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Book Review: "Gurus in America"

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Finally, he mines his own prior study of Alexandre de Rhodes' 17th century mission in Vietnam to offer an appreciative critique of the comparative theological project of Francis X. Clooney (IOOT, ch. 9). In response to Clooney, Phan commends a comparative strategy that moves beyond texts to popular devotion: "it is important and necessary, as de Rhodes has shown, to go beyond texts to religions as actually lived at the popular level . . ." (171). In each case, Phan attempts to draw those engaged in dialogue from the particular boundaries they occupy back into broader Catholic, Christian and extra-Christian discussions about mission and identity.

Though it takes up each aspect of the "triple dialogue" in turn, Phan's trilogy finds its true heart and center in one central task: discerning the features of a truly *Asian* Christianity (or even Christianities). Phan treats the topic from many angles; the "reception" of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent teachings of the Catholic Magisterium in Asia, the "new way of being church" promoted by the bishops of Asia through the vehicles of the FABC and the 1998 Asian Synod, the contribution from Asia to teaching and theologizing in the affluent West, and the perils and

possibilities of a worship that is thoroughly Christian and thoroughly Asian at one and the same time. Along the way, he also offers some very good examples of theological reasoning across the bounds of culture and religion, especially in his native Vietnam. "Jesus as the Eldest Son and Ancestor" (CAF, ch. 6), "Mary in Vietnamese Piety and Theology" (IOOT, ch. 6), and "How Much Uniformity Can We Stand? How Much Unity Do We Want?" (BRI, ch. 14) are particularly noteworthy in this regard.

I began this review by observing that "trinity" might describe these books better than "trilogy." In several places, Phan himself highlights the importance of the Trinity as the most fundamental Christian doctrine, in part because he finds in it an "inherent bias" toward "plurality and diversity" (BRI, xxxi-xxii). To read these volumes is indeed to enter into conversation with a genuine plurality of diverse positions, traditions and concerns. Despite its limitations, it is a highly impressive and worthwhile conversation to enter.

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Gurus in America. Edited by Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005, 236 pp.

THIS book provides perhaps the best available introduction to what the editors call the "second wave of gurus in America" (p.4), the first having begun with the arrival of Swami Vivekananda at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 followed by the emergence of Swami Paramananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, and Jiddu Krishnamurti. Despite the book's title the influence of the nine guru movements covered extends well beyond the U.S. to other nations and continents. Moreover, not all these spiritual teachers have themselves

lived in the West; it is sufficient for their followers to have sunk roots in the West to merit inclusion in this study. In addition, *Gurus in America* does not claim to be exhaustive in its selection of Hindu spiritual guides living in the West - Swami Satchidananda and Swami Rama are notably absent - yet the nine men and women gurus selected represent well the wide range of Hindu teachings, practices, and models of authority one may encounter today in the quest for wholeness and spiritual growth.

The expressed goal of *Gurus* is to address “key questions about the nature of the guru, the diverse histories of each guru and movement, the varied constructions of Hinduism, and the complex process of cultural interaction.” (12) Each of these issues is admirably covered in all the essays. Indeed, each chapter is rich enough in itself to warrant expansion into a book-length manuscript.

The chapters are sequenced thematically. Chapter 1 deals with the Samkhya Yoga taught by Guru Anjali (authored by Christopher Chapple). Chapters 2 and 3 treat Advaita Vedanta: Ramana Maharshi (Thomas Forsthoefel) and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and TM (Cynthia Humes). Chapters 4, 5, and 6 take up the theme of bhakti: A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami and ISKCON (Tamal Krishna Goswami and Ravi Gupta); Satya Sai Baba (Norris Palmer); Mata Amritanandamayi/Ammachi (Selva Raj). Tantra unites chapters 7: Swami Muktananda, Chidvilasananda/Gurumayi and Siddha Yoga (Lola Williamson), 8: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh/Osho (Hugh Urban), and 9: Franklin Jones/Adi Da (Jeffrey Kripal). The book concludes with a brief Epilogue by Daniel Gold.

One of the strengths of this volume is that the majority of its authors have had first-hand experience with either the guru or the guru’s disciples or ashram. Indeed some of the book’s contributors—Christopher Chapple, Cynthia Humes, Lola Williamson, Ravi Gupta—are members of the movements about which they report. This does not prevent them from an objective scholarly approach to their subject matter. The authors are, in fact, to be congratulated for successfully combining the personal-anecdotal and sympathetic with a detached and critical academic rigor, an approach that enables the book to speak to several audiences at once. I found myself at times surprised by the occasional candid critique of less than stellar guru-behavior, especially involving exploitation and sexual scandal. Yet the overall assessment of the gurus and their devotees is overwhelmingly positive.

As Gold points out in his Epilogue, one of the biggest variables among the gurus is the way their elevated status is understood. This ranges from respected and inspiring human teacher of a rich age-old tradition (Guru Anjali, Maharishi Mahesh, Bhaktivedanta Swami) to “an instance of the embodied divine, somehow superhuman and distinct from ordinary mortals” (220) (Sai Baba, Ammachi, at times Osho/Rajneesh). There are also in-between ontologies and categories that overlap.

Another variable concerns the degree to which the guru movements acculturate to the West and modify or reformulate their teachings and practices from a purely Indian cultural framework to one more easily assimilated by converts and devotees from other cultural backgrounds. This topic of continuity and discontinuity with Hindu tradition, the reformulation of Hinduism for Western discipleship, constitutes the heart of the book. We find here at times, depending on the guru movement, a greater emphasis on humanitarian service as integral to the spiritual quest, a valuing of family life as an authentic spiritual path, an increased egalitarianism within the community of disciples, ritual performances strikingly reminiscent of Christian communion, the creation of feasts and festivals expanded outward to include other religions, the flaunting of certain social gender norms, an embrace of perennialist philosophy that frequently plays down the significant differences between the religions, gurus who themselves have not been formally initiated as such, the formulation of new mantras and the imparting of them without the preparatory discipline or customary regulations and restrictions, a flexibility of some gurus to adjust both behavior and even doctrine to the circumstances and needs of the spiritual aspirant. Sometimes, too, the devotees profess “dual personal and religious identity” (130) through simultaneous discipleship to two gurus or even two religions.

All told, a remarkably informative book that does much to sort out the

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sometimes bewildering array of gurus, practices, and teachings. A book such as this will prove useful at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

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