

Book Review

Approaches, Foundations, Issues and Models of Inter-Faith Relations by David Emmanuel Singh and Robert Edwin Schick, Delhi: ISPCK/HMI, 2001, pp.499.

This book is a collection of articles on dialogue published in *The Journal of the Henry Martyn Institute* (formerly *The Bulletin of the Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies*) since 1991. For those who have missed out the Journal here is a golden opportunity to read a collection of valuable articles from it. Also, the good news is that a companion volume is forthcoming, a selection of article published in the bulletin between 1941 and 1986 on the subject of dialogue.

David Emmanuel Singh writes an introduction to the book. The first part of the book is on 'Christian approaches to religions' with special reference to Islam, and contains seven articles. The first article, by Andreas D'Souza which is a little more than a hundred pages in length analyses the writings of two of the western Christian scholars', namely W. Montgomery Watt and Kenneth A Craggton "An approach to the study of Islam." The Christian standpoint taken by both these scholars imposes limitations on their studies. We should know that in reality Islam is what Muslims say it is. The believers' interpretation of their own traditions is the only legitimate data on which we can base our studies is the conclusion of D'Souza. The second article, by Jan Slomp is entitled 'Hendrik Kraemer and Dialogue today', and it shows in brief the change that came about in Kraemer regarding more or less an openness to other religious faiths towards the end of his career. Michael Anthony Barnes' article on 'Theology or Dialogue in a post-modernist world' suggests that we should go beyond pluralism in theology of religions. A theology of dialogue demands not the abstract philosophical theism of pluralism, but the hermeneutically and historically informed reading of the actual encounter between communities of faith.

'Christian-Muslim Relations: A Burdensome past, A challenging future', by Willem Bijlefeld is the next article and it expresses the hope that though the past relations between Christians and Muslims were strained ones, things are going to change for the better in the future. William al-Sharif's article 'Christianity and Islam: Towards a Civilizational Dialogue' attempts to lay down guidelines regarding a work plan for a profoundly civilizational dialogue between Christians and Muslims. In the next article, Clinton Bennett provides a detailed and critical biography of Henry Martyn which is simultaneously the story of Christian approach to Islam containing missiological thought from a historical perspective. Godwin Rajendra

Singh's article is on 'the evangelistic activities of the Jesuits in the courts of the Mughals' and it provides a reasonably detailed account on the matter.

The second part of the book deals with certain issues in Christian-Muslim relations by way of presenting four articles. Clinton Bennett has a second contribution entitled 'Christian Trinity and Muslim Attributes: An Invitation to Spiritual Exploration', which suggests that on the doctrinal matters the gap between Islam and Christianity is not as wide as we might at first believe. The next article by Steven R. Benson is on 'Forgiveness from God as expressed in the Quran and as interpreted by Muslims and Christians' and it shows that because of the background which a Christian brings to a reading of Muslim texts, the texts are understood by the Christian in a manner not completely consistent with their intention. William al-Sharif also has a second article and it is entitled 'Islamic Revelation and Christianity', it points out that the same methodology and logic that Christian scholars use to criticize Islamic ideas can also be used reversely by Muslims to destabilize the foundations of Christianity. Thus doctrines are not provable; they can only have spiritual meaning in our lives. L. Stanislaus' article is on 'Jesus' Crucifixion, Death and Elevation in Islam: An Effort at Comprehension' and its conclusion is that it is difficult to achieve reconciliation between Christian and Muslim beliefs concerning redemption.

The third part of the book is about Christian foundations for interfaith encounters. Kenneth J. Thomas writes on the place of the Bible in Muslim-Christian relations. Samuel Rayan interprets Christ as our peace. Antonie Wessels discuss certain biblical insights for inter-religious encounters. Israel Selvanayagam studies the life of Abraham as a model for Jews, Christians, and the Muslims. Theodore N. Swanson provides biblical insights regarding impossible relations between Christianity and world religions. L. Raymond Waldock discusses Acts 10 and 11 to derive insights on the church and its mission today. Hendrick M. Vroom interprets religious truths as basic insights and not as a rigid theory, which has implications for inter-religious dialogue.

The fourth and the last part of the book provides certain models of interfaith relations. Cees Bouma presents the Inner city Parish Church of Pecs, Hungary as an example of interreligious respect. Trinidad offers a precious example of healthy interreligious relations and Rolph Fernandes discusses this. Paulose Mar Paulose emphasis that our role in a multireligious society is to become messengers of reconciliation. Ernest W. Talibuddin reflects on pastoral ministry in a pluralistic society. In the last article of the book, David Dyck sheds lights on two interfaith peace building bodies working in the Island of Mindanao, in Philippines to bring about reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. A very useful book for all students of Islam and interreligious dialogue.

Revised by K.P. Aleaz
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Book Review

Dialogical Theologies: Hartford Papers and Other Essays by K.P. Aleaz, Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2004, pp. x+254.

I am indeed pleased to review Dr. K.P. Aleaz's fifteen chaptered multifaceted book, '*Dialogical Theologies: Hartford Papers and Other Essays*' which has a single objective of relational convergence of religions. A thorough reading of the book can assure refined view of the author on his favourite themes and the subjects pursued here.

The first chapter, 'Religious Tensions and Dialogical opportunities in India Today' is the first heartrending presentation of the many sided communal conflicts that agonies the life of millions in India. It reveals the author's unshakable faith in the dynamic values of religions on the one hand and his anguish over the copious use of religion as instrument of communalism on the other. Amidst stark condemnation of the atrocities against the minorities, his creative appeal that the Sangh Parivar needs the good will of majority is constructive compared to their aggressive claim that the minorities should live on the goodwill of the majority Hindus. Author's contention that the Sangh Parivar distorts the original message of Hinduism is a shrewd venture for inter-relatedness among religions without igniting communalism. His unwavering commitment to Pluralistic Inclusivism draws resources not only from Hinduism but also from the Syadvada or Anekantavada of Jainism.

The second chapter, 'Play and religion: Indication of an Inter Connection' can thrill the reader to find out, what does it mean to say that 'as the humans play, play gives rise to religion and as the deities play, religion becomes play'. The author's effort look for interconnection between various dimensions of religion and play is heartwarming. Statements like, 'Ritual is sacred play indispensable for the well-being of humanity' and 'Playing along with the playing God becomes life' suggests the indispensable interconnectedness between religion and life. The innovative reading, that in God's Lila (creation) there is no motive but it reveals the transcendental aspect, is appealing. If there is any confusion about the subject matter, the statements, 'life of saints is play' and 'Ramakrishna played with Mother' make the point clear.

The third chapter, 'Leo Tolstoy' Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount and its inspiration to Mahatma Gandhi' is a befitting message to the present day Christianity. The presentation of Tolstoy's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, particularly "do not resist evil by violence" is well focused. The author has adequately

considered Tolstoy's claim that dogmas do not convey the teaching of Jesus, to illuminate the church and to appeal to the world that, "it is time for the world to come directly to the doctrine of Jesus" (p.78). It is call for the church to be vibrant in pluralistic contexts.

The fourth chapter, 'Christian Theologies of Religions need to go Global: A Response to Paul F. Knitter' is a critical assessment of Knitter's work, *Introducing Theology of Religions*. The author has radically refuted the claims of Knitter as to the utility and viability of the book. K.P. Aleaz's commitment to the nation, church, Indian Christian Theology and Indian interpretation of religions are echoed in his furious but academic remarks about the book that it has completely failed to consider and credit Indian writers' views and interpretations. Another pointer to the readers is Knitter's undue recognition of Catholic efforts in the field of theology of religions. Before reaching the final phase of the book one may be vaguely tempted to think that the author's alternate suggestion of Pluralistic Inclusivism and Vedantic interpretation is forceful. The academic bent of the author is apparent in his reception of Knitter's contributions.

The fifth chapter, 'Samples of Interfaith Theology from India for an Ecumenical Perspective' is an appraisal of at least seventeen Indian Christian Theologian's (thinkers) interpretations. The author's preference for 'Indian Dialogical Jesology, from the perspective of Pluralistic Inclusivism, for the relational convergence of religions and his insistence that Advaita Vedanta is our hermeneutical context may be constructed as absolutistic. For him, those who interpret the thoughts of Hinduism in the light of a preformulated Christian Theology are non-ecumenical. His ecumenical and exploratory nature can be grasped from the statement that, "the Hindu religious experience and thought categories can really enrich Christian faith experience and also bring out new meanings regarding the Christian notion of God as well as the person and function of Jesus" (p.122).

The sixth chapter, 'A Tribal Christian Theology from India, and chapter seven 'Some Highlights on a Dalit Christian Theology' are the lucid and positive presentations of tribal and Dalit worldviews as they are currently propounded. His admiration for the space centered worldview of tribal theology in which land is the crucial place of integrated activity and his appreciative account of Dalit theology with special emphasis on their deities and drums too, are quite appropriate and can pave way for a much critical persuasion of the subjects. The use of traditional tribal and Dalit world views and their integration in the present theologizing process can lead to exciting observations.

The eight chapter, 'A strife from India to 'Think Together' on Jesus' is the earnest attempt of the author to establish that 'Advaitic experience is a hermeneutical context of an Indian experience'. The author's competence of and commitment to Advaitic standpoint can be deduced from his interpretative skill, particularly his use of Vedantic categories to interpret Jesus. One will have to wait for the next chapter to avoid a possible suspicion that the author is advocating only Advaitic hermeneutical context and Advaitic interpretation of Jesus.

The ninth chapter, 'Challenging Contexts: A Response' clarifies various doubts arising from the previous chapters. There is a bid sigh of relief when the author says that our hermeneutical context is plural and Advaita is just one such hermeneutical context. This unfurls the genuine pluralistic character of the author. His view that the Gospel is always in the process of formulation adds substance and new resourceful dimension to theology. The declaration that 'to be in touch with Sanskrit is to be in touch with our roots' may be provocative yet, its wider ecumenical vision can enormously profit the church. His suggestion to move beyond Christology has justly considered the contextual realities of India.

The tenth chapter, 'Challenges of Religious Pluralism to Pastoral Ministry in the 21st Century' is first of this kind against the traditional notion that there is difference between academic atmosphere and church. The courageous penetration of the author into this sensitive issue provides a new paradigm and agenda to pastoral ministry. Can Pluralistic Inclusivism alone, provide solution to all situations is a legitimate question any one will be prompted to ask?

The eleventh chapter, 'A self contradictory document!' is a thorough scholarly critical evaluation of the Vatican document '*Dominus Jesus*' which has not sufficiently regarded the realities of religiously plural contexts. It has also created a kind of suspicion about the credibility of Christianity's relation with other faith traditions. The author is bent on exposing the ambiguities of the document particularly on Christology and theology of religions. His critique is purposeful as it alerts the church against such declarations and the resulting consequences.

The twelfth chapter, 'Violence against the gospel' ventilates the resentment of the author over the apparent errors that are attributed to Christianity in India. He focuses on the allegations that Christianity is a foreign religion and it proselytizes. Author's proposal to apologize for the assertions characterizes his resolve for religious harmony. It also poses the pertinent question whether individuals in Independent India have the fundamental human right to accept and adhere to the religion of their choice? A question as to the move of these accusations can be enlightening. The author's conviction about the Christ of Indian renaissance and his call for the gospel emerging from the hermeneutical context of India uphold the validity of the gospel in India.

The thirteenth chapter, 'A Note on a Forgotten Past of Indian/Asian Christianity' is a conscious endeavour to establish with indigenous sources that Christianity and Jesus are Asian. The author opines that there was acceptability and mutual respect between people of other faiths and native Indian Christians. His affirmation that the native Christians were fully committed to the nation and her various causes appears to be his prudent reply to the charges that Christianity is foreign and antinational.

The fourteenth chapter, 'Swami Lokeshwarananda – A Tribute' is a blissful real experience germinating out of an earnest association with friends from other faiths. This kind of anubhavas (experiences) can help in overcoming the prejudices against

the genuine commitment of people of other faiths. This chapter is a beacon and assurance to all who sincerely labor for interreligious relations. The author's extract from 'Practical Spirituality' of Swami Lokeswarananda reveals the ecumenical character of his writing.

The final chapter, 'Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya: Some Highlights' is a modest effort to elucidate Upadhyaya's life and contributions. The author reminds the readers of his use of Saccidananda in Indian Christian Theology, his political contribution, and his association with Rabindranath Tagore. The respectful interaction between Upadhyaya and Tagore, and the former addressing the latter as Guru Dev and the latter's acknowledgement of the former as a Vedantin are open recognitions for the candid Christian activities.

Positive consideration of other faiths, stressing the importance of religion for life, leaning on the teaching of Jesus rather than dogmas, passion for the recognition of Indian contributions, call for ecumenical interpretation of other faiths, optimistic treatment of Tribal and Dalit Theology, interpreting Jesus from Advadic point of view, looking beyond Christology, nurturing pastors for pluralistic context, critiquing unwarranted declaration of the church, being sensitive to the allegations of others about Christianity, establishing that Jesus and Christianity are Asian, experiencing the bliss of relationship with people of other faiths, and others admiration for our faithfulness are the themes knitting together as a single thread, the author's commitment for relational convergence of religions from the perspective of Pluralistic Inclusivism. The book also testifies to the academic acumen, clarity of thought, coherent presentation and author's familiarity with varieties of subject matters. The recurring appeal is for Advadic standpoint and Pluralistic Inclusivism

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Book Review

The Quest for a Contextual Spirituality by K.P. Aleaz, Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2004, pp.158.

Dr. K.P. Aleaz's earnest quest and sincere commitment for a contextual Indian Christian spirituality and the feasible preferential option for a life-sustaining spirituality, which is people centered, Christ centered, and pluralist in nature is courageously and eruditely explored and substantiated in the book under review which is the compilation of the author's five papers and fifteen sermons presented and delivered respectively in different occasions.

Spirituality is on of the most difficult subject matters to define and expound because of its multifaceted content and range. The author's effort to define and explain spirituality, particularly, Christian spirituality to be inclusive and plural is a strong sign of the demands of our Indian context. This is further demonstrated in his proposal for a viable Indian Christian spirituality, which encompasses several crucial theological concerns. His emphatic expression Christo-centric spirituality may at times tantalize the readers, before grasping the basic thrusts of the author, to wonder whether he is swinging back to the much debated Christi-centric viewpoint.

The author as a part of his earnestness to expand the scope of Indian Christian spirituality now seeks materials from Eastern Christian Spirituality. The presentation of Eastern Christian Spirituality unfurls yet another dimension of the author's commitment. This is exemplified from the view that worship provides opportunity for an excursion into the non-rational deeper yearning and feelings of the seeker. The picturing of essence and energy distinction in God is helpful to answer some of the often-repeated doctrinal questions. The progression of deification of humans in Eastern Christian spirituality is dexterously explained by giving much room for the operation of the grace of God. The natural explanation rendered to the apophatic character of theology may be an eye-opener for a conspicuous understanding of it and other forms of theologies.

Although the theology admired and probably advocated in the book is apophatic, the content, as it is presented, seems to suggest that eastern Christian spirituality has undertaken to penetrate too deep into God in terms of doctrines. This paves way for a critical acceptance of the authenticity and verifiability of certain theological constructs. Portraying and emphasizing the theological viewpoint of one particular

tradition without indicating the availability of similar resources in other denominations may hamper the intended creative and comprehensive proposal for a contextual spirituality.

Attempting to compare God-creation relation in eastern Christian thought with Advaita Vedanta to explain spirituality, once again reminds the readers of the commitment of the author to the philosophy and also his intention to formulate an inclusive and pluralistic spirituality. The uncomplicated, systematic, and precise comparison is a vivid indication for the in depth knowledge of the author both on Christian theology and Advaita Vedanta.

Considering the brief but condensed information about the apophatic theology, the readers may raise serious questions regarding the author's comparisons. For example, is Advaita Vedantic apophatic theological perspective the source of eastern Christianity's apophatic theology and deification? Or whether all our theological understandings should be verified by the Vedantic categories? The comparisons may also give chance to think that the author is inclined to categorize, although not intentional, Advaita as superior to eastern Christian theology or spirituality.

Author's interpretation of Jaina view, 'Syadvada' as an Indian contribution to spirituality of pluralism is a courageous attempt to make Indian spirituality wider and inter-religious. He has mainly critiqued the Jaina viewpoint from the point of Sankara. Although a few other general comments are highlighted, the gravity of the issues raised against Jaina view may further be reflected. The author admits that the Jaina system is the outcome of non-acceptance of the absolute nature of the reality. His appreciation of the pluralist character of Jaina understanding does not bar him from opening up the possibilities of critical evaluation of the system.

K.P. Aleaz's earnestness in seeking resources for spirituality of nature is quite convincing. His argument that most of the Vedic deities have been developed from the worship of nature is appreciable. It is in fact, a genuine acceptance demanded from all of us to credit the innocent attempts of the primal community to conceptualize what was beyond the ordinary phenomenal realities. It is implicit that the Vedas are the earliest crucial religious resources materials for drawing inspiration for spirituality of nature.

In explaining the Vedantic vision of the spirituality of nature the author excels because it is very difficult to perceive such a view from the Vedanta with peripheral understanding. He has gone into the bottom of the system and made easy to understand what is otherwise very difficult. His endeavour deserves specific acknowledgement for it has gone beyond the general notion that Vedanta is not so practical. One pertinent question that they may ask is whether Advaita Vedanta inspires all else?

The fifteen sermons included in this book are unique. They are strong academic reflections germinating from Indian context and Indian theological studies rather than mere sermons. It may not be a wonder if one asks, whether they are polemics

against exclusive and alien interpretations of the scripture. The pattern of the sermons is, texture of the texts concerned; prevalent interpretations; Indian parallels and appropriating to the context in order that all may understand the text. His main objective is to transcend the barriers of interpretations so that even our neighbours will not have any difficulty in grasping the message. The author's Advaitic and pluralistic vision constantly flows through the sermons, as always expected to be the landmark.

K.P. Aleaz has made spirituality, a complex subject, an approachable one. The insights on the content and boundaries of Indian Christian spirituality are exploratory. His consideration of eastern Christian spirituality and its comparison with Advaitic viewpoint prompt considerable theological and philosophical inquiries. The inclusion of the Jaina System for a wider perspective of spirituality can challenge any exclusive and monolithic claims. The search for Vedic and Vedantic visions for spirituality of nature is a motivating starting point for further pursuit in this direction. His sermons indicate the tough task ahead for theological education. Hence, a reading of the book can enrich and challenge the readers from many directions.

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