

Book Review

Relating to People of Other Religions : What Every Christian Needs to Know by M. Thomas Thangaraj. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997, 112 pp.

Thomas Thangaraj is Associate Professor of World Christianity at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. In a warm and engaging manner, he presents to Christians the motives, paths, and basic confidence about relating to people of other faiths. His approach is autobiographical, anecdotal, biblical, and practical; the result is an easily-read book that communicates effectively.

Because of his lengthy personal involvement in interfaith dialogue, Thangaraj has a positive approach to the followers of other religious traditions. His chapters often begin by narrating a personal encounter : “Ganga and I have had long conversations...[and we] discover many similarities; but we know we are very different...” (75, 87). This narrative style brings the reader directly into the heart of the question in a personal, concrete way.

Recognizing the fact that in today’s global community “Christians will be increasingly drawn into interaction and conversation with other religious communities in our mission to serve humanity,” Thangaraj explores several “different modes of relationship between Christians and others” (18).

Six of the book’s nine chapters explore various possible stances of a Christian *vis-a-vis* other religionists. Creative chapter titles capture these positions: “We know and They know not” (Chapter Three) [an exclusivist view]; “We perhaps know; They perhaps know; Who knows?” (Chapter Four) [a skeptical or relativist view]; “We and They Together need to know more!” (Chapter Eight) [an inclusivist view]. Although Thangaraj does not use the nomenclature found within the bracketed words, he explores those issues and attitudes; the mode of exploration is narrative, experiential, and attitudinal. The reader will find the approach engaging and insightful.

Some recurrent themes are played throughout the work: the God of the Bible “does not fail to celebrate plurality” (20) and “revels in the multiplicity of peoples, cultures, and religions” (24); balanced judgment is needed in evaluating the missionary enterprise, because for many believers (Thangaraj’s own ancestors) the Gospel “liberated them and helped them to affirm and assert their self-worth and dignity”(47); dialogue includes “every act, word, and thought carried out together with others in a spirit of mutuality” (92); it is “an exercise in humility and love” (95).

The book does not romanticize other religions; the author is not compromising of his Christian faith. The thoughts of theologians (e.g. Panikkar, Rahner, etc.) are used for the insights

they offer. The Bible is frequently quoted to affirm a positive and open approach to other believers. A study guide with practical suggestions for each chapter concludes the work.

This is a helpful book; it could become a basic resource for a short course in interfaith dialogue. It is easily understood, but one that never proposes simplistic solutions to complex problems. In a word, Thangaraj has followed the advice found in I Peter 3:15-16a; he has witnessed to his Christian faith and hope “with gentleness and reverence.”

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Book Review

A Convergence of Advaita Vedānta and Eastern Christian Thought by K.P. Aleaz, Delhi : ISPCK, 2000, xxvi + 345 pp.

This book represents a bold attempt to identify a possible convergence of Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta and Eastern Christian Theology in terms of an approach of Pluralistic Inclusivism in theology of religions which is open to receiving insights from other religious experiences and theologies. What is suggested is to go beyond a comparative approach to an interrelational approach, as religious traditions are not static finished products, rather dynamic inter-related experiences of growth. Pluralistic Inclusivism stands for dialogical theologies that encourage the relational convergence of religions, conceiving on the one hand the diverse religious resources of the world as the common property of humanity and on the other a possible growth in the richness of each of the religious experiences through mutual inter-relation.

The work under review demonstrates that Advaita Vedānta can dynamically enrich Eastern Christian thought in its further developments. It invites Orthodox theology to discard its proud contention of itself as the custodian of the totality of Truth and instead with humility learn from the spiritual experiences of people of other faiths, in the present case from Advaitic experience. If so far the approach of Eastern Christian theologians was to evaluate negatively other religious thoughts in terms of their own preformulated Christian traditional beliefs and reject the former if they differ from the latter, this research work initiates an entirely new approach where Advaitic experience is invited to assist in the reformulation of Eastern Christian experience, so that new creative Christian theological insights are arrived at for the benefit not only of Eastern Christians but all Christians, not only of Christians, but all people of all living religious faiths.

The book has a number of significant findings which can be further developed, such as: (1) The Advaita Vedāntic interpretation of the six *Pramāṇas* (valid sources of knowledge) provides the relevant sources of authority, a viable theological method and an appropriate Biblical-theological hermeneutics for Indian Christian theology and derivatively for Eastern Christian thought. (2) An enrichment of Eastern Christian Theology is possible through an experience of Trinity as Saccidānanda, as is accomplished by Indian Christian spirituality (3) An Indian Christology from within Advaita Vedānta enables a further development of an Orthodox Christology. Advaita gives a theological basis for the self-emptying of Jesus : It is Being (*Sat*) alone who is perceived in a form other than His/Her own, namely Jesus and the total sacrifice of Jesus is the total affirmation of Being. Jesus redeems in the sense his life and work re-presents to us the Supreme BrahmanĀtman as pervading, illuminating and unifying us and the whole creation. Eastern Christology here receives new insights to go beyond the atonement theories. (4) According to Orthodox theology God is unknowable in His/Her essence

and knowable in His/Her energies or operations in the world. The *neti neti* theology of Advaita, the experience of Brahman/Ātman as the subject and knower of all and everything who cannot be known, enables Eastern Christian theology to develop its apophatic theology as well as to pursue the goal of apophatic theology, namely deification. The salutary function of the unknowability of God is affirmed by both Advaita and Orthodox thought. (5) We know God through His/Her energies or operations in the world means that we know Him/Her through His/Her pervasion, illumination and unification of everything and everybody as Pure Consciousness and Witness. The insight that Brahman/Ātman pervades, illumines and unifies all the levels and layers of human personality as well as the whole of creation enables Eastern Christian theology to arrive at new insights regarding the energies of God through which God is knowable and through which deification is actualised. (6) The Orthodox conception of deification is enriched through advaitic interpretation : Deification is in terms of the implantation (mayah) of the Ātman in the five human sheaths. The luminous Ātman (ātmajyotiḥ) imparts His/Her lusture to the intellect and all other organs and thus deification is effected. Brahman/Ātman unifies everything in His/Her homogeneity (*ekarasatā*) and the result is again deification. (7) Brahman/Ātman as Pure Consciousness (*Vijñānaghanah*) and Witness (*sākṣi*) pervades, illumines and unifies the whole human person by means of His/Her reflection in it. The awareness that Brahman/Ātman Himself/Herself is reflected at all the levels of our personality gives new vigour to the interpretation of human person as created in the image of God, taught by Eastern Christian theology. (8) As per the Orthodox thought the inheritance of the Fall is essentially an inheritance of mortality rather than of sinfulness, sinfulness being merely a consequence of mortality. This is quite in line with the Advaitic interpretation of human person with body, senses, mind and intellect as mortal; immortality being that of Brahman/Ātman. Evil or sin lies in conceiving due to ignorance (*avidyā*) the body, senses, mind and intellect as the Absolute, instead of the one Supreme Reality, Brahman/Ātman as the absolute. (9) The human person is totally dependent on his/her Cause, Brahman/Ātman. The relation between the effects and the Cause is *tādātmya* or non-reciprocal dependence relation. This Advaita Vedāntic view can enrich Orthodox anthropology. (10) Advaita stands for an integral God-Human-Nature relationship. There is an unbroken continuum between humans and the external world because the material world as well as the material body are constituted by the same five elements (*pañcabhūta*) and each *indriya* (sense organ) is composed of the same element, the quality of which is sensed by it. This enriches the Eastern Christian theological conception of humanity's vocation to be the mediator (*methorios*) or the frontier being between the material and spiritual, to be a 'microcosm' uniting the material and the spiritual. (11) According to Advaita Vedānta Brahman/Ātman is both the internal, reality-providing cause (*upādānakāraṇam*) as well as the efficient cause (*nimittakāraṇam*) of the whole creation. Brahman/Ātman is the total Creator, and creation has only derived reality. Māyā does not mean that creation is an illusion. It only means that if we project creation as a parallel Absolute to Brahman/Ātman we are in illusion and we are in ignorance. Eastern Christian thought is in full agreement with the view that Brahman/Ātman is the total Creator, and creation has only derived reality. (12) Creation *ex nihilo* means that creation is brought about from non-being. Advaita also proclaims that all modifications which are name and form are real by the Ātman who is real (*Sadātmanaiya satyam*), and left to themselves they are unreal (*Savatastavanṛtameva*). If the self-emptying of God in Christ is involved in the ongoing process of creation, creation is to affirm Being by self-sacrifice as Jesus did. (13) The divine willings, the ideas of created things, the *logoi*, the

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words, are in the energies of God and not in His/Her essence. The Advaita Vedāntic view that before creation this universe preexisted in Brahman as potential seed (*bījaśaktiḥ*) and undifferentiated name and form (*avyākṛtanāmarūpa*) clarifies this understanding of creation in the energies of God.

Thus this book becomes a practical demonstration of the approach of pluralistic inclusivism in theology of religions as are two of the author's earlier works namely *The Role of Pramāṇas in Hindu Christian Epistemology* (Calcutta : Punthi Pustak, 1991) and *An Indian Jesus from Śaṅkara's Thought* (Calcutta : Punthi Pustak, 1997). Students of both theology and religion are surely going to be benefitted by these books.

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Book Review

A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology by Azariah, Masillamani, Delhi : ISPCK, 2000, xx + 199 pp.

The Rt. Rev. M. Azariah has long been renowned for his stand in support of the Dalit cause, and during his tenure as Bishop of Madras has done yeoman service in highlighting the Dalit issue in general and that of Dalit Christians in particular. The recent publication by the ISPCK and DLET entitled *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology* that has been authored by him is a witness to those long years of struggle to make the message of Christ relevant in the Indian context. The book *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology* is a compilation of his articles (including his now famous, *The Un-Christian Side of the Christian Church*), essays, lectures and Bible studies, all of which centre around the liberative message of the gospel of Jesus Christ with specific reference to the liberation of Dalits from caste-oppression. The articles have been the work of more than twenty years and in the book a loose chronological order has been followed in arranging them.

The very title of the book is telling in the sense that the author makes it clear that his intention is never an academic inquiry into the caste question. Rather his book is a pastoral search, that is to say, a search which does not maintain the so-called 'distance' of academia but which stands in the midst of the struggles of people in an attempt to discover the meaning of Christian faith and praxis in the face of caste discrimination.

Even though there has been an attempt by theologians to contextualize theology for several years now, Indian Christian Theology has failed to be a theology of the people. In fact it would not be wrong to say that the crisis of Indian theology is that it has been far removed from the aspirations of the people. Early attempts at contextualization dialogued with philosophical Hinduism, an attempt which had little to do with the masses. In the late sixties theology at last began to take the poor seriously but again refused to ask the question who the poor in India are. It was only with the emergence of Dalit theology (in 1978 as recorded by Azariah) that Christian theology in India began to take people seriously, As Rt. Rev. Azariah puts it in his book : "It has been truly said that Christian Theology is a task carried on primarily by the church for the sake of the Church." Therefore if 75% of Christians are of a scheduled caste origin then Christian theology should have immediate relevance to this mass of people.

This is exactly where the book by Azariah becomes helpful, what he has succeeded in doing is to highlight the entire issue of caste discrimination in India giving visibility to it. He shows in no uncertain terms and very graphically in several instances, the pathetic conditions of poverty and prejudice that millions of Indians and millions of Indian Christians live under. While several sociologists in India have pointed out the two-India phenomenon in the great

urban-rural divide that exists in the country, Azariah has pushed this concept further to show us the great caste divide that exists in the country, where each village is divided into the main village and the outcaste Dalit Cheri. But Azariah's critique of caste does not confine itself to Indian society only, he also points to the terrible caste distinction that exists even within the church. He points out that Dalit Christians are three times oppressed inside and outside the church and also by the state in its refusal to offer reservations to Christians of Scheduled caste origin.

Though Azariah does tend to reduce caste to being a religious phenomenon he understands that caste is not only a matter of attitudes and beliefs but also of very hard material reality that organizes how people live, work and marry. It may be assumed that since caste in India is upheld using theological arguments, a first critique of it must be theological. But Dalit theology cannot merely stop at theologically deconstructing caste but must also construct an alternative vision of a caste-free, just Indian society.

Therefore Dalit theology for Azariah goes beyond just recognition of the fact that Jesus identified with the 'Dalits' of history or that a faith in Christ demands equality to seeking alternative models of development that include Dalits as central to the entire process of national development or orienting our economic goals towards that end. Azariah makes this clear by pointing out that the threefold key to Dalit liberation is self-realization, self-respect and self-reliance.

One can note in the book an evolving awareness of the issues at stake that the author himself points out on the back cover. This is particularly true of the book's analysis of patriarchy—while the earlier chapters say little about Dalit women, towards the end there is an acknowledgement that Dalit women are twice alienated. However one feels that the women's question must be taken a lot more seriously than it has been, after all caste is integrally linked to patriarchy and cannot survive without it. Therefore any attempt to break free from caste bondages should first critique the patriarchal system.

All in all one would have to admit that the book makes a definitely good read serving two purposes. Firstly it performs the ideological task of spotlighting the issue and gaining support for it. Several passages are extremely well written making one's blood boil at the atrocities that Dalits face. And secondly it gives vision to the direction in which Pastoral theology should proceed—making heard the voices of those who have been kept silent.

One would have to admit that may be the book is a trifle repetitive at times but then when it comes to the issue of Dalits it has to be mentioned that one cannot say enough.

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