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Introductory Information and Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

SOME YEARS BACK I wrote a book examining the way scripture functions in each of the major religions (Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions. Orbis, 1988, recently republished in India). In it I showed how both Hindu and Christian scripture begin as oral poetry and only later became written text. I also argued that the transforming power of the word is in its oral form. More recently Wilfred Cantwell Smith published a comparative historical analysis of the form and concept of Hindu and Christian scripture (What is Scripture? Fortress, 1993). And the 1991 issue of this Bulletin examined Protestant Bible translations in India as an early form of Hindu-Christian dialogue.

In this issue of the Bulletin the role and function of scripture in Hinduism and Christianity are the focus. Hindu and Christian scholars discuss scripture as a source of knowledge and a means to release or salvation. Rambachan, basing his analysis on classical Hindu philosophy, shows that scripture, namely the Veda, is understood to be a source of valid metaphysical knowledge but limited in relation to everyday life where perception and inference have higher authority. Sugirtharajah finds the Christian Bible to be judged differently in different contexts: in the parish as the confessional word of God; in academia as a historical or literary document; and in the pluralistic context as but one of many sacred texts.

The role of Hindu scripture in salvation or release is studied by Allen and Yadav. They offer a careful technical discussion of the contrasting roles of scripture in Śaṅkara and Kumarila and find the latter to be closer to the Christian view (especially as found in the Gospel of John). In both, the words are efficacious and action oriented, leading to salvation/release. Finally DeRoche offers a balanced presentation of the Christian understanding of the relation between scripture and salvation — especially helpful to our Hindu readers.

Other articles in this issue include a response to the discussion of the thought of Sri Dharmapal in the 1995 issue; an analysis of Bishop Reginald Heber (the second Anglican Bishop of Calcutta, 1783-1826) and his contribution to Hindu-Christian dialogue; and David Scott notes that 80% of dialogue occurs not at the level of the theological elites of Hinduism and Christianity (where most academic analysis has focused) but rather at the level of popular religiosity. He calls our attention to several studies of popular religious interaction by Carl Diehl, P.Y. Luke, John Carman, and David Mosse.

Harold Coward
Editor