

BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas Manninezhath CMI, *Harmony of Religions*. Vedanta Siddhanta Samarasam of Tayumanavar. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993, pp xvii + 193, Rs. 175/-

Fr. (Dr.) Thomas Manninezhath's book *Harmony of Religions* is a fine, erudite contribution in the context of the on-going interreligious dialogue in India and abroad. The title of the book may appear too wide or ambitious for the author does not deal with the religions, as the sub-title of the book clarifies.

The author's aim is clear. He has studied the works of the 17th century mystic-poet Tayumanavar in depth and he offers the Vedanta-Siddhanta Samarasam evolved by the poet as a paradigm for interreligious dialogue. Thus the book is quite topical and relevant.

In the first chapter, the author has given a brief biographical sketch of Tayumanavar. In the second chapter, he describes the political, social and religious situations of Tamil Nadu during the time of the poet and he concludes:

The political and social conditions were depressingly violent and confusing, and the disputations and rivalries between various sects and sub-sects within Hinduism were the distinctive features of the religious situation of the period . . . The poet saint having realized the unitive experience in his life, responded to the challenge of the society through his devotional and mystical hymns. The heart of his religious hymns is an invitation to a basic, deep and intuitive unity experience where all faiths meet irrespective of their religious diversity (p. 33).

In the third chapter the author has meticulously analyzed the contents of the hymns of Tayumanavar with particular reference to the concepts of God, bondage, soul and liberation. In his assessment:

the possession of intuitive knowledge and the experience of Oneness with God does not restrict the poet-saint to the

theoretical and intellectual level alone. The practical operation of the *attuvita anupavam* (*Skt. advaita anubhava*) of Tayumanavar is the bed-rock of his hymns (p. 67).

The impact of Tayumanavar on Ramalingaswamikal (1823-74), on Mastan Sahib (1830 ?) a Muslim sufi, and on Subramanya Bharati (1882-1921) is also explained by the author. It is heartening to note that at the inauguration of the international 'Sarva-dharama sammelana' in Bangalore on August 19, 1993, the key-note speaker Sri Mahalingam, based his speech on Ramalingaswami, which is an indirect tribute to the abiding influence of Tayumanavar.

In chapter IV and V the author has brought to bear his critical acumen and mature scholarship on the issue of Vedanta Vs Siddhanta as seen by Tayumanavar. The author is to be congratulated for his fine exposition of the subtle distinctions between Vedanta and Siddhanta, as these are not normally appreciated due to the dominance or popularity of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta amidst contemporary thinkers, especially because of the propaganda by the Ramakrishna Mission Swamijis in India and abroad. The following quotations will serve to explain Tayumanavar's standpoint: a) The study of his hymns will help us conclude, with good reason, that his understanding of Vedanta is mainly in the primary sense of the word as representing the *anubhava* of the Vedic Seers. The understanding of Vedanta in this sense - as unitive experience - is helpful in transcending all religious differences and dis-engaging from the Schismatic fight on religious and doctrinal issues, taking Vedanta back to its more original and integral sense (p. 106). b) As a Saiva Siddhantin he says that Saiva religion is the best place to experience that *attuvitanantam* - the bliss of being one with Sivam. This God-experience is the centripetal force binding Vedanta and Siddhanta. The convergence of Vedanta and Siddhanta at the point of *advaitā-nandam* is Vedanta Siddhanta Samarasam. (p. 147).

In the concluding chapter the author high-lights a few points which may be of great methodological significance in the context of present-day interreligious dialogue.

- 1) Samarasam is not a religion, a new religion to be brought into existence by rejection of the old philosophical structures of Vedanta and Siddhanta.

- 2) Samarasam is neither a doctrine nor a mere harmonization of creeds.
- 3) Samarasam is a reconciliation between 'thought' and what is beyond or behind 'thought'. It points to the silent experiential state - *mauna samarasam* - inclusively transcending all thought forms.
- 4) Samarasam is a cohesive force emanating from the heart and spirit of religion itself, from religious experience (*anubhava*)
- 5) Samarasam is as close to the non-dualism (Advaita) of Vedanta as it is to the dualism that defies scrutiny of Siddhanta; in fact, it is above both. Advaita *anubhava* is the common ground of religious experience for both Vedanta and Siddhanta. In this sense, the poet-saint is a non-conformist Vedantin and also a non-conformist Siddhantin in an original and creative manner. (pp, 170-172).

In the light of the above detailed exposition, the author's final conclusion should be quite welcome to all interested in interreligious dialogue :

The experiential realization of oneness between God and the soul, and between religious traditions, is a possibility more or less distinctively envisaged by all religious traditions and therefore deserves to be further explored. In that sense, Tayumanavar's call is relevant even today, for in a religiously pluralistic society, the meeting of religions at the point of realization of their essence can certainly create room for a constructive and spiritually meaningful co-existence (p. 173).

Personally, I have been using Tayumanavar's hymns in my inter-religious work for the past thirty years. The following lines from Tayumanavar's *Ākārabhūvanam*, have been my favourite. For in these lines the poet clearly "shows" the apex at which religion itself is transcended :

When egoism, in the form of 'I-sense' comes to any one, primordial *Maya* presents multiple facets. Because of this, the manifold suffering to which one becomes subject, who can describe it? All sorts of "entities" such as flesh, body, internal organ, interior and exterior, all-pervading space, air, fire, water, earth, mountains and forests, rise tier upon tier and cloud the vision - one posits forget-

fullness and memory. One posits joys and sorrows caused by countless waves of *maya*. One talks of *karma* as the cause of joys and sorrows. One talks of countering this *karma* by different religious practices. One talks of God. One talks of the religious practitioner (*sadaka*). One talks of different dharmas: One talks of doctrine and argument. When one sees all these, he thinks that they are like the myriad sand - particles on the sea-shore.

S.N. Rao

Garma C.C. Chang (General Editor), *A Treasury of Sūtras – Selections from the Maharatnakuta Sūtra*. Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, First Indian Edition, 1991, pp xv + 496, Rs. 200.00.

The primary goal of Buddhism is to attain liberation. That which hinders liberation is the clinging to ego or self, that is to an entity which is indivisible, unchanging, definite and eternal. In order to eliminate this deep-rooted clinging, three major practices are given in Buddhism – (i) adherence to precept; (ii) practice of meditation and (iii) *prajna* or non-self (*anatman*) training.

The central teaching of Buddhism is – “The nature of everything is void (= insubstantial in essence).” Through realization of emptiness, one attains liberation and the perfection of Buddhahood. Emptiness is not a nihilistic void, but a wondrous state wherein dynamic events and dramas can take place. True realization of emptiness is a state free of all types of clinging, a state encompassing all and unifying all.

“Mahayana” is the great vehicle of Buddhism whose followers vow to attain enlightenment for the sake of delivering all other sentient beings from suffering. The spiritual hero of the Mahayana is the Bodhisattva, in whom the virtues of wisdom and compassion are stressed and balanced. According to Mahayana Buddhism, the true teaching of the Buddha is provided only in one vehicle – the Mahāyāna. Other vehicles, such as those of Śrāvakas *pratyekabuddhas* are only expedient teachings for the unprepared.

Maharatnakutasutras is one of the important sutra groups belonging to the Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is a collection of forty-nine different sutras which cover a manifold range of topics. In the present translation, twenty-two sutras are presented for the reader. This translation is presented in eight sections covering specific issues – on Maya and Miracles, on emptiness, on the light of Tathagata, on consciousness, on virtue and discipline, on pure land and on general Mahayana doctrines. Each of these sections is provided with copious notes and supported with additional details in the glossary.

Buddhism in the course of history has developed a great variety of methods to express the inexpressible and to enable man to "catch" that which is totally transcendent or empty. At one extreme, the intellectual approach represented by the Madhyamika philosophy is present; at the other end, the direct approach techniques of Zen Buddhism prevail. Both these methods depend for their source – authority on sutras. Sutras are the final guide and arbiters in all the disputed matters. The sutras are prescribed not only for general reading, but for repetitive reading, frequently, even aloud, so that the words of the sutra become totally absorbed into the sub-conscious mind. This tantamounts to letting the sutra take over the mind and run its course to reach the beyond. Thus the repetition of Buddhist Sutra is a means of acquiring religious insight and experience.

In a country like India, of the ancient days, every other new religion had somehow to measure up its tenets of philosophy and practical presentations and methods in the light of Vedic religion. Buddhism and Jainism, which emerged as an alternative and/or revolt to the Vedic religion had to present their alternatives in all the spheres of philosophy and practice.

Probably the Vedic scholars who got converted in their faith and conviction to Buddhism suitably adopted the Hindu Vedic hierarchical structures, teaching methods and practices into the framework of Buddhism. Thus, we find parallels of Vedic Dharmasutras and Smṛti sutras coming up in various Buddhistic sutras. The rules of moral and conduct prescribed for a mendicant get suitably adopted for the monks. (See section VII of the text which expounds on the right observations of the Middle way and various kinds of Srammanas). The parallels of Vedic yoga practices the concepts of hell and heaven and law of karma

get a structured re-presentation and orientation in these sutras. The most interesting is the concept "that realization can be engendered through long years of frequent recitation of sutra by a process of religious insight and experience. This is exactly the adoption of "Japa-parayana", prevalent in the Vedic texts application for practical desires, (Kāmya) achievement. The literary style of sutras, apparently repetitive, is an intentional one towards this purpose.

The original teachings, which had their origin in India have travelled far and wide and passed through different language phases. The present work in English is based on the Chinese version of the text. Therefore it is difficult to make observations on the accuracy of translation. However, looking at the style of the text translated into and in comparison with the Sanskrit texts explaining these concepts and parallel works in Vedic background, this work is of great help to clearly bring out the basic authentic tenets of Mahayana Buddhism.

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