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## Book Review: "Christianity at the Religious Roundtable. Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam"

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The author of this book is aware of the Christian anomalies too prevalent today, and so he draws attention to the extreme positions in the approach towards the Hindus, either being too negative without respect for them or compromising one's own faith "by just doing social work without even mentioning the name of Christ while dealing with the Hindus." (p.189). There should be concern both for the Gospel and for the Hindu brethren. An exaggerated love of one's religion without the love of the neighbour has cost humanity bloody wars and quarrels. (p. 201)

This book is a helpful source of information regarding the areas of common

interests, identifying the points of convergence in Hindu Christian dialogue. Obviously it is a Christian approach to the Hindu religion inspired by its theological presuppositions. But it has to be open enough to be critiqued by the Hindu community as well, since the religious texts of a particular tradition cannot be interpreted from outside. Hence it calls for further reflection from the dialogue partners of both the traditions - Hindu and Christian.

Anand Amaladass  
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***Christianity at the Religious Roundtable. Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.*** Timothy C. Tennent. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002, 270 pp.

**THE AUTHOR** is an evangelical Christian missiologist who teaches at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in the U.S. and at the Luther New Theological College in India. The roundtable "conversation" he advocates ultimately serves an apologetic purpose: to show the superiority of traditional Christian soteriology and biblical creation ontology over the teachings of the three other faith traditions named in the book's subtitle. The volume is simultaneously an attack on the contemporary inclusivism of Roman Catholicism and the pluralist positions of important Western Christian writers such as John Hick, Paul Knitter and others. Tennent draws not only on Bible and Christian theology and on authoritative works of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, but also on the "many conversations I have had with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists from all over the world". (p. 11) He thereby attempts to overcome the generally "embarrassingly superficial" literature on different religions hitherto presented by other evangelical Christian writers, and he goes on to

challenge them to actively engage in interreligious dialogue. In this the author's aim is laudable.

After an opening chapter assessing the various contemporary approaches taken by Christians to interreligious dialogue, the next six chapters, the heart of the book, provide the author with the opportunity to engage in imaginary and sympathetic dialogue with two Hindus (representing Advaita and Visistadvaita Vedanta), two Buddhists (advocating Madhyamika and Yogacara), and three Muslims (espousing Sunnism, Shi'ism, and Sufism) on such key issues as God, creation, ethics, incarnation and Trinity. We thus note from the outset the omission of a great many possible issues and schools of thought, but this restriction enables the topics chosen to be treated with adequate depth. Each debate ends with an authoritative evangelical Christian response as a kind of *siddhanta* or final correct view. The last three chapters of the book examine in succession Justin Martyr's use of "logos spermatikos," Brahmabandhav Upadhyay's rearticulation of the Trinity in terms of

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*saccidananda*, and A. G. Hogg's distinction between the faith of Christians and the faith of others. A closing epilogue urges the reader to remain a faithful witness to the Gospel while recognizing the value of dialogue to lead to a deeper understanding of the position of Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims and also of one's own Christian theological heritage.

In what follows I offer some critical remarks on the Hindu-Christian conversations presented in this book, but in so doing I want to stress that in my sometimes strong disagreement with the author I recognize his achievement in the area of Christian theology. Tennent is an exceptionally clear and elegant writer, he knows his Christian theology very well, and he presents it in language that is comprehensible to both the specialist and the general reader. And, yes, his knowledge of other faith traditions is by and large superior to that of other evangelical Christians.

Nevertheless the presentation of Hindu views is sometimes questionable, and at times the structure of the so-called "conversation" is self-serving. For example, in the discussion by a Christian and Advaitin on the viability of human language to speak about God (48-53), the Advaitin is given only 35 lines to present his position, whereas closing words. Similarly, in the discussion the Christian is given 153, including the about *lila* and the problem of evil (73-80) the Visistadvaita position is expressed in 67 lines, while the Christian portion of the conversation comprises 188. The Christian thus completely dominates the theological debates.

Though Tennent does find strengths within Hindu doctrine, they are affirmed in as much as they confirm what Christians themselves already believe or should believe on the basis of revelation. Where real and significant differences between Christian and Hindu theology are uncovered they are always treated as in necessary opposition; no creative rethinking will allow possible bridges to be built. For example, in the

author's view Sankara's Advaita system amounts to a strict denial of the world's reality and of a personal creator God and must therefore be recognized, from the Christian point of view, as limited and defective. Illusionism is indeed an acceptable and mainstream interpretation of Sankara's ontology, but there are others that have been articulated during recent decades by both Hindus and Christians that recognize not only insuperable doctrinal conflict but also important convergences between Sankara and Christian theology that might lead to a deeper theological exchange. What is surprising is that Tennent does not include such recent developments in his deliberations. He makes no mention of the work of Paul Hacker and Richard De Smet, both Christian indologists and Sankara specialists, nor is the work of these two included in the author's ample bibliography. My own essay has tried to summarize some of these developments by focusing on the work of Hacker and De Smet.<sup>1</sup> These two held Sankara in higher regard than does Tennent. I mention this, because Tennent refers to my essay twice (42, 54) in support of his view that Sankara's *brahman* and the God of Christians are in irreconcilable opposition, whereas my point was to show their basic compatibility despite many important differences.

Tennent errs on several points when presenting Sankara. Among them is the teaching he attributes to Sankara that human language cannot be used to speak about God at all (52), that *brahman* cannot be known (54), and that, in the absence of propositional truth, one cannot say whether Mother Teresa or Adolf Hitler is more like *brahman* (55). All of these points are incorrect, and the last one will be insulting to Advaitins and Hindus in general.

There is much else in the book that is correct and clearly presented, and I found the section (chapters 6 and 7) on dialogue with Islam generally very insightful and helpful.

It is important to review a book such as this, because with the flaws I have mentioned, it is nonetheless an important book in evangelical literature. I expect it to find much acclaim in evangelical circles, but I would suggest that any such future manuscripts heading for publication should first pass the test of an anonymous Hindu reviewer so that authentic Hindu teaching might be more accurately and fairly presented.

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***Pilgrim Without Boundaries.*** Ravi Ravindra. Chennai: Satya Nilayam Publications, 2002, x+78 pp.

**AT A TIME** when every community tries to define and guard its boundaries in search of security and as a result when the people seem to live in a war horizon, there are also stray voices heard to cross the boundaries. Ravi Ravindra with his cross-cultural outlook has authored several books. A physicist by training, born and brought up as a Hindu and married into Christianity and Western culture Ravi seems to move with ease crossing the borders. His earlier works bear witness to this aspect of cross-cultural orientation: *Science and the Sacred: Eternal Wisdom in a Changing World* (1991), and *The Yoga of the Christ: A Hindu Reflection on the Gospel of John* (1990).

In fact this publication under review is the result of the De Nobili Endowment lectures he delivered in Satya Nilayam, Chennai, which he re-worked later as a monograph to be published in the Satya Nilayam Endowment Lectures Series. In brief, this work with three chapters sums up his basic attitude to the other - to other traditions and religions.

The author does not wish to engage in interfaith dialogue, which may be at best a preliminary stage of human dialogue and which could even be an impediment for deeper understanding; but he would like to

1. Bradley Malkovsky, "The Personhood of Sankara's *Para Brahman*," *The Journal of Religion* 77 (1997):541-562. Tennent also makes no mention of the work of Francis X. Clooney, another Christian, on Advaita.

engage in an "inter-pilgrim dialogue", which he explains as pilgrim being a student, a searcher with no fixed position, not quite satisfied with anything except the Infinite. (p.62)

On the one hand, he tries to see the common elements between the Asian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism and the Judeo-Christian traditions. On the other hand, he highlights the divergence expressed in the type of vocabulary these religions use. The key words in the Judeo-Christian corpus of redemptive literature, according to him, are sin, faith, prayer, revelation, grace, and salvation. All these words sound rather odd, he says, in the Hindu-Buddhist context, the hub of which is indicated by other words and ideas: *avidya-maya* (ignorance-illusion), *jnana* (knowledge), *sadhana-yoga* (practice-integration), *samadhi* (meditation-synthesis), *bodhi* (illumination) and *moksa* (liberation), (p. 50). In the Hindu-Buddhist tradition there are gurus, *buddhas*, spiritual teachers, but there are no saviours, since in this worldview each one has to work out his own salvation. Of course he admits that one can find parallels in all traditions. But what he wants to highlight is the striking emphasis in these worldviews.