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BOOK REVIEW

Paulachan Kochappilly and Sebeesh Jacob Vettiyadan, ed., *Indian Christian Theological Aesthetics and Art: Saundarya Leela*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2025, Pages: 131. ISBN: 978-93-92996-99-3.

The book, *Indian Christian Theological Aesthetics and Art: Saundarya Leela*, is an excellent collection of 19 essays by scholars and theologians of lines and colours from diverse cultural contexts. The volume is the result of a workshop on Indian Christian Theological Aesthetics and Art held on 13-14 March 2023 at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru, under the auspices of the Placid Podipara Centre for Eastern and Indian Christian Studies (PPCEICS). It is an amazing work that contains a wealth of information on *Saundarya Leela* - the attraction of beauty. Paulachan Kochappilly, the Director of PPCEICS, admires the work, saying, "a grand choreography of unquenchable joy, wonder, and praise" (p. 7).

Let me now whet the reader's appetite by selecting a few notable features of the volume. Jyoti Sahi, a great artist who relates the Christian Gospel to Indian cultures, in his essay on "Perichoresis and Parikrama" explores both ancient and contemporary cultural and religious symbols, and he affirms that "the visual arts have had a special role in making the invisible visible" (p. 16). Gheevarghese Mar Aphrem, a scholar in Syriac iconography and an icon-writer, presently the Auxiliary Bishop of the Syro-Malankara Archeparchy of Kottayam, through his paper on "The Virgin Mary in the Iconographic Tradition" invites our attention to iconography. As he presents various phases of Marian imagery across the Syriac and Greek ecclesial contexts, Mar Aphrem expounds the Marian icons of 'Theotokos', 'Deesis', 'Hodigitria', 'Enthroned Theotokos', 'Loving Kindness', 'Theotokos of Passion' or 'Our Lady of Perpetual Help', 'Salus Populi Romani', 'The Milk Giver Icon', 'The Virgin of the Burning Bush', 'The Man of Sorrow Icon', etc.

In her essay on "The Son of God: A Reincarnation in the Indian Context", Kabita Mukhopadhyay, an author, illustrator, and columnist in print media, and an art instructor, presents the history of Christian art in the Indian milieu, drawing on her formative childhood

experience of encountering Jesus Christ. She observes that India developed its own style to depict Biblical themes, using signs and symbols derived from its indigenous resources. The paper focuses on the diverse nature and influence of narratives and aesthetic standards in Christian images in India. Jacob Kooroth, a teacher of iconography and a well-known icon writer, in his article “The Voyage of Marian Icons from Europe to India”, provides a historical survey of Marian iconography in India. Icons as a visual rendering of the invisible divine reality in time and space, Kooroth dwells elaborately on ‘Salus Populi Romani’ and ‘Mother of Perpetual Help’ from theological and historical perspectives.

In “Tree of Life/Wonder Tree,” Lucy D’Souza Krone, formerly a promoter of creative education for rural women and currently living in Germany, delineates how paintings and reflections on the natural world can prompt deep engagement with changing moods and seasons and broaden our appreciation of beauty. The following article by K.M. George, incumbent Chairperson of Dr Paulos Gregorios Chair at Mahatma Gandhi University and Director of Sopana Academy at Kottayam, is titled “Icon Turned Iconographer: Image of God and Human Creativity: A Theological-Aesthetic Reflection”. It is an invitation to see the human person as an icon of God; God as artist granted freedom and creative imagination to God’s own work, i.e., the human person.

Sebeesh Jacob Vettiyadan CMI, an icon artist who envisions a contemplative life where art and study enrich Christian worship and expression, in his paper on “Aesthetics of Imagining Beauty” clarifies the perceptual distinction of approaching beauty in early Christian traditions and explains the theological pointers underlying the practice of icons and its variations in other contexts. He challenges the artists to paint an image that transcends mere representation and achieves the transformative power of the icon. Sebastian Elavathingal CMI, an artist and musician, in “Understanding a Work of Art,” expounds on art and different levels of consciousness, the reminder function of art, the artist as a seeker and a worshipper, secular and religious art, art as the threshold of the mystery, and the theological function of art. Clarifying the parameters for critical appreciation of art, he offers a theological interpretation of the two artworks he created in Jabalpur and Bhopal.

In “Divine Aesthetics Reclaimed”, Rohitha Elizabeth Varghese, personality coach and design-entrance trainer and founder of

Kriyations.in, affirms art as a divine expression and way of life, and urges us to rediscover the divine design at work in the world. Roy M. Thottathil, Director of Thanmaya Media and Legal Aid Center, Kottayam and Coordinator of Company of Artists for Radiance of Peace, considers art as a spiritual process of inner journey and every artistic process a process of liberation. Gudrun Lowner, an ordained Lutheran pastor from Germany, in the essay "Sister Claire and her Art: Painted Christian Theology," gives a profile of Sister Claire and situates her art within the Indian forms of art and aesthetics. Vimala Joseph PDDM, an artist and designer, in the essay on "Aesthetic Identity in Indian Christian Art", explores the historical evolution and transformation of Christian images in India. She affirms Indian Christian art as a living testimony to the adaptability of faith and the richness of Indian culture.

Mani Karott, a rehabilitation and art therapist, in the essay on "Accessing the Beauty of the Inner Self through Art Therapy" highlights the mission and orientation of art therapy as participation in the healing work of God. Sunil Jose CMI, author of several works, in "Resplendence of Self-realisation through Art and Poetry", presents his artistic and poetic endeavours as a spiritual discipline that connects with his deepest emotions and experiences, and expounds art and poetry as transformative tools for individuals. Joby Koodakkattu CMI, Director of RAZA Art Space Academy, Kottayam, in "Christian Art: A Space of Communion" envisions a sacred realm through mosaic iconography where divine and human meet. He holds sacred art as a visible form of theology and liturgical art as an integral part of the church.

In "Beauty in the Wildflower", Seby Moolan, an artist working for Sandesh NGO, is deeply inspired by nature's beauty and fine details, and he believes the universe is an overflowing pot of beauty for everyone and everything, regardless of their abilities and utility, is full of beauty. Anil Kumar Kuttappan, a versatile painter and craftsperson, in his essay "Dance of Fury" highlights the transformative power of dance and how it dispels the suffering, pain and grief, igniting the light of hope. Sebastian Mulloparambil CMI, a Bible scholar and prolific writer, in "The Allure of Beauty: Biblical Perspectives", makes a scriptural exploration highlighting beauty as a divine gift that leads humans towards God. A human being reflects God's beauty when s/he lives without sin. In the final entry, Paulachan Kochappilly CMI, Director of PPCEICS, expresses appreciation for Dharmaram Chapel as a Saundarya Kalaa Kshetra.

The work is well organised, easy to follow, and has a cohesive presentation in which all parts work well together and feel connected. Insights, visuals, tone and structure support the same purpose. The variety of approaches and insights by different art theologians makes the volume a rich mine of resources. The insights are relevant and extremely beneficial, and the contributing authors succeed in sharing their reflections on the attraction of beauty blending theology, art and life experience. The sketches and icons accompanying the texts attract the reader. The volume offers a wealth of material, teaches us some criteria and invites us to further reflection on Attraction of Beauty - *Saundarya Leela*. The authors of various essays and the editors - Paulachan and Sebeesh - deserve appreciation. Even though all the papers are not strictly scientific in presentation, an index at the end would have helped to make better sense of the appendix. I notice a couple of oversights: misspellings (p. 25, 54), font size (122, 123, 125, 125). As the volume is informative and presents deep insights into Indian Christian theological aesthetics and art, I confidently recommend this work to all, especially students of aesthetics and art.

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