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### Book Review: "The Beginning and End of Religion"

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single-minded devotion to the downtrodden, and the oppressed." Thus, Jayawardena (p. 267-8) claims a kind of "sisterhood" for these women, united in their confrontation of and resistance to patriarchy, their firm stand against imperialism, and their willingness to speak out against the exploitation and oppression of women and other social ills in South Asia. By bringing a feminist perspective to bear on a heavily researched period in history, this carefully researched, well-written volume provides an interesting and readable alternative to more traditional histories of India. Beyond this, by casting an "Asian feminist gaze" on the lives

of the women discussed, Jayawardena highlights their contribution to the liberation of women generally and, in some cases, to national liberation as well. She brings into question both the British Liberal view and the standard nationalist interpretation of South Asian history and the roles of foreign women in it. In doing so, she protects the legacy of these women which might otherwise have been "erased from memory and history in both Asian and the West" (p. x).

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*The Beginning and End of Religion.* Nicholas Lash. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 284 pp.

**READERS OF THIS** journal will find the first three chapters of Lash's book of particular interest as they contain the text of his 1994 Teape Lectures, reflecting upon, as the endowment requires, "The Upanishads in the Catholic Church". The lectures were delivered in India. The remaining eleven chapters deal with theology and science (4-6), theology and secular modernity (7-10), and Christian hope (11-14). While some of the chapters in the second section of the book are immensely important and all of them are stimulating and entertaining, I shall focus on only the first three chapters, given the specialist focus of this journal. If the book can be said to contain a single overall argument it would have to be that one welcome effect of the collapse of modernity is to challenge the view of "religion" constructed by modernity: i.e. that it is a private concern which should keep out of the public sphere.

Lash is like a poet. One begins to see things differently after reading him, and describing an argument or thesis within his work is an appropriately problematic endeavour. It is a masterly stroke to invite

someone who has no (self-confessed) expertise on Hinduism, but who is a gifted Christian theologian to reflect on Christian-Hindu themes. One shortcoming is perhaps inevitable: a lack of scholarly depth regarding the Hindu tradition. But this is made up eloquently by Lash's unrestrained delight in dealing with new materials and his modest restraint regarding any far-reaching claims or conclusions.

The first chapter brings to bear a resolutely historical sensibility upon the question of "religion". Lash's thesis which is well substantiated, is that "religions" were essentially a seventeenth-century invention falsely predicated upon a model of different species of a common genus. This construction was part of the enlightenment project (see also ch. 7 for a more detailed discussion of the genesis of this project) which inevitably, in the nineteenth century, slotted the Eastern religions into an already distorted matrix. Lash's remedy is to view religious traditions as pedagogic schools for cultivating practices and virtues which may or may not relate to similar outcomes. (Despite this tradition-specific outlook, he

sometimes and quite unnecessarily lapses into generalized statements about "all" religions which are particularly inappropriate as he only materially deals with Hinduism, e.g., pp. 35, 50, 60, 71).

The next two chapters are moving and insightful explorations of his contention that Hinduism and Christianity are at least united in "weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desires" (p.21). He takes up the latter via a necessarily unresolved exploration of the *Upanishads* and *Gita* with many rich observations on the way. Christian and Vedantic Hinduism's commonality, reflecting Lash's healthy predilection for apophatic theology, is found in both traditions' sense of the provisionality and ambiguity regarding the question of who we are. But this is marked by the narratives within which "remembrance" and "expectation" have differing functions within each pedagogic school. So while recognizing that the theme of "Gift" (p.32) is central to both, Lash is also aware that the nature of the Gift generates different patterns, with their own enigmas and unresolved difficulties. With "Gift", this chapter is markedly Christological. The final lecture is markedly trinitarian, although Lash's relentless energy to think things freshly means that we do not stumble upon tough technical trinitarian vocabulary. One of the rich insights here,

which needs far more development, is his exploration of *sat-cit-ananda* as a trinitarian psychological analogy.

There are details which one might contest (such as his suggestion that matter-spirit dualism is alien to India and is a European Enlightenment imposition) and insights which one would wish further developed, but that is testimony to the stimulation of the lectures. My one criticism would be that despite his excellent first chapter, he nevertheless tends to treat "Hinduism" in a somewhat abstracted manner, purely in terms of the *Upanishads* and *Gita*, as if it were not, like Christianity, a schooling in the use of power and social formation. In later chapters (e.g., 12), Lash is very particular upon just this point, but in his treatment of Hinduism one gets no sense of the social and symbolic order that mediate the texts he deals with and in this sense there is a real danger of the Enlightenment reification he so carefully criticizes creeping in through the back door. But this is a danger, no more. From what Lash has offered there is much to learn, and his engaging Christian approach to the issue will be better appreciated by reading the book in its entirety.

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***The Impact of Ancient Indian Thought on Christianity.*** V. W. Deshpande. New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation, 1996. xi + 359 pp.

***THE IMPACT OF Ancient Indian Thought on Christianity*** by V. W. Deshpande is a work which readers will find both provocative and frustrating. It is provocative in its claim that the historical contacts of the Middle Eastern and Greco-Roman world with India during the pre-Christian era must have impacted the developments of Judeo-Christian world perspectives in a significant

way. It is frustrating because its claims are more in the nature of tenuous hypotheses rather than definitive conclusions.

In the Introduction, the author spells out the subject matter of the book which "is to find out whether there is any impact of ancient Indian thought on the New Testament as well as in the contemporary literature of Christianity". If there is any