of the hymnists to whet the palate of western readers. Providing links to several helpful YouTube videos of Malayalee hymns would have been a helpful addition that would have invited western readers to enjoy the ethnic music of India.

The book accurately explains that the spirituality and the theology of the Malayalee Christians are conservative and, thus, in line with the global south Christianity. In spite of the minor flaws that have been noted, this book is a real treat for those interested in world Christianity and global ethno-hymnody, and I highly recommend it.

Peter Vethanayagamony
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago


THE intellectual connections between Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Walt Whitman (1819-1892), and their historical context within Hindu philosophy and ethics are well-known. But the ways in which these connections can foster a democratic ethics for modern America is the primary purchase of Jeremy David Engels’s The Ethics of Oneness, an unassuming yet ambitious reimagining of these two American writers. In Ethics, Engels focuses exclusively on Emerson and Whitman “to recover [their] two long-forgotten philosophies of oneness” (9). A project both of literary-historical recovery and a timely theorization of an ethos suited to a contemporary democracy often viewed as in a state of crisis, Ethics challenges readers in and out of the academic space not only to see their lives as shaped by literature and history, but urges them to recognize “the space of commonality, identification, and interconnectedness between opponents” (189).

Versed in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy, Engels powerfully presents the practice of yoga—a core concept in the book—as it emerged in nineteenth-century American culture. In this work, Engels’s allegiance is clearly on the side of the latter of the two American writers that subtitle Ethics. Whitman, “seer, prophet, genius” (166)—as Engels calls him at one point—represents a oneness that respects manyness because, as Ethics puts it, “[a] oneness that refuses to respect difference is unethical” (206). Emerson, on the other hand, represents the oneness of an over-soul that views manyness, difference, diversity as unreal facades, and hence fails to produce an ethics of democratic engagement. Ethics does excellent work of elucidating how the Bhagavad Gita—and