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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Rosen, S.J. (1989). East-West dialogues, an interreligious encounter: conversations between the Rev. Alvin V.P. Hart and Satyaraja Dasa Adhikari. N.Y: Folk Books. (105 pp. Paper)

Rev. Hart: I agree completely. But let's move on. I'm interested in this concept of the soul.

Broadly, this tiny book is a concern for an acknowledgement, understanding, and appreciation of differences between the world's great religions. More specifically, it is the refined display of a smiling brawl between an apparently mild-mannered Episcopalian Christian and the patronising Minister of Interreligious Affairs for the New York chapter of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. They disarmingly reveal their lightness to us by parenthetically editing in their mutual laughter (thank heavens). I am rapidly developing a sneaking regard for their tolerant discourse - and so begin by commending it to you.

Unfortunately for the authors, you will probably find their book buried under the literary junk of a "\$1 or Less" remainder table: non-one will rush to buy this very slim vol.

If we put aside pre-ordained opinions about latter-day gurus wearing funny clothes, references to ordinary beings who like to be known as Divine Grace, or His Holiness, and self-indulgent theological posturings...we can begin to enjoy these two as entertainers.

There will always be differences between the great religions of the world - they are a way of noticing duality, if you like; and there will always be differences of opinion between their adherents. There are hundreds of Christian religions, umpteen forms of Buddhism, and so on. Scholars who despise into this morass can be endlessly and safely amusing: we will often buy their books, remaindered or not.

As the introduction reminds us, this volume is a carefully edited transcript of hours of interreligious dialogue. There are six chapters and half a dozen or so themes to each chapter. Glancing at these thematic titles may startle the browser. 'Religion is One'; 'The Final Destination'; 'Vegetarianism'; 'St Francis'; 'The Rejection of the Gita'; 'Chanting Hare Krishna' - and so on. If the work survives into a later edition I hope the authors will remove these bits of nonsense at the start of each chapter - they unfairly give an impression of New Age ratbaggery. In fact, these lofty themes conceal sensible discussions about vegetarianism, animal liberation, and much, much more.

Whatever else it may be, Dialogues is a charming ragbag of religious trivia. Familiar sayings and jawbreaking Sanskrit words are scattered like confetti - and, mercifully, passionately discussed. The authors clearly relish theological interpretations as presumptions and dogma, and God-speak washes over the reader in waves; both speakers hurl exquisitely polite interreligious missiles at each other which the reader may accept if s/he wishes to. And the reader must unwittingly play the role of spectator at this elevated tennis match - and that's partly what I

like about it. So many names are dropped, so many concepts lightly revealed - that the book becomes a mini-treasury of religious possibilities for those of us who stumble about in ignorance.

Dasa overemphasizes Krishna Consciousness and at times is obsessive about it. He says, e.g., 'The original system of loving God was more technically called bhakti-yoga, or the science of devotional service.' Perhaps it's his stylized use of language, or my intolerance of organized religions. Do we need a 'system' of loving God? Does it work better if it's labelled 'bhakti-yoga' (or agape)? Cannot we be of devotional service unless that notion be guided by 'science'?

Hart often looks more tolerant. In a statement preceding Dasa's he says: 'The interesting thing, to my mind, is that a superficial look at religious history tells us that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the only existing monotheistic religions, or certainly the three earliest. But now I can see quite clearly a precursor in the Vedic (Vaishnava) tradition of ancient India. This is fascinating.' And so on.

Dasa, who never relents, throws in some unenlightened condescensions every so often: 'But with the influx of Buddhistic thought in five hundred B.C., and with the monistic - "it's all one" - teaching of Shankara in the eight century A.D., the original Vedic concept became obscured. What follows is the confusion now broadly known as "Hinduism",' etc. Will this be universally appreciated, I wonder?

I have developed a sneaking regard for Hart (who also never gives up); he has the effrontery to remind his elevated companion of what Jesus called "the first and foremost commandment": 'to love God with all of one's heart, soul, and mind.' There's simplicity, too, if you like; no science, no systems: 'Loving Openly,' we might call it.

Dasa strikes back with the reminder that 'The Bible, which might be considered a Vedic supplement, gives some indication of how to fulfil the mandate to love God.'

- All of this, by the way, is from a mere couple of pages in the first chapter and is outrageously out of context; but it shows, I think, that this kind of dialogue serves to draw battle lines. Such a notion merely re-emphasizes divisiveness in organized religions.

What, I began to wonder, can we, as breathless readers, extract from the book? Are there chunks of substance here which will refresh us and even strengthen flagging spirits? Or ought we to merely notice them self indulgently waffle on into the twilight? The answer for me is, yes, there are many useful signposts in what they say and in that regard Dialogues is a useful bedside book - one that can be dipped into. It may also serve as a point of departure and more disciplined study.

My fantasy is that these two could benefit from my self-indulgence: I happen to have a seat on the riverbank. Were they to sit here with me (not necessarily quietly) and watch the river and see the rapids, Hart might cease turning the apologetic Christian cheek and Dasa (who was Steven Rosen in another life) might stop saying 'do you follow?' Unfortunately they wouldn't sip a glass of wine with me so we would never roll uproariously down the bank and fall into the river, into What Is. Alas: 'No meat-eating, no gambling, no illicit sex, and no intoxication -

none! - not even the wine at Communion,' is Dasa's stern injunction.

That might have been fun - when the alternative has to be an interreligious pomposity. Dasa reminds us that ...'one must approach a spiritual master in disciplic succession (parampara) to know the truth of the Gita; it will not suffice to approach an academic research scholar.' Lighten up, youse two.

Don Diespecker
Consultant Editor

Helminski, Kabir Edmund (1992) Living Presence: A Sufi Way to Mindfulness and the Essential Self. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigee (180 pp Paper)

Kabir Helminski is a major translator and interpreter of Sufi literature, a Shaikh (authorized teacher) in several Sufi orders, especially the Mevlevi Order founded by Rumi and a transpersonal psychologist. Consequently we have here a well written book clearly reflecting a transpersonal perspective. Moreover the perspective presented here is a living one which weaves together deep rooted aspects of consciousness, active love and service to others.

Living Presence contains an 'Introduction' on 'Presence', 28 contemplative meditations (on topics such as Soul Work, Reflecting Spirit, Voluntary Attention, The Essential Self, The Dance of Personality, The Alchemy of Effort, Love the Transformer, and Service Within the Divine Unknown), a spiritual essay on 'What Sufism Is' and a 4 1/2 page summary Glossary of understandings related to awakening to a holistic sense of one's Conscious Self. Most units in the book extend from 3 to 6 pages. They are purposely written to be easy to read so as to leave you time to contemplate on how you might make the central notions of each section live in your own life. This is the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowing is understanding the sense of what is being said while wisdom relates to applying the sense of what is said as a living aspect of one's own spiritual life.

Page 12 presents in diagram form two sets of polar terms relating to the notion of Self discussed in the rest of the book. The horizontal set consists of False Self (constructed, fearful and compulsive) and Essential Self (compassionate, expansive and free). The concern here is to recognise the limits of the False ego-centric Self and be attentive to the presence of the Essential spiritual Self which we all can access. The vertical set consists of Conscious Mind (ego "I" intellect and personality) and Subconscious Mind (heart, emotion and subtle perceptions). The concern here is to minimise the domination of the Conscious Mind in our life so that we can allow the Subconscious Mind to play a more vital role. To the extent that we become attentive to the Essential Self and the Subconscious Mind we realise a fuller and more holistic sense of our spiritual being--a reflection of the Divine, Loving Spirit.

Of all the books read over the past several years, I would nominate Living Presence as one of the best books on Transpersonal Psychology. Like Brother Lawrence's The Practice Of The Presence of God--to which it is an excellent companion--it is on the one hand short and easy to read and on the other presents all aspects touched on in light of an illuminating and meaningful spiritual perspective. Needless to say, I strongly recommend this book to anyone keen to grasp a firm sense of transpersonal knowing, being, loving and serving.

Don Chipley
Co -Editor IJTS

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Don Chipley
Co -Editor IJTS

Greer, M.K. and Pollack, R. (Eds.) (1989) New thoughts on tarot: symposium journal. Van Nuys, California: Newcastle.

This book is an edited version of presentations made by ten distinguished teachers and practitioners of Tarot-as-Tool-for-Personal-Growth at the First International Newcastle Tarot Symposium. Authors/Topics featured in New thoughts...are: 1) Hillary Anderson--"Bringing Swords Out of Depression and Darkness"; 2) Angeles Arrien--"The Tarot Renaissance: Ancient Imagery for Contemporary Use"; 3) Eileen Connolly "Pathways to...the Major Arcana; Preview of the Upcoming Connolly Deck", 4) Gail Fairfield--"Creating, Maintaining and Enhancing Relationships"; 5) Mary K. Greer--"Healing Emotional Pain with the Tarot"; 6) Amber Jayanti--"Guided Tour of the Kabalistic Tree of Life"; William C. Lammey--"What is Karmic tarot; 8) Rachel Pollack--"An Overview of...New Tarot Decks: Emphasis European"; 9) Nicholas Tereshchenko--"Arcanum XXIII: The Drowned Sleeping Titan"; and 10) James Wanless--"Synergy- A Tarot Myth To Live By". As can be seen from the above topics, the Tarot, an ancient symbol system, is constantly being reviewed and creatively interpreted.

As is pointed out by the Editors, one major development which has influenced Tarot reading in recent times is the cultivation and clarification of the relation between psycho-spiritual insights and the explication of Tarot symbols and spreads. Over half of the papers - mainly those by Anderson, Arrien, Fairfield, Greer, Lammey and Wanless - concentrate on important aspects of this growing relationship. These writers see Tarot as a tool for helping clients to undergo an evolution of consciousness whereby they bring to the surface elements of their inner, unconscious and spiritual world and make them a part of their everyday life. Intuition is used to draw forth the images, ideas and feelings to be attended to while the rational mind is used to explore and distinguish relevant meanings and possible constructive choices. Elected choices must eventually be tested in varying contexts and relationships. Regardless of whether these choices result in a positive or negative outcome, they yield feedback in terms of new information/images//feelings from which we can learn more about ourselves and build on for future guidance in life. Tarot use, then provides us with an opportunity both to synthesize elements from right and left brained activities and to transform the inner spirit into outer wisdom.

Let us take a brief look now at some of the connections made in the book between psycho-spiritual insights and Tarot symbols and processes. Anderson makes the case that the four suits equate with Jung's four functions of personality: 1) Wands become fiery intuition; 2) Cups, watery feeling/emotional content; 3) Swords, airy thinking/ rational mind; and 4) Pentacles, sensation modalities (pp 12). She goes on to show how swords may be related to the 'Sword of Wisdom' or of 'Discrimination' and how progression from Ace to King represents a journey from simple minded thinking to a stage of balanced and enlightened mental acuity. Connolly applies a similar approach in describing the Major Arcana cards of her soon-to-be released Connolly Deck. The dreaded "Death" card becomes "Transition" (It pictures a man in the center with his back to the dark of ordinary consciousness on the left and his front facing the light of higher spiritual consciousness, found to the right of the card). The feared "Devil" card becomes "Materialism" (It shows a man in a bewildered state chained to the four tools of life - wands, cups, swords and pentacles - which he has both become overly

attached to and abused. He can release himself if only he will give up the attachments and turn towards the woman (the unconscious) in the background gazing at the rainbow (the dawn of a new consciousness. (pp 55-53)

Arrien (a former staff member of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in California) identifies Five Universal Shapes found in the artworks of different cultures around the world. The shapes are circle, cross, square, triangle and spiral. She uses meanings drawn from mythology, folklore, psychological and spiritual practices as a base for identifying connections between these shapes and aspects of Medicine Wheels, Meditational Practices and Tarot Symbols (see Chart pp. 24). The shapes are also used to set up a preferential diagnostic tool which calls for a 1-5 rating of most to least preferred of the various shapes. Each shape is associated with several universal meanings (e.g. Spiral-Growth, Evolution, Change) and the distribution of our choices indicates areas needing more or less attention and/or ones where more balance would enrich our lives. Speaking of charts and different cultures, Lammey presents a Karmic description of Tarot, first in terms of definitions for the 22 Major Arcana cards and second in terms of positions related to Four planes (Spiritual, Mental, Emotional and Physical) and Seven Stages of Evolution (re Consciousness and Time) (pp. 118-120).

Fairfield, Green and Wanless discuss applications of Tarot to the resolution of specific problems. Fairfield outlines several ways to use Tarot cards and spreads, to create, maintain and/or strengthen relationships. One part of her work, helpful to me, was a spread used to "Gracefully conclude or Transform a Relationship". Greer shows how the major Arcana Cards can be explored to help people work through a process of healing emotional pain in a way that enables us to come to better understand the pattern of reality underpinning the pain experienced in our lives. For Greer, pain is that part of the great life teacher called "The Teacher Who Bites" (pp. 78). Wanless asserts that the Major Arcana Cards contain archetypes which reflect primal patterns of human personality and behaviour rendered in symbolic imagery. Archetypal imagery can be applied in terms of four distinct levels: 1) as taken from the reading of an external Tarot reader, 2) as read for myself but according to prescribed text meanings, 3) as read for myself and in light of my own intuited meanings in response to an established Tarot deck and 4) as read from archetypal symbols and cards created by myself. This latter level is the essence of Tarot and in a sense is an initial stage of Jung's process of 'individuation which is becoming whole' (pp. 159-160). Wanless then describes how he used the approach of self generated symbolism as a means for uncovering and dialoging with several archetypal selves in order to resolve a relationship problem--viz. his (typically male) inability to commit to a worthwhile woman. It was through his use and application of this approach that over time he came to create the Voyager Tarot Deck.

Tarot, then, is far more than a set of mysterious, occult picture cards which can tell us what our future will be. It is a transpersonal tool for doing spiritual undercover work. If we are willing to take certain images or spreads of symbols and meditate/contemplate on them, we can discover important aspects of our soul nature. Being conscious of and tuned into these aspects, we can make choices which will enable us to create a more meaningful and fulfilling future. For this reason, I urge you to place this book near the top of your 'must read soon' list of transpersonal resources.

Don Chipley
Co-Editor IJTS