

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Dalit Christian: A History**

by John C.B. Webster, Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1992

262pp., paper, Rs. 65 (India)/\$5; cloth, Rs. 95/\$8

One of the refreshing development in historical and theological studies during the past quarter century has been the efforts to retrieve the often neglected history and religious thought of oppressed people. *The Dalit Christians* is Webster's attempt to make such a retrieval in the Indian context, building on his work as a Presbyterian missionary teaching history at Baring Union Christian College, Batala, Punjab, and the history of Christianity at the United Theological College, Bangalore, 1963-1981, and occasional visits back to India since becoming a pastor in Connecticut in 1984.

This immediate stimulus for this book was a question raised by an educated Dalit Christian during Webster's trip back to India in 1987: "What is our heritage as Dalit Christians?" As a social historian, Webster provides his answer by viewing the history of Dalit Christians as intertwined with the broader history of Dalits in India, particularly since the late 19th Century. While Dalits, formerly called "untouchables" or "Harijans" and listed in the Constitution as "Scheduled Castes", have historically constituted the lowest 15 percent of India's population, they have in recent decades increasingly viewed themselves as Dalits (the 'broken' or 'oppressed') and become more assertive in their quest for being treated with human dignity. Webster sees continuity in the emerging identity of Dalits and Dalit Christians and attempts to trace this through three stages: the 'mass movements' period, roughly 1870-1930, marked by widespread conversions to Christianity (some to other faiths also) in the quest for greater dignity; the 'politics of numbers' period, roughly the 1920s and 1930s, during which much attention was given to the political representation of Dalits, and the 'compensatory discrimination' period of independent India during which efforts have been made to implement a government policy of "preferential treatment of historically-disadvantaged sections of the population."

This volume shows evidence of extensive research and is well organized. Webster is helpful in bringing out (1) how Dalit Christians, who constitute the majority of Christians in India, have in many ways a shared history with other Dalits; (2) how Dalit concerns have impacted or failed to impact the church in India whose leadership has come largely from the Christian elite; (3) the often ambiguous status of Dalit Christians who have not been considered as either fully Dalit because they are Christians or as fully Christian since even within the church they suffer discrimination; (4) how the government's policy of denying Dalit Christians many of the benefits extended to other Dalits has not only raised the question of justice to Dalit Christians but also served as a disincentive to other Dalits changing their religion, and (5) trends in theological reflection with reference to Dalits during the period under review.

At the same time, there are worrisome flaws in Webster's treatment. Karnataka Methodists, who constitute the largest single body of Protestant Christians in that state and whose roots go back to the mass movements, will wonder at

Webster's observation that Karnataka seems not to have experienced mass movements. Persons familiar with Indian census data will be appalled by Webster's representation that during 1931-1951 the population of India grew by only 2.2 percent; had he used the correct figure of 29.4 percent there would be a much weaker basis for his argument that, relative to the total population growth, there has been "a dramatic drop in the growth rates of the Dalit Christian population since the introduction of compensatory discrimination." And his occasional bold assertions sometimes seem questionable — e.g., his claim that *the* beginnings of Dalit Theology emerged out of studies in which he was involved during 1971-1976 is undermined by evidence which he cites.

Despite such flaws, this work makes a significant contribution toward filling an important gap and will be of particular interest to historians of Christianity in India, to Dalits seeking to better understand and strengthen their identity, and to Dalit Christians striving to further construct a Dalit Theology.

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## **Jesus in Neo-Vedanta – A Meeting of Hinduism and Christianity**

by Dr. K.P. Aleaz

Delhi: Kant Publication, Eastern Book Corporation, 1995

Ever since the time of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Indians have tried to understand and interpret Jesus Christ and his Gospel in their own way, much to the displeasure of the Western missionaries who took it upon themselves the duty of protecting the European interpretations of Christ as the only and true interpretations. But the Gospel could not be monopolized or manipulated on a permanent basis. New and rigorous Indian interpretations were forthcoming through Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, Keshub Chunder Sen, Vivekananda and several others. Many followers of Sri Ramkrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda, took the freedom of interpreting Jesus Christ in India, without any Western tradition's assistance. These interpreters include the famous leaders of the Ramakrishna Mission such as Swamijis Abhedananda, Akhilananda, Prabhavananda, Satprakashananda and Ranganathananda. This book by Dr. K.P. Aleaz, *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta—A Meeting of Hinduism and Christianity* is mustering strength for a new Advaitic Christology in India from these interpretations as well as from the most recent interpretations by Swamijis Divyananda, Atmapriyananda, Purnananda, Purnatmananda, whose articles are collected and appended to this book.

This book is divided into fifteen chapters of which the first three are devoted to establish neo-Vedanta as an important Indian hermeneutical context for the construction of a Christology. The next seven chapters deal with the interpretations of Jesus Christ by Swami Vivekananda and his disciples of the Ramakrishna Mission and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. Chapter eleven elaborates the attempts of a lawyer of Calcutta, Bhavani Sankar Chowdhury to interpret Jesus Christ from a Hindu lay person's point of view, in his book *The New Wine of Jesus: Christ Taught Vedanta*, Calcutta, 1982. Chapter Twelve discusses various Indian Christian Christological constructions like reception, reinterpretation

and rejection models which have originated in the Advaitic context. The last two chapters deal with contemporary Christian response to neo-Vedantic interpretations and the emerging Indian Christian theology of religions, and the new meanings of Jesus, as well as new directions for a theology of mission. The book has detailed footnotes and bibliography to help researchers. Also it contains a selective index. In the preface, the intention of the book is given as that no attempt has been made to make any Christian superimpositions on Hindu interpretations of Christ but simply "to bear witness to the fact that the Gospel manifested in Jesus emerges naturally and spontaneously from within the integrally related religio-cultural heritage of India ...". In his conclusion Dr. Aleaz asserts, "In Neo-Vedantic view, the Christian doctrines, specially the doctrine of atonement goes against the spirit of Jesus. What Jesus does is to show us the way to become perfect, to show us our true nature which is divine, to bring us to realization which involves the regaining of the lost selfhood. Thus the function of Jesus is re-conceived in Neo-Vedantic Christology. Accordingly, the Cross and the resurrection of Jesus also attains new meanings, ... Cross signifies dying to the lower self and resurrection means rising to the higher universal self."

The importance of the Neo-vedanta for modern India is as the author makes it clear, "in terms of a significance for history and human life on earth". This significance has been acknowledged by earlier Indian Christian thinkers. But a later statement by Aleaz makes us to rethink about neo-Vedanta's ability to capture the "significance for history and human life on earth." For instance, the author says, "Above all, it is the affirmation of the Neo-Vedantic Christology that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are not so much historical events which occurred once upon a time as universal processes of spiritual life, which are being continually accomplished in human lives." This is more or less in tune with the classical Vedanta where history does not matter. This problem of Hinduism to come to terms with history, has not been completely solved irrespective of the efforts of Vivekananda, Gandhiji or Radhakrishnan, remains a fact. Unless that is solved its ability to have a dialogue with, for example, Dalit theology, is impaired.

On the whole this book will serve as a valuable instrument for Indian Christology not only in respect to theological education but also in relation to the Church's missionary agenda. We have to rework our theology of missions from the bottom up, and discover anew what had been revealed through Indian eyes.

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### **Dimensions of Indian Religion: Study, Experience and Interaction**

by Dr. K.P. Aleaz, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1995

This is a book that explores the meaning of religion by a "multi-methodic" study of religion, by a study of the religious experiences of Swami Ram Tirth and Sister Nivedita, and by a study of interactions between Hindu-Muslim, Hindu Christian, Brahmanical-non Brahmanical, Dalit-Advaitic religious views. The

author approaches religions on a pluralistic framework, that is, accepting the validity of all religious experiences of humankind as authentic experiences of God-realization. However, he is firmly rooted in his own religious tradition, namely Christian tradition, and searches the significance of other religious traditions for his own. He accepts this as a method to be followed by other religionists too, that is, experiencing deeply one's own religious tradition with the help of other traditions. This he calls the method of Pluralistic Inclusivism as against other schools of Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism in the theology of religions.

This book contains thirteen chapters divided into two parts. The first part includes a methodological discussion on the study of religions and analytical studies on the thoughts of Swami Ram Tirth and Sister Nivedita, two advaitins. Second part deals with the interactions of different religious schools and interactions within each school, so as to show the real crust of religious faiths, which stands the test of self-criticism within each religion. Each religion has its own resources for correcting itself. Correcting one religion with another religion is not only dangerous but also counter-productive as it results in strengthening communalistic fundamentalistic forces within each religion. Each religious faith can reform itself. To this end religious interactions may help. Each religion must be open to the challenge of others so that each may see itself in the light of others and thus, deepen, transform and reform itself. No religion can play an absolutist role with regard to the religious truths. This fundamental presupposition of the author makes him an advaitin along the lives of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda, in claiming all religions to be true, from the view point of particular religions. Each religion at the same time is relatively distinctive. What the author advocates is a relational convergence of religions so that all religions may shed forth their hostile and contradictory attitudes in favour of mutual acceptance and tolerance.

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## **Our Journey in Christ with People**

*by Somen Das, M.Th., Ph.D, New Delhi, CNI-SBSS, 1994*

This books contains nine Bible studies given at various consultations organised by the Synodical Board of Social Services of the Church of North India.

These Bible studies have a global perspective and connected with the mission of the church. The author writes, "the holistic understanding of Mission is derived from and determined by the holistic mission of God in the world particularly or specially through the life and work of Jesus. There is wholeness about God's Creation, Liberation (Salvation) and Recreation (BS.1). This is not an indifferentiated wholeness, rather it is a plurality of reality. There has been a shift in Christian understanding of God's mission in the modern world. The WCC has tried to redefine and modify its understanding of society to include justice, peace and integrity of creation. This new vision of mission is rooted in the trinitarian understanding of Godhead. Dr. Das elaborates this theme in the further studies.

Incarnation of God in Jesus is the affirmation that divinity is defined in terms of humanity. Jesus is not only *for* but *from* humanity. God is a 'pathetic' God, God's love is "pain-love". And this brings liberation for suffering humanity. Jesus is holistic in his *karma* and *dharmā*. He is for a holy worldliness as well as a worldly holiness. To be holistic means to include all of life and the whole of life. It means "to take seriously all cultures and religions" (BS/3). God recreates the earth and humans. God cannot be communalised or fragmented. We must not individualise or privatise the Gospel of God or the mission of God. We should not live in the world with "frog-in-the well" attitude. The Church must give up its old images and stereotypes. It has to reconceive and re-create Christianity. "The Church has to be liberated and saved". A communal church cannot fight communalism. We need new visions for this world, a vision of the kingdom of God, not only a deep inner spirituality, but a hunger for justice and peace, a vision of equality and mutuality which was lacking in the ancient Indian spirituality (BS 4 and 5). Human *hubris* (insolence or disobedience) has prevented humanity from forgiving a new understanding of development that will bring justice. A religion reduced to rituals and rites has no place in the modern world. For example, in the modern India religion has to be concerned with the 'invasion' of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organisation etc. The Church's vision of mission must include 'empowerment of people' to challenge unjust systems and seek consciously and systematically to eliminate the deep, diabolical causes of oppression and marginalization" (BS 7). The Church has to move forward as a corporate body. Sacrament must lead to it. Concept of community is essentially inseparable from Christian religion. It is a community for larger, open, inclusive community of the whole creation. "The Church must be like a wheel keeping alive the movement of the spokes with the hub in the centre" (BS 8 and 9).

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