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Book Review

**Theology of Religions,
Birmingham Papers and
Other Essays**

BY

**K.P. ALEAZ, CALCUTTA: MOUMITA PUBLISHERS
AND DISTRIBUTORS, 1998 PP. X + 366.**

The first part of this book contains eight papers on theology of religions written while the author was in the William Paton Fellow of the Selly Oak Federation of Colleges, Birmingham, in 1997. The author's perspective which is named *Pluralistic Inclusivism* is presented here in relation to the Perspectives of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, John B. Cobb Jr., Keith Ward, W.E. Hocking and Paul F. Nitter. For W.C. Smith faith is a total orientation of a human person to the transcendent dimension and it is conceived as a common human phenomenon. He presents the quest for a world theology in terms of verbalising the totality of the faith experiences in the history of religions from the standpoint of the subject. It is explained that the pluralistic hypothesis of John Hick is arrived at on the basis of the distinction between the Real in himself/herself/itself and the Real in relation to us on the one hand, and the epistemological principle that there is an interpretative contribution to all human cognition on the other. He interprets salvation/liberation as transformation from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness available for all people of diverse religious traditions and pleads for a Copernican revolution in theology making it Reality-centered and interpreting, trans-historical Truth-claims as Myths/metaphors.

John B. Cobb Jr. believes in transformationism, in mutual creative transformation of religious faiths through internalisation going beyond dialogue. He has shown, for

example, that both Christianity and Māhāyana Buddhism can transform one another and apparent contradictions can become complementary contrasts. Though Keith Ward was earlier of the view that full revelation of God we get only in Jesus, now he speaks of an 'open theology' which seeks a convergence of common core beliefs, he speaks of a 'convergent pluralism' or a 'convergent spirituality' referring to a possible convergence of the central focal concepts of various religions. W.E. Hocking proposes a reconception of the living religions into a world faith, rejecting the ways of radical displacement and synthesis. The way of reconception consists in a reconception of the essence of one's own religion in relation to other religions. Inclusion by reconception is growth within sameness towards a world faith. Also studied is the five theses on the 'correlational theology of religions' or 'relational uniqueness of Jesus' of Paul F. Knitter. In it the uniqueness of Jesus' salvific role is reinterpreted in terms of *truly* but not *only*. It is not necessary to proclaim God's revelation in Jesus as full, definitive, or unsurpassable, rather Jesus is God's universal, decisive and indispensable manifestation of saving truth and grace. Knitter supports a representational Christology — Jesus saves not by causing God's saving love, but rather, in so far as he represents for us the love of God.

Pluralistic Inclusivism is discussed in the book in relation to views of scholars such as these. In Pluralistic Inclusivism on the one hand each living faith is to become truly pluralistic by other faiths contributing to its conceptual content and on the other hand, Inclusivism is to transform its meaning to witness the fulfilment of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faith in and through the contributions of other living faiths. Religious resources of the world are conceived here as the common property of humanity. A growth in the richness of religious experiences as well as a relational convergence of religions is envisaged in this perspective as against the perspectives of Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism. The last chapter in part I is a theological response to the 1996 Salvador Conference on World Mission and Evangelism on the Gospel in Diverse Cultures. It is shown in this chapter that while considering diverse cultures the

Conference almost completely ignored the diverse religions which are integrally related to those cultures and hence the Gospel as envisaged by the Conference is a preformulated sectarian gospel over against other religious experiences. As a correction to the Salvador Conference, according to the author, our hermenautical context of diverse religious experiences has to decide the content of our knowledge and experience of the Gospel.

The second part of the book in another eight chapters represents a collection of mostly the more recent essay of the author on Indian Christian thought as one which is integrally related to Indian religious culture. There is an analysis of Ramakrishna Mission's contribution to Christian thought. There is a study on the origin and growth of the vision of Bishop's College of Calcutta in the propagation of the Gospel. Also discussed is the theological contributions of Krishna Mohun Banerjea (1813-1885) as well as Indian Christian *pramanas* as emerging from Indian philosophical *pramanas*. The relation between dialogue and dialogical theologies, gospel from within inter-religious culture, some Indian Christian reflections on conversion and theological perspective regarding mission and evangelism in the urban-industrial context are the other topics of investigation in this part of the book. The book which is the tenth in number from the author's pen is a significant contribution to theology of religions as well as Indian Christian thought and he deserves our congratulations.

- Dr. Bonita Aleaz

Department of Political Science
University of Calcutta

Book Review

Vedic Sacrifice, Challenge and Response

BY

ISRAEL SELVANAYAGAM, NEW DELHI : MANOHAR,
1996, PP.322

This book is a modified version of a doctoral dissertation submitted to the Senate of Serampore College (University) in 1989. It has studied the principal *Upanisads*, *Mānavadharmasāstrā* and sections of the *Mahābhārata*, including the *Bhagavad Gītā* in their original. The purpose is stated as to suggest a new line of reading the development of ancient religious thought in India. *Yajña* (sacrifice) is the most central element of the Vedic religion and society. From a simple gift or food offering to gods, *yajña* developed into a complex mechanism for generating the power to create and recreate the universe and all forms of its life and this we see in the *śanhitā* and *brāhmaṇa* parts of the Vedas. In the course of the subsequent period there were changes in the understanding of *yajña* within the Brahmasic-Hindu tradition and the book examines the nature of these changes and identifies the historical factors that contributed to them. The book is an inquiry into an historical-hermeneutical process, a search for the patterns of change in a particular context. It investigates into the nature of developments in the understanding of *yajña* in the post-Vedic period and the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in response to these developments.

The book starts with the recognition of the fundamental aspects of the Vedic sacrifice and its development. In the second section the principal *Upanisads* are studied from the viewpoint of Vedic sacrifice. Attention is focussed on the persistence of ritual, categories like *Karman*, *brahman* and *tapas* which originated in the context of *yajña* as being given now a new

meaning, and the nature of allegorical and interiorised understanding of sacrifice. The third section tries to identify major trends in the socio-economic-political history of the period between 600 and 200 B.C., and also in the development of the *Śramana* movement which had an impact on sacrificial religion. This is followed by the *brāhmanic* reaction and revival which is studied with reference to the epics, in particular the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Dharmaśāstras*, specially *Manu*. The reaction reaffirmed the Vedic *yajna*, assimilated the *Śramana* ethical ideals and formulated new schemes like *purusārtha* and *āśramadharmā*. As an extension of this revival there was an amalgamation of *bhāgavatism* and *brāhmanism*. *Gītā*'s interpretation of *yajña* is taken up in the fourth and final section. *Gita* gives a new interpretation of sacrifice without rejecting the Vedic vision. Sacrifice is interpreted through the *triguna* scheme of *Sāṅkhya*. By relating *yajña* to action, *Gītā* provides insight for authentic action. According to the author the famous idea of *niskāma karma* propounded by the *Gita*, from the perspective of *yajña*, means neither disinterested action nor dispassionate detachment, but only the performance of action, both ritual and general, with undivided concentration on carrying out of a mandatory duty required by *sanātana dharmā*. Also given in this section is an analysis of *Gita*'s understanding of *jñāna yajña* as well as the relation between sacrifice and *bhakti*. The ritual tradition on the whole, it is said, has a remarkable continuity despite many challenges and new focuses like *bhakti* and *jñāna*. The book deserves careful study and reflection by all students of religion, specially by those of Hinduism.

- Dr. K. P. Aleaz
Bishop's College