



January 1998

Book Review: "The Bairagi Madonna: Leaves from a Calcutta Notebook"

Harold Coward

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Coward, Harold (1998) "Book Review: "The Bairagi Madonna: Leaves from a Calcutta Notebook", *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 11, Article 23.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1196>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

66 Book Reviews

The mystical traditions of Eastern Christianity are presented by S. Descy. The purpose of this volume is "to let the various traditions speak for themselves" (p.xvi).

It is also striking that from the Christian tradition individual mystics like Meister Eckhart, Julian, or Ignatius are presented. But from the Shaiva tradition it is mostly the basic concepts of the Shaiva school like Prabhajijna or Sambhayopaya that are explained. So the volume might sound asymmetrical. However, the book itself offers an interesting reading of the accounts of Christian mystics, and it is presented in such a way that the reader is drawn into the mystic path of these great personalities.

In fact there is a growing awareness of

this mystic dimension of each tradition and this has been brought about by the inter-religious coming together where each one looks at his/her religious roots and rediscovers values that remained so far unthematic and implicit. This process has become also a self-discovery enabling people to enter into other traditions than their own.

It is not so easy to bring in partners in dialogue from different traditions for a "living together" and to allow the respective followers to articulate the insights of the tradition they have inherited. The editor has succeeded in this venture.

Anand Amaladass, S.J
Madras

The Bairagi Madonna: Leaves from a Calcutta Notebook. A. F. Thompson. Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997, x + 105 pp.

FRANK THOMPSON SPENT the 1960s as a teacher at Bishop's College, Calcutta - the central seminary of the Anglican churches of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon. This small but wonderful book is based on a journal Frank wrote during his last year at Bishop's College, 1969-70. It records the experiences of himself, his wife Elaine, and their two small boys, living in a multilingual and interracial community in the Hindu-Christian context of Calcutta. Reading it brought back vivid memories of my own first stay in India which occurred at Banaras Hindu University at about the same time.

Appropriate to Calcutta, the book begins with a reflection on living in the heat and the humidity of the city. Following chapters detail a rich cross-section of life in India: a train journey to a summer holiday in the mountains, students arriving and settling into the daily routine of the College, the coming of monsoon rains, life in Calcutta, politics, movies, worship, Gandhi's birthday, Durga puja, and Christmas in Calcutta. The Teape

Lectures were given at the College in 1969 by R. C. Zaehner. Thompson describes the lectures as an academic "non-event" for reasons familiar to any of us who have given talks in India. The first lecture was to be chaired by an eminent scholar and senior administrator from Rabindra Bharati University in Calcutta. In introducing Zaehner, the scholar spoke for forty minutes on her own neo-vedantin philosophy, finally introduced Zaehner and then said that unfortunately, due to another commitment, she could not stay to hear his lecture. That disaster was immediately followed by the microphone and amplifying system being inadequate to pick up Zaehner's soft voice.

The title of the book, *The Bairagi Madonna*, refers to a painting installed in the college chapel shortly before Thompson left. It was a painting of a mother and child done by a young painter, Sama Bairagi, in the Bengali style of Jamine Roy. The painting responded to a complaint that the chapel needed to be made more "Indian".

The issue as to the "Indianness" of the college, along with male speaker bias, forms the core of Thompson's "retrospect" written from the perspective of thirty years later. The Madonna painting, in strong Bengali style, turns out to symbolize the critique of life in Bishop's College in the late 1960s – a critique that Thompson only fully comes to years later.

Anyone who spent time in India during the 1960s or 1970s will find much resonance

in the beautifully written book. Students of Hindu-Christian studies will find wisdom in the author's critical reflection on the success and failure of Christianity to be sensitive to its context, as one Calcutta Anglican seminary attempted to prepare Indian students for ordination and service in their own cultures.

Harold Coward
University of Victoria

Briefly Noted

Bibliography on Hindu-Christian Dialogue
Kenneth Cracknell, research professor at Texas Christian University, has compiled an annotated bibliography of "One Hundred Books on Hindu-Christian Dialogue" (1997). The personal selection and guide to available literature also contains a list of the "top ten" essential books on the topic. For information on this and similar bibliographies on interfaith dialogue and the theology of religions, Muslim-Christian dialogue, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and mission and evangelism, write to Kenneth Cracknell, Research Professor in Theology and Mission, Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth TX 76129, USA.

Bibliography on Hindu-European Diaspora
A comprehensive bibliography on the Hindu-European Diaspora can be accessed at web site
<http://www.rewi.uni-hannover.de/for-r-1.htm>
Compiled by Dr Martin Baumann, Dept of the History of Religions at the University of Hannover, it includes general overviews and surveys, geographical studies, and a table of estimated numbers of Hindus in European countries in the mid-1990s.

Recent Articles of Interest

- Aleaz, K. P. "Ramakrishna Mission's Contribution to Christian Thought", *World Faiths Encounter*, 18, November, 1997, pp.21-32.
- Cracknell, Kenneth. "The Nature of the Self: Vaisnava-Christian Conference", 6-2, 1996, pp.213-220.
- Coward, Harold. "Hindu Spirituality and the Environment", *Ecotheology*, 3, 1997, pp.50-60
- Delgado, Mariano. "Western Catholicism and the Indian Religions, or Syncretism: Balance and Perspectives", *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* (Amsterdam), 6-1, 1996, pp.5-28.
- Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. "What Jesus Means to Me", *Fellowship in Prayer* (Princeton, NJ), 47-6, December, 1996, pp.32-34,
- Machado, Felix. "Hindu-Christian Encounter: General Problematic", *Vidyajyoti*, 60-12, December, 1996, pp.825-842.
- Nayak, G. C. "Approch of Hinduism to Its Scriptures", *Journal of Dharma (Bangalore)*, 21-4, October-December, 1996, pp. 307-319.
- Rambachan, Anantanand. "Hindu-Christian Consultation: 'Towards One World Family' Keynote Address", *Current Dialogue*, 31, December, 1997. pp.28-38.