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# Book Review: "Encounters with Hinduism"

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Christian mystic who writes chiefly for Christians (and Westerners) in order to open their minds to Hindu wisdom. In his diary he is more and more the Hindu monk who is faced with the Christian mystery and is trying desperately to reconcile it with Vedanta. (xiv)

The author did not prepare the diary for publication. Personal details and jottings on various themes without further development do not normally go to press. We are told moreover that his disciple threw away certain portions of the diary, after copying what he considered to be relevant. However, the editorial committee seems to have reasons for publishing it. And Panikkar justifies it for three reasons: 1) it offers a fascinating example of the evolution of a thought process coming to the birth of a conviction out of his lived experience; 2) it shows us the transformation of a Christian grappling with himself, a testimony of a contemporary who, without breaking with his past, has been able to transform it, thanks to his faith and fidelity; 3) the value of the private diary lies in its revelation of the depths of a human being. His symbolizes a life lived in depth in the midst of a world that has fallen apart (xv-xvii).

The diary obviously reveals the man, since his books can speak for his ideas. The fact that he kept his diaries, noted his thoughts, the events that moved him, the inner struggle, amidst his travel, unfavourable circumstances as a wandering *sannyasi*, speaks of the man, his disciplined life, dedicated pursuit, still remaining warm-hearted, being open to all in utter simplicity. He was thinking and searching and he has jotted down his insights that bear witness to a committed Christian who crossed the

borders of his tradition to experience the other of the *advaitic* framework. Some felt that he had gone too far in taking the plunge into *advaitic* worldview. But he is a rare example of one who had the courage to enter into that kind of dialogue, which many Christians would not do. But that only adds to his greatness

The diary reveals the insights of Abhishiktananda, not as a theologian but as a mystic. Still, they have their theological significance. Some hesitate to take that seriously, since he was not a theologian and his diaries are not polished treatises on Christian faith. But one cannot but be struck by the way he has articulated his deeper experiences as a monk. In fact in the diary he is more transparent than in his books, since the author is in communion with his readers besides communicating his insights.

Abhishiktananda has affected many people. Though it is said that he did not have many disciples, his influence is felt much more through his writings. His vision of reality, which is dialogical, cross-cultural, authentically experience-centred as it is portrayed in his diaries, fascinatingly draws the attention of the reader to a new type of religious encounter for today.

This volume is a valuable contribution for those who are involved with the inter-religious dialogue today. This work and the earlier publication, *Swami Abhishiktananda, His Life Told through his Letters*, (1989, 1995) by James Stuart, are companion volumes on the spiritual journey of a mystic who crossed the borders to find his own authentic self.

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***Encounters with Hinduism.*** Horst Georg Pöhlmann, transl. John Bowden. London: SCM Press, 1996, vii + 121 pp.

**PÖHLMANN'S BOOK IS** the outcome of his separate visits to South India in 1989 and 1993 to interview Hindus about their religious beliefs. The author undertook the

interviews while staying as a visiting Professor at United Theological College in Bangalore. His research was funded by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany

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and his book attempts to outline what Christians, particularly Evangelical Lutherans, can learn from Hindus.

This little book is surprisingly comprehensive in its scope and touches on almost every important theme in Hindu-Christian dialogue except the current issues of Hindutva nationalism and religious conversion in India. Included within its covers are the issues of defining dialogue, the role of religious commitments, inculturation theology, *avatara* and incarnation, the caste system, the problem of orientalism, the *dalits*, and different theological attitudes towards other religions. The author sees the "encounter of religions" as something that can be revitalizing rather than something to be feared. He writes that through dialogue "we can be reminded once again of elements of our faith that we have lost". (29) Pöhlmann suggests that Christians can learn a great deal from Hindus in the areas of sexuality, beauty, silence, simplicity, and meditation, and argues that Christianity is closer to Hinduism than to Islam or Judaism because both religions see the Incarnation of God as their basic dogma, which is rejected by Muslims and Jews (45). In addition, the book is interesting for its attempt to quantify Hindu-Christian dialogue through the collection of research data from interviews. The author interviewed Hindus using a questionnaire to discover "what the local temple priests believed and what the actual grass-roots belief was" (37). This approach to the topic is valuable since most writings on interreligious dialogue have tended to be philosophical and theological rather than empirical.

Pöhlmann, however, is neither a social scientist, nor an expert in Hinduism but a Christian theologian and his description of Hinduism lacks the precise detail usually found in scholarly study. Unfortunately, his little book is plagued by generalizations. The book appears to have been written mainly for an audience of Christians, not for scholars of Hinduism, or Hindus themselves, since its generalizations preclude advanced analysis. Thus scholars seeking a technical and academic study of Hindu-Christian

dialogue will find Pöhlmann's book insufficient.

From a scholarly point of view, however, Pöhlmann's research method is more interesting and his data warrant a second look. Pöhlmann used a short questionnaire, consisting of the following five questions, to structure his interviews with Hindus: 1) Do you believe in one God or many Gods? 2) What is the difference between Hinduism and Christianity? 3) What is the hope, meaning, and goal of life? 4) Are you afraid of death? and, 5) Can casteless people visit the temple? Unfortunately, the questions Pöhlmann asked Hindus in his "encounters" were unilaterally declared – not formulated in dialogue – which is ironic since Pöhlmann writes that in authentic dialogue "there may be no privileged opinions and pre-programmed results" (66). In fact, he admits that Hindus "did not always answer all five questions and – as was to be expected – questions were also asked in return and other topics were touched upon". (23) What is troubling is that these "other topics" are entirely ignored in Pöhlmann's book. Why does Pöhlmann say that "Christians must also let Hinduism [sic] put questions to us" (40) while ignoring their questions in his own writing?

Pöhlmann's research locations are also not adequately explained in his book. For example, out of seven thousand temples in Bangalore, he visited seventy-nine, but he does not identify the reasons for their particular selection, and without any explanation, his choice of temples seems arbitrary (22).

The main weakness of Pöhlmann's book is his refusal to identify the specific groups involved in his "encounters". The author's primary dialogue partners were temple priests whose exact sectarian affiliations are not given (50) and the views of other groups, such as women and *dalits*, are either excluded from his interviews or treated marginally (57). In my experience, it is very important to identify the specific Hindu traditions and Christian denominations involved in Hindu-Christian dialogue since different groups have their own

distinct beliefs, assumptions, and agendas. A Roman Catholic has a different belief system than a Lutheran, just as a follower of the Ramakrishna Order has different beliefs than a member of the R.S.S. Therefore, it is ambiguous to speak of Hindu-Christian dialogue without further clarification, because the labels "Hindus" and "Christians" are merely umbrella terms. There are many different religious sects within each religion and all these sects have their own distinct identities. Unfortunately, Pöhlmann's writing glosses over the internal diversity found in Hinduism, and he argues that all Hindus are basically the same since they follow the same temple rite (32). Pöhlmann's writing also glorifies either *Advaita Vedanta* or *Vaishnavism* as if they represent the whole of Hinduism, which is misleading. This lack of precision prevents one from drawing any serious conclusions from his data and reduces the scholarly value of his work.

The last chapter of the book is titled, "Five types of present-day interreligious dialogue" and it offers some useful distinctions between theological positions on truth claims; however, these positions do not constitute "types" of dialogue but are better seen as "theological attitudes towards others on the question of truth".

Overall the book's strengths lie in its readable writing style, its open-minded treatment of Hinduism, and its refreshing attitude of Christian self-criticism. I recommend the book for those wanting a general overview of Hindu-Christian dialogue from the perspective of a German Lutheran theologian. While the book is replete with generalizations, it is an enjoyable introduction to the topic, and its broad brush strokes allow it to be of value to a larger audience than just scholars.

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***Religions in Conflict: Ideology, Cultural Contact, and Conversion in Late-Colonial India.*** A. R. H. Copley. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, xvii + 279 pp.

COPLEY OPENS HIS book by suggesting that the new militancy manifested by Hinduism may have its roots in what was learned from the ideology and organization of nineteenth-century Christian missionary activities. He defines the ideology of mission as a desire to proselytize and convert which has at its heart a narrow exclusivist theology. In analysing the character of this ideology, the author has researched four missionary thrusts to India: 1) The Baptist mission of William Carrey (c.1793); 2) The Church Missionary Society (1799); 3) The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (1701); and 4) The Scottish Mission with its focus on education. In this careful study, Copley seeks to understand the mind and culture the English missionaries brought to India as well as the Indian religion and culture they met. It is a book about the interaction of cultures as

well as religions.

A sample of the questions Copley sets out to answer includes the following:

Can we read the cultural response of the missionaries themselves? They came remarkably ignorant of these religions. Were they moved to understand these religions? Was there anything analogous to the curiosity of an earlier, if secular, Orientalist generation of visiting Europeans? Did they remain merely confrontational ... and did their narrow exclusivism give way to a more liberal approach?" (xv).

In the course of answering these questions, the author offers an updating of such earlier classics as David Kopf's *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* and an effective critique of Wilhelm Halbfass's *India and Europe*. As such this is an important new book deserving of a wide readership.