

SWIDLER, Leonard, ed., *Religious Liberty and Human Rights in Nations and Religions*, Philadelphia PA: Ecumenical Press/New York NY: Hippocrene Books, 1986, US\$9.95, 255 pp.

It would be easy to pass over a book like the above in a developing country with the excuse that the subject matter is “Western” and hence irrelevant. On closer inspection, however, things are not quite so simple. With regard to religious liberty, there has already been a threat to legislate against Christian and other “sects” entering Papua New Guinea, with the result that the whole question of religious liberty, as guaranteed by the constitution, and as decreed by the Second Vatican Council was raised in this journal (*Melanesian Journal of Theology* 2-1 (1986), pp. 77-106). Politicians and church workers have already had to face human rights issues in the cases of refugees from Irian Jaya, and the growing number of squatters on the outskirts of Papua New Guinea’s towns. And diplomats are dealing with Asian countries, whose concepts in these areas are influenced by Muslim and Buddhist, rather than Christian, traditions. It is, thus, not so inappropriate, as it might appear at first glance, to recommend a book in which representatives of Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions discuss these issues both within and between their religious communities.

In her keynote address to the conference from which the book originated, Prof. Elizabeth Odio-Benito, of Costa Rica, revealed that not many countries are willing to engage in self-criticism on human rights’ matters, let alone submit their records to thorough analysis. According to Franklin H. Littell, even the USA, the traditional home of religious liberty, does not have a flawless record. Reports on countries as diverse as Yugoslavia, Egypt, the Sudan, the USSR, and Korea confirm these findings. Littell’s thesis that full religious liberty is more than mere toleration of minorities (pp. 14, 16), and is “indivisible” (p. 19), is valuable.

It is when it moves into the area of religious liberty and human rights in the different religious traditions that the book becomes particularly interesting for theologians. The chapter on Christianity, by Charles Curran, concentrates on the Roman Catholic church’s reluctance to embrace the full implications of these principles, despite their promulgation by the Second Vatican Council; his own recent condemnation by the Vatican gives a sad irony to his criticisms of judicial process in his own church. The book

breaks new ground, not only by presenting Muslim viewpoints on religious liberty in Islam, and the possibility of dialogue between Muslims and Hindus, but, in adding a Buddhist response to the Muslim position, as well as an exposition of the radically-different Buddhist approach by Masao Abe. The inability, even of enlightened Muslims, to conceive of an act of free choice with regard to Islam itself, is completely inadmissible in the Buddhist context. Most Christians will probably find that they have hardly begun to reflect on such questions.

An honest analysis of traditional ways of justifying the caste system in Hinduism, and a report on Tübingen University's interfaith human rights project round off a volume that is full of surprises for those who are seriously interested in the religious foundations of ethics in multicultural and interreligious contexts.

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