

Book Review

Harmony of Religions : The Relevance of Swami Vivekananda,
Dr. K.P. Aleaz

Calcutta: Punthi Pustak (136/4B, Bidhan Sarani,
Calcutta-700004) 1993, pp. 256.

1993 marks the centenary year of the first World's parliament of Religions at Chicago in which Swami Vivekananda stirred World's religious consciousness by forcefully presenting his neo—Vedanta philosophy as a synthesis of spiritual search of humanity. Many international organisations are making preparations to commemorate that unique occasion by observing 1993 as a year of Inter-religious Understanding and Cooperation. Dr. Aleaz has undertaken this research to probe into the specific contributions of Swami Vivekananda— towards a harmony of competing religions of the world. In his Foreword to the book Swami Lokeswarananda, head of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Calcutta, remarks: "Harmony of religions may be too far away a goal to realize, but if we learn to 'live and let live,' that will be enough Truth is one and each religion is a way to realize it I commend this scholarly work, written with much love and respect to the attention of everybody wishing to see an end to religious disputes."

The first seven chapters of this work are devoted to study the practical Vedanta as the unifying force of all religions as conceived by Swami Vivekananda. His thoughts are presented in the context of the teachings of his master, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and in the larger framework of Hindu religious tolerance as revealed in Indian history.

In the Chicago Parliament of Religions Vivekananda presented his vision of a universal religion which will be a sum total of all religions. According to him different religions are different paths to the same goal, a journey not from error to truth but from lower truth to higher truth. He described the quarrels of different religions like the quarrels among blind persons about the shape of an elephant. He interpreted the different philosophical schools of India as a progress towards Advaitic truth and followed this method in relation to different religions of the world. He neither has repudiated any religion, nor has claimed that all truth in other religions ultimately belong to Advaita. What he taught was practical Vedanta of equality and unity of all religions in One

Atman and the right of everyone to have his/her own *Ista* or chosen way.

In the second part (chapters eight to eleven) the author examines Vivekananda's theology of religions in the light of Christian theologies of religions and of the *Syādvāda* of Jainism. Author's own theology of religions is presented in chapter nine. He argues for a pluralistic Inclusivism which positively incorporates the spiritual contents of other faiths and allows one's own faith to be transformed by them. He holds that this is the only meaningful way of holding the values of one's own faith and at the same time accepting other religious positions on equal terms. To him this must be the position of any adequate theology of religions which can promote harmony and dialogue among religions. He rejects the Exclusivist position where one's own religious position determines the criterion to judge other religions and the Inclusivist position which in fact is exclusivism *in cognito*. Inclusivism, while accepting the truth in other religions, maintains that they have meaning only in relation to one's own faith, and thus virtually rejects the validity to other faiths as authoritative means for human salvation. Pluralism conceives all religions as equally true and considers conversion from one faith to another unnecessary.

The author argues that Vivekananda can be considered only as a pluralist and discards the view of some other Indian Christian writers that he is an Inclusivist. The author sums up his position in these words: "In order to promote harmony of religions one has to be either a Pluralist and or a Pluralistic Inclusivist. Exclusivism or Inclusivism cannot promote religious harmony." Vivekananda "was a Pluralist and consequently his thought promotes harmony of religions" (p.235). The author himself takes the position of a Pluralistic Inclusivist which permits freedom of movement from one faith to another as per the decision of the individual, his or her *ista*. Given the freedom to speculate it may be possible to consider Vivekananda also as Pluralistic Inclusivist, taking into consideration his admission that each person has his or her own *ista* or chosen way. Perhaps, Vivekananda would be happy to be known as an advaitin himself, rather than be placed in any of the Christian theological speculations.

Vivekananda, undoubtedly, challenges Christian theology to reconsider its formulations on the uniqueness of Christ, nature of church and meaning of mission. Author's presentation of *Syādvāda* (conditional predications — i.e., all predications are true only in reference to the standpoint occupied and the aspect

of the object considered) is a contribution to Indian Christian theology as an ideology for the harmony of religions in India. The author deserves special credit for bringing out this volume at the historic occasion of world wide remembrance of Vivekananda.

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One Christ- Many Religions : Towards a Revised Christology
S. J. Samartha

ORBIS Books, Maryknoll, New York 1991, & SATHRI, Bangalore, India. 1992, 212 pp, Rs. 85

To Christians who have to grapple with the task of holding a faith that has much to give to and yet much to take from their neighbours' faiths, S. J. Samartha's latest work, *One Christ- Many Religions* comes as an invaluable tool for theology. In the long history and rich heritage of the search for an understanding of Christ that enables Christians to relate their faith with the faith of their neighbours in a positive and constructive way, *One Christ— Many Religions* is certainly a watershed. The Christological question stands out as a stubborn issue in Christian theology of religions. In this study which bears the stamp of a lifelong concern to lighten up this area Samartha has made out a powerful case for a Christology that must arise from dialogue with the faiths of others in their own Lords and Saviours. On the others hand this exhaustive study is itself a dialogue with Christian theology. The book is rich in its depth of understanding of the mind of the people of other faiths. This gives strength to the author's conviction that a Christology that allows theological and spiritual space to establish a just relationship with the spirituality of peoples of others religions cannot be Christo-monistic, for less, exclusive. Here it would have been interesting if the author had examined how the Bhagavadgita has banded the same issue regarding Krishna- monism by referring to the higher and the lower self of Sri Krishna.

The Theocentrism of Samartha' Christological approach has long made its impact on theology of religions. This book which is the apex of his thought shows clearly the struggle of the spirit that is committed to Christ in such a way that it is forced to respect

the non-negotiables in the faiths of others in the same way. Indeed it is true that it is the non-negotiable elements and the exclusive claims of each faith that is the mark of the authentic spiritual depth of a faith. Samartha discusses candidly how Christological claim must be made in recognition of such claims in the faith of others. He says, ' a one-way exclusivistic proclamation is like a stone hurled into a flowing stream. It makes a little splash and then remain submerged and makes no difference whatsoever to the water flowing past it. Someone may pick it up and hurl it back to where it came from.'

In India the challenge for religions is to develop a pro-existence towards one another. Theologians call it the *Kairos* of our times. Samartha, in this book faces this *Kairos* with his 'Bullock-Cart Christology'. He very ably argues why this is the time to give up deductive interpretation of Christology which he calls 'Christology from above' or Helicopter Christology'. Such a Christology, he says, makes it impossible for Christians to 'relate themselves, their faith in God through Christ and the liberated life of the Kingdom of God to neighbours of other faiths'. He shows how such wrongly arrived dogma must give way so that the divinity of Christ in terms of the principle of incarnation may be understood without confusing it with the doctrine of the deity of Christ. He comes down clearly on the side of an ecumenical search for Christology which is free from narrowly parochial interests of the Christian community alone.

The book ends with a chapter on the discussion of 'Mission in a religiously plural world' in which the author shows the change in the content and practice of mission in a religiously plural world and discusses the methodology of confession Christ's Lordship and Saviourhood in a way that it becomes free from the "onlyness" of Christian parochialism and is understood in the midst of the "manyness" of God's love and concern for all humanity'.

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Nagas Towards A.D. 2000 and Other Selected Addresses and Writings

M. M. Thomas

Madras: Centre for Research on New International Economic Order, 1992. pp. vii+226.

The impact of modernization on traditional culture, contribution of religious spirituality towards social transformation, the place of ethnic communities and tribals in the cultural mainstream of Indian society and politics are questions of deep interest to students of ethics, theology, anthropology and politics. The well-known Indian Christian theologian and social thinker, Dr. M. M. Thomas analyzes such issues with deep Christian insights in relation to the North East Indian State of Nagaland, where he served as its Governor from 1990 to 1992. This book contains not only the mature reflections of a person who engaged himself for many years in the study of religion and society but also provides rare insights into the personality of M. M. Thomas a combination of "theologian- pastor-statesman."

As the title indicates this is a collection of selected addresses which Thomas gave in Nagaland and outside during his tenure as Governor. These addresses are divided into five sections dealing with topics such as culture and education, politics and civil society, religion and social transformation, formal addresses given to various places in Nagaland, general addresses on the transition of Indian society from traditional to a modern technological culture. It also contains some general information on the geography, tribal background, literacy, religion and modern political history of Nagaland. In his lectures he extensively makes use of authoritative historical, anthropological and sociological studies on Nagas by Nagas and outsiders such as Yang Konyak, *From Darkness to Light* (Guwahati, 1986); Wati Aier, *A Cry From the Rice Fields*; V. K. Nuh, *Nagaland Church and Politics*; Piketo Sema, *British Policy and Administration in Nagaland 1881-1947*; Thungjamo Lotha, *A Christian Approach to Politics*; J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*; Fuerer-Haimendorf, *Naked Nagas* London, 1939; Julian Jacob, *The Nagas—Society, Culture, and Colonial Encounter*, Cambridge: 1989.

In most of his speeches given in Nagaland Thomas interprets the transition of Nagas from the traditional culture to modern technological culture and attempts to provide insights to build a cultural ethos conducive to control the forces of disintegration

and demoralization and to give a basis for reintegration of culture at a new level of genuine humanism within a spiritual framework.

His interpretation of modernity has the following features :

1. Modernity is a movement of breaking up an Undifferentiated Total Unity that enables development. The problem of Naga culture is that while the differentiation and separation are necessary, no new concept of integrating the differentiated areas of life is arrived at.

2. The discovery of the individual persons with their fundamental rights of non-conformity. Eventhough this individualism is the underlying force of democracy, in its extreme form freedom is converted into licence and self-interest without moral responsibility in community. The resultant all around corruption will activate collectivism of race or nation. "If we" he observes, "have to stop the pendulum swinging from individualism to collectivism and back, we need a culture that emphasises human beings as persons-in-community, and defines freedom as moral responsibility" (p.115).

3. Modernization involves a movement from the sacred ethos to the secular ethos. But it often becomes a pseudosecularism which destroys ecological environment, destroying or marginalizing the tradition that gives human beings their spiritual dignity in public life. This invites a reaction from the fundamentalist and communal forces. A new public culture which recongnizes plurality of structures and dialogues with each other is required.

4. Modernization involves a movement from the idea of world as nature to world as history, world as purposive dynamic movement towards the Future. This sense of goal brings the tragedy of missing the goal, leading to meaninglessness and the destructiveness of nihilism.

Thomas relates his first-hand information on the transition of Naga culture to other traditional cultures and observes the similarity of pattern among them. In these speeches we do not see an angry outsider who sermonizes on the cultural and spiritual vacuum that has enveloped the society, but a fellow-sufferer with rare sensitivity, who identifies himself with the joy and anguish of the people. He dreams for a better Nagaland, a better and humane Indian community, and he believes and hopes that the Nagas have and can contribute something unique to the cultural texture of India. He believes that the Christians in Nagaland have a primary responsibility to promote the culture of non-violence

and peaceful co-existence together with people of other faiths and cultures of Indian nation with whom their freedom and destiny are integrally intertwined. This book provides interpretative tools for serious students of ethics and culture to analyse the transformation of culture and values. This book also points to the need for broadening one's understanding of cultural and ethnic diversity of India to include that of the tribal and hill people and other traditional minority cultures, shedding the exclusive claims of a single race or culture as the Indian.

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