

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND CHRISTOLOGY

- Topic: Hindu Christology – Impasse or Opportunity?
 Convener: Reid B. Locklin, Saint Michael's College, University of Toronto
 Presenters: Leo D. Lefebure, Georgetown University
 Michael T. McLaughlin, Saint Leo University
 Ravi Ravindra, Dalhousie University

This session offered a celebration and critical discussion of the creative contribution of Ravi Ravindra to Christian theology and interreligious dialogue. Ravindra is Emeritus Professor at Dalhousie University and the author of many articles and books in physics, international development, and comparative religion, including the work that was the primary focus of this session, *The Gospel of John in Light of Indian Mysticism*.

Following a suggestion in Ravindra's work, Leo D. Lefebure addressed his comments to two levels of interpretation: a horizontal movement between and across religious traditions, and a vertical division between the few who achieve spiritual understanding and the many who focus on the literal and material. Regarding the horizontal dimensions of Ravindra's reading of the Gospel, Lefebure recognized the sapiential character of John and the legitimacy of a Hindu interpretation, but questioned whether the identification of Christ as a Yogi or the comparison of Christ's relation to the Father with that of Krishna and Radha may have been "done too quickly and without enough clarification or nuance to be completely convincing." With regard to the vertical division between the masses and the spiritual elite, he questioned whether Ravindra may end up proposing an "exclusivism against exclusivism," sharply critical of Christian claims to superiority and exclusiveness yet vulnerable to the charge of elitism. Notwithstanding such questions, Lefebure concluded, Ravindra's work definitely raises important questions and opens up "new avenues for approaching the gospel of John."

Michael T. McLaughlin shifted the discussion from purely "intertextual" concerns to a more broadly social and cultural perspective. In today's global situation, in which sacred texts are freely available and open to comment by persons from a variety of traditions, how should Ravindra's work be received? Is it a form of enrichment or plundering Christian treasures . . . or even a kind of defection from Hinduism? McLaughlin suggested that Ravindra's "experiential-expressivist" interpretation stands in a theological trajectory and intensifies a realized eschatology revealed in the Gospel of John itself, while also bringing it into closer proximity to various, diverse traditions of Christian Gnosticism. Though certainly defensible, such an approach entails several risks, not least the risk of making Jews and Judaism – already attenuated in John – "disappear even more." McLaughlin concluded with reflections on Benedict XVI's inclusion of a prayer from the Upanishads in the 2009 Good Friday liturgy and the need for more people, like Ravindra, "who can speak the language of both faiths."

Ravi Ravindra responded to the two papers by clarifying that he does not consider his interpretation of John as an exercise in theology, but in *theophily* – sincere

love of God rather than discourse *about* God. To give a sense of this love, he offered a brief account of his own autobiography and his intense desire, as a student of physics in Toronto in the 1960s, to discover the driving force of Canadian culture by learning about Christianity. He eventually discovered a profound resonance with the Gospel of John and judged it to be as much a part of his heritage as the *Bhagavad-Gita* or any other Hindu text; he felt that he must have read it in a previous life! He wrote the commentary, not to offer a “Hindu interpretation,” but merely to uncover its riches. It was Ravindra’s Christian friends who urged him to publish it. Since it was not Christian enough for some publishers, and too Christian for others, this was no easy task. It has, however, received very warm appreciation from many quarters, including the great comparatist – and Ravindra’s former colleague – Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

Authentic dialogue, Ravindra contended, should not be “inter-faith” but “inter-pilgrim,” exploring the differences, diversity, and spiritual communion from person to person, rather than from tradition to tradition. He argued that neither Christianity nor any other tradition should be regarded as fossilized or fixed – as revealed by the rather dramatic change in attitudes toward spirituality and mysticism in a mere twenty years. Jesus said, “you have eyes, but you cannot see.” Similarly, spiritual persons in the contemporary world are called to free themselves from denominationalism, to allow our traditions to cleanse our perceptions so that Christ, God’s Spirit, lives in us. Ravindra concluded with a reflection on Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4 and the ideal of worshipping “in Spirit and in Truth.”

After the three presentations, questions were raised about Ravindra’s distinctive interpretation of Jesus’ sacrifice, about the relationship between spirituality and theology, and about responses to his work from other Hindus, such as Gaudiyas or Shrivaisnavas. One participant asked how it is possible to apprehend spiritual truth, when the universal is only attainable through the particular. Ravindra suggested that everyone must begin with particular theological traditions, but also subject them to an “experiential check.” Although truth may lie beyond the grasp of discursive reason, nevertheless one can cultivate a “flare” or a “taste” for truth.

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