

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Dharma of the Twenty-First Century: Theological-Ethical Paradigm Shift.**

by *Somen Das*, Calcutta, Punthi Pustak, 1995, pp. XIV+384

In the local and global context of fanaticism and fundamentalism an authentic *dharma* could lead us to an integral, holistic vision making unity and harmony possible on the basis of liberation and justice. This is the basic contention of this book which is a revised and enlarged edition of a Ph.D. thesis submitted to the University of Boston in 1977. The author Dr. Somen Das, Principal of Bishop's College, Calcutta is a well known Indian Christian thinker.

The original thesis we get in the first five chapters. Chapter six to fifteen are modified versions of articles that appeared in various Journals, indicating the scope, character and content of new *dharma* based basically on the old. The causal connection is clear, in terms of continuity of ideas and meaning.

The author interprets *dharma* as meaning holding or upholding the inter-relatedness of all that is. At one level the concept indicates the cosmic order (reality) which imposes on humans a universal norm or principle. At another level it suggests the specific duties of people, understood from the perspective of that Order. These are characterised as the double focus of *dharma* namely ontological and deontological. There is a third aspect to the concept of *dharma*, a paradigm shift, where *dharma* is understood not so much as deontology but teleology i.e., a set of values or goals for which one aims, where one is interested not only in the end or the goals but the means adopted to achieve that.

The book has explored the contemporary meaning of *dharma* in terms of the thought of people like Aurobindo, Gandhiji, Tagore and Radhakrishnan. These modern Indian scholars are very reluctant to emphasise *dharma's* deontological dimension, particularly in terms of prohibitions and injunctions stipulated in the sacred and secular literature of India. They are very keen to indicate the teleological dimension of *dharma* in terms of values and goals, dreams and visions. They do not want to understand *dharma* primarily in terms of structures like *varnasrama-dharma* which are rather rigid and static; while in their estimation *purusarthas* assume great significance for theology and ethics. Thus they are more interested in the teleological implications of the concept *dharma*, without of course having any radical break with the past perception of *dharma*. The modern writers have retained *dharma's* ontological thrust and meaning. The finding of the author is that today

*dharma* is viewed not so much as a static order but as orderliness, not so much as a specific duty but as dutifulness, and not so much as a fixed and rigid law, external to the humans, but as an innate law which is human's sense of justice and injustice.

The author has also attempted to indicate the elements of the contemporary reinterpreted notice of *dharma* which could be integrated into the system of Christian theological-ethical discourse. These are: *dharma* as the ontological basis of theology and ethics; *dharma* as the principle of unity; *dharma* and *moksa* as inseparable; *dharma* as *niskamakarma*, and *dharma* as *ahimsa*. These five elements, together and separately can be a corrective to Christian thought in India. The author deserves congratulations for taking such a positive stand regarding the concept of *dharma*. For him dialogical community life is the new *dharma*. He has pictured William Carey, Swami Vivekananda and Toyohiko Kagawa as agents of the new *dharma*. He has also interpreted the movements for socio-economic changes as the new *dharma* in practice. A critique of traditional Christian spirituality has been provided, giving indications to a reconceived spirituality in the light of the new *dharma*. The author envisages a paradigm shift in contemporary ethical-theological thinking as well as religio-cultural life in terms of the new *dharma* and he presents Asian Christian Theology as a quest towards a new Christianity, new *dharma*. The book is a valuable contribution not only to students of Hinduism but also to students of Indian-Asian Christian Theology and ethics.

Dr. K.P. Aleaz,  
Bishop's College, Calcutta

## **Human Freedom and Indian Culture: Christian Ethical Reflections**

by T. Jacob Thomas, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1995, pp. xi+330

Dr. T. Jacob Thomas is a professor of theology and ethics at Bishop's College, Calcutta. His main contention is that the Christian concept of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in human history to restore, to recreate the image of God in human beings and the Hindu vision of salvation as liberation from *maya* or the distorted vision of the world point to a common human destiny in God. The function of Ethics in human society is primarily integrative-but since the composition of human society is far from homogenous, Ethics has to imbibe both a singular and a plural nature. The author does not believe that any particular world-view can claim exclusive interpretative rights to the 'ethics of a world community.' The ethics of a world community is based on human freedom and it emerges from the interaction of cultures.

The book has been divided into twelve chapters and they are again grouped into three parts. The first part deals with the understanding of human freedom in Christian and Hindu theologies. Classical and contemporary writers both from the East and the West like Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, Calvin, Tillich, Radhakrishnan, Chenchiah, Devanandan, M.M. Thomas, Samartha are studied here. The second part is a critique of the developments in India in the area of Gospel-culture interactions. Cultural interactions of certain select regions such as Kerala, Bengal and the Tribal areas of the North and the North East are analysed. Through a wide variety of topics: Manu Smriti and Mandal Commission, Ambedkar and untouchability, Dalit Christians in Kerala and the Syrian Church, Women's struggle for equality and the Mary Roy case, Gospel-culture interactions in modern Bengal, and the transformation of Tribal culture in India, to name just a few, the author has attempted to interpret the varied facets of cultural interactions. Dr. Thomas's search leads him to the supposition, a very positive one at that, cultural isolation is neither possible nor desirable in the modern world. The need of the hour is positively oriented cultural interactions that is, not the subjugation or replacement of one by the other but nourishment of all that is truly humane and progressive in all cultures. The author unfolds his vision in the third part. This is the vision of a future human community made possible by the reconstruction of a Christian theology of humans (anthropology) through an interpretation of the image of God as a vision of human future. The model identifies an ethical understanding of Jesus Christ for India (Christology). The model also lays the ground work for a non-communal form of church in the Indian context of religio-cultural pluralism (ecclesiology). Christian theological doctrines are reconstructed in this part with a view to provide spiritual and theological basis for human freedom and a world community.

One of the main premises of the book is that excessive significance has been laid on the difference between Hindu and Christian concepts of God-human relationship—this cannot be the real ground on which Indian Christian theology stands.

Another important conclusion is that racism, casteism, sexism authoritarianism and other evils are the embodiments of untruths, manipulations of truth, slavery, oppression and all forms of injustice. It is against these that all religions should take up arms and not against each other. Our search for a common theology and ethics should be aimed at unravelling the spiritual truths which are present in all religions and thus is a part of our common heritage.

The author does a lot of soul searching and then asserts that the value-consciousness one generally associates with the gospel such as

sense of freedom, equality, justice and universal vision have not been created among the Syrian Christian community of Kerala, if one is to judge them through their traditional practices. The ideology of exclusivism of the Syrian Christians which made them into a closed community cannot help in the emergence of a contextually relevant theology and that has to come from the Dalit and Tribal Christians. The Hindu-Christian interaction in modern Bengal is helping in the emergence of a new world culture with its emphasis on human freedom, where the west imbibes Indian spirituality and the Indians are open to Western humanistic ideology. Thus the author has provided us with a well balanced examination of human freedom and culture from a Christian ethical perspective.

Dr. Bonita Aleaz,  
Department of Political Science  
Women's Christian College, Calcutta

## **The Relevance of Relation in Sankara's Advaita Vedanta**

by *K.P. Aleaz*, Delhi: Kant Publications, 1996

Dr. K.P. Aleaz in this book wards off mistaken notions that surround advaita vedanta of Sankara and brings out the value and meaning of Jiva (self) and the world and thereby the significance of life and the relation of God and creation, history and human existence. He writes, "The Vedic treasure is very much with us in Sankara's thought; what we have to do is to correctly identify its contemporary relevance, namely the relevance of relation, God-World-Human relation, for the purpose of present-day celebration of human life on earth". Such a search, the author thinks, is necessary in the modern Indian context of nation building as well as the universal search for the fullness of human life on earth, Sanskara's Advaita Vedanta present an "ideal, integral, God-World-Human relationship".

The author considers Advaita Vedanta to be "Theology" and not "Philosophy". The reason he gives is that it "has no foundation other than infallible and divine testimony". It is "beyond the reach of reason and entirely based upon the testimony of Sruti, the revelation...". The hermeneutical principle Sankara employs to interpret the Sruti is theory of implication (laksana). That is, ordinary words get an implied meaning when applied to transcendental reality.

Brahman is beyond speech and mind, cannot be perceived or objectified. It is one's inmost self and is unmanifest. Atman is the comprehending, engulfing or pervading Brahman or Purusa, one who fills up in its entirety, formless and co-extensive with all that is internal and external. Brahman is the reality of reality. There is no other knower

different from Brahman to whom Brahman can become a separate knowable. No one can say "I know Brahman well enough". The fact that Brahman is the self of all (Atman) proclaims the existence of Brahman. Brahman is the Supreme Lord (Paramesvara), the Supreme Person. Thus to Sankara Nirguna Brahman is the most Personal Being.

The Atman (self) presiding over the body and senses is called *Jiva*. All living entities, immovable beings like plants also, are endowed with *Jiva*. The preeminence of human persons over other *Jivas* is due to their competence for action and knowledge (karmajnaanadhikarah). All humans are equal in the realm of knowledge and liberation. Caste distinctions last only so long as ignorance lasts. Brahman is the reality in all existence. Identifying the extrinsic denominator or creation (upadhi) as independently is ignorance. It is their relation to Brahman that gives meaning to creation. This upadhi relationship is key to understanding God-Human-World relationship.

Dr. Aleaz is a specialist in Hindu religious philosophy. His intention is to provide an objective interpretation of original Advaita Vedanta. He presents it as a universal theology. Therefore he has found it necessary to answer the criticisms levelled against it by western theologians and philosophers as world negating and impersonal. Certainly Advaita Vedanta have been misunderstood by Westerners as well as by Indians. It is appreciable that a fresh effort is made to discover its genuine message. The author has to be given credit to his painstaking study, giving detailed footnotes to controversial issues and an elaborate bibliography and helpful index. However, this reviewer has some reservations regarding some basic assumptions behind the whole discussion. The book assumes the Western categories of personality and history as universally valid. Also it assumes that theology has to be eternal and universal. These are philosophical assumptions. These assumptions do not go along with the explicit statement that Advaita Vedanta is not philosophy but theology. Is there such a distinction in Indian thinking?

Dr. T. Jacob Thomas,  
Bishop's College, Calcutta

### **The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels**

by Raymond E. Brown, 2 Vols., The Anchor Bible Reference Library, New York: Doubleday, 1994, pp.4-1608.

Raymond E. Brown's book on passion narratives of the Gospels—*The Death of the Messiah*—written in two volumes is unique in many respects

and this is a fitting continuation and a 'companion' of his earlier work *The Birth of the Messiah* (1977). This book is the result of ten years of consistent work, studying and teaching on passion narratives (hence forth PNs).

### *Importance of the Study*

The PNs are unique in their literary standard, in the historical grounding of the Christian faith and theological value, for the death of Christ is associated as the key element in God's plan of salvation of all. This is the longest, consecutive action recounted of Jesus. Aesthetically, literarily, historically, theologically, spiritually and pastorally the PNs occupy a central place in the Christian Church and culture.

The author acknowledges the extreme complexities and difficult problems that are behind the study on PNs. He accepts that he is incompetent to solve all the problems fully. What he claims to have achieved through these two volumes is that he "made available in one place insights of past and present that render study of the passion a uniquely rewarding endeavour". The author intends to 'bring together the scattered views and proposals, sift them for the truly worthwhile and organize them (with new contributions)'. A full scale commentary mainly concentrating on the PNs in the four Gospels is a pioneering venture on his part to start with. He acknowledges that the time spent on studying the PNs "has been the most enriching" of his life.

This book is aimed at a wide variety of readers—scholars, preaching clergy, students of religion and theology and interested Christians and all those who are interested in the study of the passion and death of Jesus. He has treated the complicated topics in a readable way. A notable feature of this commentary is that instead of citing mere references the author took pain to write the biblical verses to help the readers to follow the biblical passages.

### *Subject of Study*

The PNs—the arrest, the trial, the condemnation, execution and burial—found in Mk. 14:26-15:47; Mt. 26:30-27.06; Lk. 22:39-23:56; Jn. 18:1-19:42 are subjected to detailed exegetical and comparative analytical study. He gives the rationale for selecting these sections. The whole drama is divided into "Acts" and "Scenes". The first volume deals with three "Acts" and four "Scenes". 'Act III' is without an expressed 'scene' but the Roman Trial of Jesus is dealt here. The second volume is exclusively for 'Act IV' which has two 'scenes'. For commentary purpose the PNs is divided in forty eight sections. The vastness of the topic dealt and study performed is seen in the 2700 pages of typescript which in printed form has got 1524 pages.

*Critical Evaluation*

The methodology that Brown pursued in his book is an integration of different NT methods both past and present. He has in an increasing measure used the Redaction and New literary critical methods without slipping into their legalistic technicalities. The book also reflects the author's indebtedness to Form criticism, Source criticism and Social Scientific methods. An integration of different methods proved not to be confusing but captivating. This is the strength of this book.

The balanced approach which is different from that of the 'ultraconservatives' and 'ultra-liberals' in tracing the historicity behind the narratives is noteworthy.

The author to a great extent is successful in proving that the PNs are similar in narrative sequence but considerably different in content.

The author's hermeneutical presupposition that the researcher stands on solid ground while pursuing the *sitz im leben* of the evangelist, by dealing with the narratives (for the text reflects them), is praise worthy, but the possibility and promise to offer a 'solid understanding' of the meaning intended and conveyed by the evangelists themselves in the first century sounds as if the author's findings are objective and normative for reflective interpretation of the passion by today's readers. We must always remember that what has happened in the first half of the first century was more truthfully, historically and theologically presented by the evangelists and preachers of the last third of the first century. The findings that we get as a result of our vertical and horizontal studies cannot be completely free from our frame of reference now; and to claim our findings now as 'solid understanding' for reflective interpretation, more than that of the evangelists tend to devalue them. I could hardly believe that the evangelists did such detailed and minute hairsplitting research in writing their narratives. I still believe that the evangelist wrote the traditions down which were in circulation in their communities, in an orderly fashion that deemed fit for them and their people. The theological import of each evangelist stands supreme here and that is to be seen within the narrative mode of each book (Cf. p. 13).

In the section of 'intended and conveyed' (p. 6) the author seems to be following the method that has been adopted in his book *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), in treating the Gospels as a window to trace the primitive Christian origins i.e. the time of the evangelist. The author in the present book also argues that from an analysis of the evangelists' presuppositions, the locale and the audience of the evangelist can be detected.

In the argument of 'scriptural reflection' of the PNs the author sees that denial, flight motifs at Last Supper scene is more akin to the OT

motifs found in Zech. 13,14 and II Sam. 15 plus the evangelists' incorporation of the key sayings of Jesus (pp. 139-145). The criteria to authenticate this hypothesis are yet to be ascertained.

The tendency to defend Peter and to downplay the denial incidents at p. 144 is quite surprising. The commentary's progress with "Acts" and "Scenes" with "Comment" and "Analysis" gives compactness to the book. The "Comment" section is packed with exegesis, comparative analysis on parallel passages, and "Analysis" section is mostly interpretation and sociological analysis and comprehensive integrated conclusions.

The historical coverage (pp. 328-397) on the Roman governance of Judea and Jewish self governing authorities, the general functioning of the Sanhedrin etc. are important informations. Though historical details are highlighted, the author's concern was not to prove the historicity of the PNs, but rather the PNs are viewed more at an existential level.

The literal translations at the outset of each "Scene" is very helpful for readers as a study tool. For consistency, general intelligibility and recognition, the book follows the division of history in to B.C. and A.D. as in his earlier book *The Birth of the Messiah*.

The quotations and views from E. Linnemann at p. 222, 23 appears that even after her confessions of the horrible mistakes that she did by following historical critical methodology (see. *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian turned Evangelical* trans. R.W. Yarbrough, Michigan: Paker, 1990. Also *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the first Three Gospels* trans. R.W. Yarbrough, Michigan: Baker, 1992.), and her request of burning all her earlier works, Brown seems to be seeking again her views to support his own. On the discussion of 'Iestai' at p. 283 Martin Hengel's views are not cited (Martin Hengel *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.* trans. David Smith, Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1989).

### *Bibliography*

The seventy pages of bibliographical details and the detailed bibliography under each "Scene" persuaded me to write something about this under a caption in this review. The general bibliography has the major writing pertinent to PNs in general and PN of each individual Gospel. Before each major "Act", "Scene" there is also sectional bibliography. The 14 Illustrative Tables and 9 Appendices are very helpful for an inquisitive and a prospective researcher. The book also has indexes of bibliographical author, subjects and Gospel passages. Ten and a half pages of Abbreviations also show the amount of labour and time spent for this massive piece of theological literature.



Last but not least, when asked by someone about his plan to write *The Resurrection of the Messiah* in order that he may conclude his trilogy, he reveals that he has no such plans, instead he says, "I would rather explore that area face to face".

Simon Samuel,  
The New Theological College, Dehradun

## Christian Thought Through Advaita Vedanta

by K.P. Aleaz, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996

In this work Dr. Aleaz has attempted to identify the various attempts made by theologians to construct Indian Christian theology on the basis of Advaita Vedanta philosophy. In an earlier work, *The Relevance of Relation in Sankara's Advaita Vedanta*, Aleaz has provided a clear and objective interpretation of Advaita Vedanta. On the strength of that work he is now able to evaluate various Christian efforts made in India to assimilate, reinterpret or reject Advaita Vedanta. Obviously the author rejects the reinterpretation and rejection models. While agreeing with the assimilation or reception model, he has his own version of it in terms of Pluralistic Inclusivism. He also outlines an advaitic Christology or rather a Jesulogy which is independent of any traditional interpretations.

The author classifies the previous efforts to develop Indian Christian theology into three models—Reception, Reinterpretation and Rejection—and discusses them in three sections of this book. The Reception model includes theologians like Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, Carl Keller, K. Subba Rao, J.G. Arapura, R.V. De Smet, S.J. Samartha and the author himself. The Reinterpretation model also has seven representatives, P. Johanns, Mark Sunder Rao, Abhishiktananda, Bede Griffiths, Raimundo Panikkar, Sara Grant and Vandana. Theologians like P.D. Devanandan and Surjit Singh are the ones included in the Rejection model.

Even those who accept Advaita Vedanta in its totality differ in their method of using it in their theological formulations. For example, Upadhyaya uses Vedanta only as a garb to clothe the Thomistic theology. He interprets neither Vedantic thought nor Thomistic theology. What he holds is that in India Thomistic theology has a Vedantic form. While Upadhyaya considered samaj dharma (social practices) as important and allowed them to influence his sadhana dharma (spiritual practices), K. Subba Rao held the "Advaita Vedantic conviction that in order to attain the spiritual realm we have to sacrifice the material realm." While Carl Keller holds that "it is not Jesus in the flesh who is the object of our faith and adoration but the *exalted Christ*", Samartha holds that it is "the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, his death and resurrection, the illumination he has brought into the mystery of God and the transforming

power he has introduced into human life, moving from self-centredness to God-centredness" that attracted the Indian heart and mind. Each of these theologians is attracted to some particular aspects of Advaita Vedanta. Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya emphasized the transcendental aspect of God, the trinitarian reality of Sat-Chit-anandam, giving meaning to humans and creation; Subba Rao focussed on the total renunciation of Jesus, taking it as an example of "dying to the body and ego as well as the material world." J.G. Arapura saw Advaita Vedanta being helpful to transcend the limitations imposed by the Western categories such as "personhood" and "history" upon Christian thought. Samartha found the unitive vision of Advaita, unity that encompasses nature, humanity and God as very relevant to an Indian Christology. Dr. Aleaz takes his clue from the capacity of advaitic philosophy to hold together diverse viewpoints in one system. His attempt is a "practical demonstration of an Indian dialogical theology, more specifically an Indian dialogical Jesology in terms of the perspective of Pluralistic Inclusivism for the relational convergence of religions, in this case of Hinduism and Christianity."

What make Dr. Aleaz's effort distinctive from earlier attempts is his method of "giving total authority to the hermeneutical context of India, a major component of which is Advaita Vedanta." According to him the content of Indian Christian theology must be determined by Advaita Vedanta. Advaita Vedanta is the "Gospel of Indian culture" (See his book with this title). His effort is to "make the very content of the revelation of God in Jesus truly pluralistic by elaborating the contributions of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta to it." "Deeper meanings of the person and function of Jesus are emerging from within Advaita Vedanta."

Dr. T. Jacob Thomas,  
Bishop's College, Calcutta.