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Book Review: "Hindu Thought & Carmelite Mysticism"

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Hindu Thought & Carmelite Mysticism. Swami Siddheswarananda. William Buchanan (Tr.). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1998, xii + 172pp.

SWAMI SIDDHESWARANANDA (b. 1897) entered the Order of Ramakrishna in 1920 under the auspices of Swamis Brahmananda and Shivananda, and went on to establish Centres for the Order in Mysore (1925) and Paris (1937). He headed the Centre in Paris until his death in 1957. This book demonstrates clearly that his activities in Paris involved Hindu-Christian dialogue of some depth and scope. It is a relatively sophisticated and insightful comparative work that was originally presented as lectures at the Sorbonne between 1949 and 1953. The chapters have appeared separately in various earlier publications, while this edition is a translation of *Pensée Indienne et Mystique Carmélitaine* (1974).

The content and style of the book reflect the fact that it is a collection of lectures. There is some repetition of material and much speculative and edifying discourse. Swami Siddheswarananda was obviously well versed in a wide variety of Hindu thought and he shows some familiarity with traditional Catholic mystical theology and Carmelite mysticism, especially the writings of St John of the Cross, who he speaks of as "the Patanjali of the West" (113).

Siddheswarananda espouses an essentialist religious pluralism which he grounds in a core metaphysical or "extra-religious truth" (85). He associates this truth with the Advaitic experience of Brahman, and suggests that it underlies the doctrinal perspectives of the different religious traditions. The main focus of comparison in his lectures is the mysticism of St John of the Cross and that of a rather eclectic Hindu spirituality, which includes various features drawn from *jnana*, *bhakti*, *karma* and *raja yoga*. He uncovers correspondences in the following key respects: i) significant aspects of the affective dynamics and the mental disciplines involved in the spiritual paths; ii) the radical negative discrimination involved

in an infused, formless contemplation of the Divine; and iii) the practical, transformative effects of their mysticisms. But Siddheswarananda also remonstrates against Hindu-Christian comparisons that disregard the significant differences between faith-orientations. "In the two traditions spiritual life has neither the same perspective nor the same foundation" (32).

For example, whereas public Revelation in Catholicism is viewed as temporal and historically focussed, a divine-human dialogue that is grounded and completed in Christ, Siddheswarananda characterizes Hindu Revelation as "atemporal" and "vibrating eternally" (29). With respect to prayer, Catholics stress its purifying role, while the Hindu views of *mantra* and *japa* resemble more closely the Catholic view of the eucharist, where "[t]he Lord remains in the *mantra* as in tabernacle of perpetual adoration" (7). Moreover, Siddheswarananda argues that mystical experience in Hinduism "is not limited by any *a priori* dogma", in contrast with Catholicism (17). So, he suggests, doctrinal considerations lead St John to maintain some level of differentiation in mystical union between God and the soul, as well as to aspire for perfection only in an other-worldly beatitude (*videhamukti*). These views contrast with the Advaitic ideal of identity with the Absolute and the this-worldly goal of *jivanmukti*.

Dogmatic issues also relate closely to ideas constellating around the view of divine incarnation. Hindus hold the view of multiple divine incarnations who play a helpful role in removing the ignorance that inhibits liberation. This includes the ideas of divine sacrifice and the vicarious expiation of sin, where "[t]he Incarnation takes on the *karma* of the disciples" (92). But in the Hindu tradition, Siddheswarananda observes, there is neither a sense of original sin nor the redemptive necessity of the passion

and crucifixion of the divine being. Divine and human suffering is granted a spiritual significance in traditional Catholicism that is foreign to Hinduism, given the traditional emphasis on the uniqueness of the incarnation and the essential nature of Christ's redemptive suffering. So Siddheswarananda can speak provocatively of Ramakrishna's "non-Christian" experience of Christ in contrast with that of the Christian. Christian mystical experience requires "as an article of faith the dogmas and credo of the Church" (91).

In his critical reflections on these and other differences Swami Siddheswarananda illustrates how a detailed understanding of the doctrinal context of one's dialogue partner is crucial in fully appreciating her or his spiritual view. He also underscores the extent to which the socio-religious context of mystics enter into their experiences, thus insightfully prefiguring contemporary contextual views of mystical experience. Yet he seems a bit naive and inconsistent in the way in which he feels that certain Hindu mystics are somehow free of their doctrinal contexts, while Christian mystics remain constrained

by theirs. Indeed, one wonders just where Siddheswarananda's own Hindu dogmas and credos enter into those core "extra-religious" experiences which provide for him the unifying ground of the various mystical traditions. Moreover, it remains unclear in his lectures just how those core Advaitic truths can provide, as he suggests, a coherent basis for *bhakti yoga*.

But the book should prove to be a remarkably interesting and helpful resource. It touches on a wide variety of issues and themes in quite thoughtful ways, including a notably eloquent comparative exploration of mystical love, as well as an intriguing analysis of the epistemological dynamics of different degrees of contemplation. William Buchanan has also included in his translation helpful glossaries of Sanskrit words, people, and sources, which adds to the book's appeal as a text in upper-level undergraduate or graduate seminars on comparative mysticism.

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Dharma of the Twenty-first Century: Theological-Ethical Paradigm Shift. Somen Das. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1996.

DR SOMEN DAS, currently Principal of Bishops College in Calcutta, will already be known to many readers of the *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*. He is the author of many books and articles that address the Christian presence in India. He also has had a distinguished academic career, having taught for many years at Serampore College and the United Theological College at Bangalore, before moving back to his native Calcutta.

The book under review contains his revised PhD thesis (University of Boston, 1977) and ten separate major articles that have appeared in various books and journals over the years. In a sense this represents the gathering of a lifetime of thinking and writing about Christianity and its relationship to

India.

This review cannot do justice to the richness and diversity of ideas offered in the book but will concentrate on those sections that deal directly with Hindu-Christian dialogue. The first five chapters – the revised PhD thesis – offer a thorough study of the notion of *dharma* as understood in the past and present in India. In a subsequent chapter, entitled "Towards a New Dharma: Dialogical Community Life" Somendas, after discussing the disruption of dialogical thought in India through the emergence of communalism and the disruption of dialogical thought and life in the world at large due to the monopoly of the ideology of the world market economy, offers constructive suggestions for building up a dialogical life