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Book Review: "The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries"

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and ritual. Desika's poem *Bhagavaddhyana sopanam* ("The Ladder Meditation on the Lord") is translated here to illustrate Desika's experience of Ranganathan.

These poems also allude to yogic visualization practices based on the southern *tantra*, *Pancaratra Agamas*. In tantric meditation the adepts are taught, by way of searching seed mantras, how to construct within their own bodies (the body of the deity). So too these poems express the experience of the poet in assimilating the image of the Lord in his own heart. Singing these hymns or reciting them bodies forth god. "They articulate both the spontaneous enjoyment of the beauty of god and the rarified ritual map of a spiritual elite, the connative and cognitive. It is within this meditational tradition that we are able perhaps to understand these poems themselves as "icons", "bodies" of God." (p.165). Thus they are 'icons of icons'.

The bhakti tradition is not just emotional outpouring of the devotees without the intellectual component, and one tends at times to juxtapose these devotional hymns with the treatises that are speculative or rational. This might perhaps devalue the hymns. But then a serious analysis and study of these hymns, as this volume illustrates, point out the richness of these sources for

our better understanding of a given religious tradition and the author's theological perspectives. Secondly, the poet-saints give importance to the body, the material aspect as is evident from their metaphors and the type of language they use. The sense of touch, smell, or taste is indicative of closeness, intimacy etc, and it is different from the sense of hearing (*sruti*) and seeing (*drshiti*) where the 'distance' is presupposed. It has a theological significance in the context of Indian religious tradition, where body is supposedly underestimated.

This volume is commendable for its scholarly presentation. It brings to light a religious thinker of the fourteenth century, takes note of the previous publications dealing with Tamil works, locating the author Desika within the development of Srivaishnava tradition and the theology of the Alvars, the poet saints. Usually Desika's language is considered difficult for ordinary readers and left to the erudite pandits, but this publication makes the rich heritage of the author accessible to all.

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The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries. Peter C. Phan, ed.
Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002, xiii + 352 pp.

AT the dawn of the new millennium, Pope John Paul II called the Catholic Church to begin a renewed evangelization. To discuss this goal, a series of five synods of bishops from five main regions of the earth were held in Rome. Peter Phan, a well known Catholic theologian from Vietnam and many years a professor in the U.S., selected and edited documents from the 1998 Synod of Asian Bishops. The book includes both formal documents which preceded the event and documents from the Synod itself. It also

includes *Ecclesia in Asia*, a comprehensive document which John Paul II developed after the Synod. Short analyses of the documents and proceedings composed by theologians selected by Phan are interspersed throughout the book.

The bishops in attendance spanned the geographical swath from Lebanon to Japan. A wide variety of perspectives and positions were thus represented. In spite of this, there was a clear consensus among the bishops that Jesus is generally perceived by Asians

as essentially a foreigner. As expressed in *Ecclesia in Asia*, "It is paradoxical that most Asians tend to regard Jesus - born on Asian soil - as a Western rather than an Asian figure. It was inevitable that the proclamation of the Gospel by Western missionaries would be influenced by the cultures from which they came" (304). In other words, even though Christ was born in the East, he is perceived as a stranger to Asia because Christianity assumed a western character as it spread outside the Holy Land.

Both the pope and the bishops hope to remedy this situation through "inculturation." Inculturation is an ambiguous term, but it is generally defined as bringing Christian faith to permeate the structures of a culture, as opposed to treating the Gospel and non-Christian culture as entities that are necessarily alien to each other. In specific, the pope wrote that Christ should be presented in ways to which Asians will easily relate: "In general, narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred. . . . The [western] ontological notions involved . . . can be complemented by more relational, historical and even cosmic perspectives" (304).

John Paul II made these statements upon the recommendation of the Synod. However, one of the analysts contributing to the book, Edmund Chia, believes that the bishops and the pope are not of one mind regarding the issue of inculturation. Many of the bishops believe that inculturation should consist of the Church learning from Asian culture and religion, not simply the Church presenting Jesus in a different manner. This was expressed by Cardinal Darmaatmadja, the President Delegate of the Synod, in response to the pope's *Ecclesia in Asia*: "We can learn also from the world," for Jesus "has always been present and working in the world, including the world of Asia" (276-77). A similar statement was made by the bishops of India prior to the Synod: "God's dialogue with Asian peoples through their religious experiences is a great mystery. We as Church enter into this mystery by

dialogue through sharing and listening to the Spirit in others" (20-21).

Given such statements, a casual observer might think that some of the bishops are rescinding traditional claims about the uniqueness and universal significance of Christianity. However, far from this, these bishops are striving to make the voice of the Catholic Church heard more strongly in Asia. They believe that the only way for this to happen is for the Church to take a seat alongside other religions at the table of dialogue. As the bishops of India stated, "In a country and a continent of many living religions, to be religious itself means to be interreligious - that is, to live amicably in dialogue. . . . This dialogical model is the new Asian way of being Church" (20-21).

However, some of the bishops of Asia feel that the distinctiveness of Christianity is being lost in this rush to dialogue. The strongest voice to this effect came from a discussion group consisting of Italian-speaking bishops. They pointed out, for instance, that Jesus is not simply a "guru," but is God himself: "We must not create confusion in the minds of people by using 'analogies' between Jesus and figures of other religions...Jesus is not a Teacher or a Guru or a Philosopher but God" (136-37). Among other concerns, the Italian group also felt that many bishops were focusing upon earthly progress, such as alleviating poverty, to the neglect of the salvation of the soul.

This book shows both the common concerns of the pope and the bishops as well as divergences between them, and divergences among the bishops themselves. In addition to issues of dialogue and theology, the book focuses on many immediate and concrete issues. These include problems of translating Biblical texts, communication with people in remote regions, the social disruptions caused by conversion, tensions between differing groups of Catholics and Protestants, and issues of authority between the pope and the

bishops. The book is a valuable window into religious life in Asia.

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Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective. Sharada Sugirtharajah. New York: Routledge, 2003, xviii + 164 pp.

THE current trend in South Asian studies is to uncover the colonial and hegemonic biases of the earliest (and usually British) Indologists. The end result has been the "post-colonial industry" and an overwhelming number of articles and monographs, some of which are only mediocre. A variety of cutting edge and carefully crafted treatises are thus joined by other less successful efforts. Sugirtharajah's *Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective*, despite its catchy title, is one such book that is less valuable than other studies.

Though Sugirtharajah promises a new perspective, hers merely repeats arguments made by scores of scholars in the past – namely, that Hinduism has been imagined through the eyes of colonizers whose agenda was colonizing and oppressive. The imagination of these tyrannical Indologists, moreover, affected the ways that Hindus have imagined themselves, just as an abused child might incorrectly believe that s/he is obese after being repeatedly told so by her/his parents. To this end, Sugirtharajah "exposes" William Jones in chapter one, Max Müller in chapter two, William Ward and John Nichol Farquhar in chapters three and four, and finally, Julia Leslie in chapter five. The chapters do not flow well with one another and Sugirtharajah explains that her volume is "not designed with a linear progression in mind" (xvii). Despite her warning (or justification), the volume remains disjointed and fragmented.

The historical and other data that she organizes is commendable and some may

find it to be interesting. Jones, for example, believed that the Vedas were composed before the Christian Flood and that the Indian god Rama was associated with the Biblical Ramah (9-10). Furthermore, according to Sugirtharajah, Müller's intentions behind the translations of the *Sacred Books of the East* were not purely academic. Instead, Müller thought that they "will do a great deal towards lifting Christianity into its high historical position"(63). Though some readers may be horrified, Müller's proposal merely reminded me of other theologian-scholar-comparativists such as Rudolf Otto who proposed similar agenda and structures.

Her presentation of these historical facts soon becomes repetitive and rather tedious. Stylistic errors abound. She uses identical introductory phrases several times in a single paragraph. For example, when introducing a quote, she far too frequently does so by prefixing it with "As [so-and-so] says." This is a bit wearying for the reader.

Though these stylistic blunders can be overlooked, the first four chapters suffer from a far larger problem that concerns her application of a post-colonial perspective to missionary activities. She thus frames Jones, Müller and Ward as Christian missionaries who hid behind an academic veil, whose presentations of Hinduism to their Christian readers and audience should be questioned, and whose methodologies reveal missionary agendas. Sugirtharajah seems unaware of the typical strategies of missionaries and proselytizers who believe that their religion has an exclusive claim to truth and is