



Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies

Volume 2

Article 7

January 1989

Book Review: "Krishna and Christ"

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Recommended Citation

Ramasamy, S. (1989) "Book Review: "Krishna and Christ"," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1016>

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Book Reviews

Krishna and Christ. Dr. Ishanana Vempeny, S.J. Gujarat Sahityaprakash, Anand, 1988, pp. 538, Rs.110/-.

It is a most gratifying sign of the times that scholars pledged to the propagation of their personal faith in the Catholic form of Christianity have felt impelled by a reverent interest in the scriptures that have inspired the Hindu mind through the ages. Gone are the days when the Hindu was a heathen to be rescued from hell fire. Gone indeed are the days when missionary enterprise in the field of education and health was motivated by the passion to recruit the lower classes at least of Hindu society into the fold. That political and economic motives mingled with nobler motives is doubtless a fact of history. But the stories of the great martyrs, the great apostles of the faith, the story of St. Thomas "gospelling India", of St. Xavier, Japan, and Britto falling a victim to brute force, tell another side of the great story of the propagation of the faith. They did what they did for God and Jesus and were ready to die in the process.

De Nobili was perhaps the first to realize that Christianity must conquer the mind of the educated upper class and he strove hard to achieve this. Dom Griffiths has sought through intense brooding on the scriptures of India to effect a greater understanding of the Hindu mind, especially of Vedanta. This is a new and altogether welcome trend. The scriptures of all the religions, even of the nearest and most animistic are a record of man's striving to come to terms with himself and with the universe around. *Kasmāi Devaya Havisha Videma*, the question posed thousands of years ago is not a Hindu question but man's question. And while many answers have emerged affording a measure of satisfaction to large sections of human beings, there seems to be little evidence of a final answer.

Dr. Ishanand has taken up the Bhagavadgita for what he calls a dialogal study, alongside of the New Testament. This in itself is a matter for thankfulness for it is an implicit, yet, even an explicit recognition that scriptures of all the religions of the world, of the most ancient and the most modern, are the scriptures of Man, imposing on man the duty, the ineffable responsibility of devout study of them. The New Testament with its Sermon on the Mount and its portrait of the compassionate Christ crucified on the Cross has evoked devotion almost comparable with that shown to the Gita by truly devout Hindus like Gandhiji, Ram Mohan Roy, Ramakrishna Paramahansa

and others. If in any quarter there has been some reluctance to study the New Testament or some distaste for it, the blame must squarely rest on those committed to the propagation of its teaching, both native and foreign who combined with them necessary zeal a wholly improper technique of contemptuous relegation of ancient faiths and cultures. Religion needs not aggressive, salesmanship, or advertizing techniques but example of lives lived in danger, amid the loneliest and the lost of mankind, bringing to these latter something of the solaces of the spirit in their seemingly endless agony and misery.

Dr. Ishanand seems seized of the principal issues relating to the text of the Gita, of its relationship to the Mahabharata and so forth. The colophon of every chapter refers to it as an Upanisad, as a Yoga sastra, as Brahma Vidya adding that it is *Krishna Arjuna Samvada*. This last term really implies that it is a *Jiva-Iswara samvada*, a dialogue between Man and God. It is clear that it is the record of a profound meditation on the meaning of life. The historical occasion of the Mahabharata was on the *dharma kshetra*, *karukshetra* is not as important to a true student of the scripture as the portrait it affords of a compassionate divine Acharya resolving the doubts of his sishya employing the well-known techniques of philosophic debate in India, of resolving the disciple's doubt by the use of rational argument. Death is not the thing to be feared. Dharma—in the sense of Asrama duties—may itself be surrendered and one could throw oneself absolutely on the mercy of God. Bodies are like clothes, getting worn out in time. The soul is immortal. The world around is but a phase in time. God will emerge, from time to time to establish dharma, righteousness.

Dr. Ishanand has a sound grasp of the argument of this great scripture. If a fault is to be found in his approach to this scripture, it is in his choice of the flute to symbolize Krishna. The fluting Krishna, the Muralidhara is the Hero of the Srimad Bhagavatam, where too the *gopis*, are symbols of the jivas seeking ecstatic communion with their Lord and God! The proper symbol would be the chariot; Krishna is Parthasarathi, the great charioteer of Partha, descended of the Prithus, and shrinking in imperfect comprehension of dharma from his duty to be discharged without thought of reward or benefit.

Dr. Ishanand's account of the New Testament is, naturally enough, fuller and more authoritative. To one reader at least the teaching of Christ can be regarded as

complete when he comes across the affirmation, the Kingdom of God is within you, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, consider the lilies of the field, they neither sow nor do they spin! This last is a firm rejection of material progress.

Both the Gita and the New Testament proclaim the call to the life lived in terms of the Spirit. Civilization itself is the triumph of the spirit in Man. Dr. Ishanand has striven hard and, on the whole, fruitfully to bring out the essential harmony of the teachings of the two great scriptures and the need to bring them into our dealings with the problems of the modern Kurukshetra—fast becoming an *adharmā Kshetra*—that is this world.

The following minor points may be jotted down for purpose of correction in a future edition of this valuable book:

- 1) On p. 5, Max Muller, Ananda Coomarasamy and Radhakrishnan are referred to, among others, as indifferent contemptuous, or even hostile to religion and...unqualified to have access to the inner sanctuary of religion. What evidence does Dr. Ishanand have of these scholars' indifference, etc.?
- 2) Again, "male criteria" and "female criteria"—of human values. Do criteria also suffer from gender?
- 3) On p. 7, Dr. Ishanand draws attention to the source of Islamic nationalism. "My Islam is my mother!" This kind of commitment is the root of religious strife.
- 4) Dr. Ishanand could have emphasized more clearly the current fact that the real conflict is not between Religion A and Religion B but between true religion and bogus substitutes, including militant materialism.
- 5) Dr. Ishanand, it is satisfying to note, takes account of Sri Sankara Statement that *Sruti* which contradicts experience is worthy of no regard.
- 6) Scriptures should emphasize experience and not fact. Fact bound religion, as Arnold pointed out, is doomed.
- 7) *Christ Value* is ineffably more important than Christ-fact.

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Dialogue in Action: Essays in honour of Johannes Aagaard. Ed. by Lars Thunberg, Moti Lal Pandit, Carl Vilh. Fogh.—Hansen. Prajna Publications, New Delhi, 1988, pp. 367.

Dialogue in Action is a felicitation volume in honour of Johannes Aagaard,