

## Book Reviews

**Sebastian Athappilly, *Theology in India: Essays on Christ, Church and Eucharist*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2005, pages 280, ISBN: 81-86861-76-9.**

*Theology in India* is a significant, scholarly and substantial volume on Christ, Church, and Eucharist, by Sebastian Athappilly. The primary focus of the author in this volume is to establish and extol Jesus Christ as the unique and universal mediator of salvation.

The title, *Theology in India*, “intends to convey the idea that the articles are primarily against the background of the present Indian scenario of theological, liturgical, religious and socio-political discussions and debates” (22). In his theological investigation and interpretation, the basic guiding principle of Athappilly is as follows: “faith is truth, not because it is my faith, but because it is my faith” (22). While the author criticises the uncritical approach of certain authors in the name of inter-religious dialogue, he is sincerely and seriously committed to it, provided it is understood properly: “this does not mean that we can advocate a plurality or parallelism of economies of salvation, for God is one, so too his history of encounter with humanity. We constitute one family in so far as we are created and interrelated in Christ in the single economy of salvation” (23). The author rightly and consistently holds the view that rather than speaking of an Indian Church “we can speak of Oriental, Syro-Malabar, Latin, Syro-Malankara, and Orthodox Churches in India. It is also in this sense that we think of theology *in India*” (23).

“The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the Plurality of Religions,” the first and key article in this volume, presents the central concerns of the author. He challenges the authors who compromise or reject the corner stone of the faith of Christians, that is, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the name of inter-religious dialogue and religious plurality. This lengthy article, mapping one third of the volume, that is, pages 25-98, is a clear sign of the erudite scholarship, enlightening arguments, excelling clarity, intellectual honesty, logical consistency, and true humility of the author and the zeal of a Christian missionary concerning the conviction of and commitment to Jesus Christ, unique and universal mediator of salvation.

The first article of the book invites the readers to the core of Christian faith, which is “not merely sharing and professing the faith *of* Jesus Christ, but essentially faith *in* him” (25). The author sincerely and seriously holds that the faith in Jesus as the unique mediator of salvation is the “very core of Christian faith” (26). He is of the conviction that “it is against Christian faith and theology to reduce Jesus Christ into just *one* of the many saviours or incarnations” (26). Without denying the role and value of any religious figure and, at the same time, without compromising the truth of salvation, the author has this to state: “When we speak of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, we focus on his role as the only ultimate mediator of salvation of and from God” (27). Though we can and may *distinguish* between Jesus and Christ, it “does not mean that we *separate* the Christ from Jesus or vice versa, for Jesus and the Christ are personally the same one” (30). Criticising the ‘relativization strategy’, Athappilly argues: “Faith does not distinguish ‘truth for me’ and ‘truth for others’; if something is true, it is true and valid for me and *all*” (32). He examines the witness of Scripture and Tradition and establishes the truth of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in salvation (33-60). The author conducts an interesting and important tour through the woods of Scripture, Fathers of the Church, contemporary theologians, and the magisterial teachings to highlight the deposit of faith in Jesus Christ. In the following section, he picks up some authors, like, John Hick, Raymon Panickkar, Paul F. Knitter, and criticises their tendency: “It is not necessary to sacrifice the uniqueness of Christ as *the* unique saviour at the altar of dialogue for the sake of a pluralistic co-relational theology of religions” (73).

Upholding the Christian claim of Jesus Christ as the one ultimate mediator of salvation, Athappilly brings into focus the temptation of many authors “to water down the claim” in the false perception of pleasing all (6). He makes the fundamental requirement for a genuine inter-religious dialogue. It is “possible only between persons who are committed to their respective religious faiths; hence it is wrong to think that committed statements of one’s faith will hinder dialogue” (79). The author cleverly and convincingly brings to light the emptiness of the authors who are not convinced of or committed to their faith: “the partners discuss not their faith convictions or religious truths, rather they bracket out their faith and then discuss as though no one has found any truth” (85). Refuting the unfounded allegations of ‘boastful hybris’ levelled against the Christian

claim, the author discloses the personality claim of Jesus to be “his ultimate kenosis” (93). According to the author, the proper mindset of a Christian should “be tolerant, humble and yet firm towards all non-Christian religions” (97).

Consistently, the author argues that “the other mediators share in Christ’s mediatory efficacy and do not offer a salvation bypassing him” (97). Emphasising the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the article highlights that “there is, was and can be no comparable claim of uniqueness for any person as that for Jesus Christ, for no one else has really claimed and been claimed as God Incarnate in the real sense; no one else also has been confirmed in this claim” (97). Showing the baseless and pointless argument of those who sacrifice the uniqueness of Christ, Athappilly gives a warning: “By sacrificing the uniqueness of Jesus Christ at the altar of inter-religious dialogue a theologian may eliminate a scandal or stumbling block of Christian faith; but he will be building his theological edifice without the corner stone and the foundation that God himself has laid” (98). Encouraging the Christians and their faith in Christ, the author presents the pattern of Saint Paul in preaching the Christ crucified: “The stumbling block of the uniqueness of Christ may similarly turn into a stepping stone in the service of truth and salvation to many” (98).

The second article, “The Affective and Affectionate Dimension of the Syro-Malabar *Qurbana*,” is a testimony of personal appreciation and conversion of the author to the celebration of the *Qurabana*, the Eucharist. “Theological Dimensions of the Anaphora of Mar Addai and Mari,” explores the Trinitarian, theo-logical, Christo-logical, pneumatological, liturgio-logical, proto-logical, and Eschato-logical dimensions in the anaphora. The anaphora “entails the grateful *anamnesis* (commemorative representation) of the entire Paschal Mystery of Christ, especially the celebration of his death and resurrection in view (hope) of his second coming” (148). The author successfully illustrates the liturgy as an important source of theology and highlights the basic and significant tenets of the Catholic faith in the anaphora and it “signifies and celebrates the various phases of the dispensation of salvation, beginning with Creation, through the redemptive work of the Paschal Mystery, culminating in the sending of the Holy Spirit, and anticipates the eschatological fulfilment” (149). In a similar vein, the article on “The Theological Anthropology of the Syro-Malabar *Qurbana*” is an exploration of the significance of the liturgy in displaying the theological content. The Eucharistic liturgy bears

witness to the “holistic and cosmic vision in Trinitarian, Christological and anthropological perspective” (184).

The next article, “Is Christian Revelation Theo-centric or Christo-centric?” is a theological investigation into the core of Christian faith. Having analysed different sources and studies, the author arrives at a synthesis: “Christian revelation is Theo-centric, with its specific trait on Christo-centrism. It is Theo-centric in its Christo-centrism and vice versa” (200). In “Universal Magisterium and Reception in the Local Church: An Oriental Perspective,” Sebastian Athappilly observes that “the Orientals in general do not approach the issue from a purely rationalistic point of view, rather spiritually and without much ado about the distinction related to the type of assent to be accorded to each magisterial pronouncement” (227). The author explains the three types of the doctrines according to the new formula of the Profession of Faith, requiring types of assent of the faithful. Nevertheless, the author makes it abundantly clear that the Oriental mentality “is not so much a juridical act of acceptance as it is an ongoing spiritual process in the life of the Church” (228). The article on “The Special Synod for Asia: Story of a Pastoral Voyage” is a personal appreciation on the celebration of the historical synod held in Rome, to which the author also was invited to participate as an *adiutor*.

“Jesus Christ Needs No Life Certificate from Sita Ram Goel” is a rational response to the book entitled *Jesus Christ: An Artifice for Aggression*, written by Sita Ram Goel. The following comment on the book illustrate the mind of Prof. Athappilly: “unscholarly, selective approach and its preconceived and forced conclusions betrays the causes that have given birth to it, namely, feelings of hatred and antagonism against Christianity” (238). At the outset, the author attacks the mindset of Goel: “The author is really (but necessarily) worried about the positive approach of the many open minded Hindus towards Jesus” (238). This article challenges the arguments of Sita Ram Goel one after another. By way of counter arguments, the author establishes that Jesus of the New Testament is not a man of aggression, but a humble and meek person who instructs the disciples not to resist even the one who is evil, but to love the enemies (255). He also rightly points to the tradition of Thomas Christians of India and their legacy of co-existence and cooperation with the Hindus and Moslems of the locality (255). At the same time, the author invites the Christians to make a self criticism on present trends “of an undue and exaggerated Westernization” (257). The article “Is John

Hick a *Theologian of Religion(s)?*" was originally a book review published in the *Journal of Dharma* on D. Cheetham's book, *John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003). The overall impression about Hick's works, according to our author, "is that they are not of a *theological* nature, for he is not operating with theological tools, but purely philosophical ones" (259).

*Theology in India* is an enlightening, empowering, and enriching reading on (1) Christ, the unique and universal mediator of salvation, (2) Church, the sign of salvation in the world, and (3) Eucharist, the celebration of the history of salvation and the mystery of Christ. Though the author deals with fundamental and subtle issues concerning Christian revelation and response, it is an interesting, important, and illustrative work, which must be read by all the faithful and all others who would like to know Jesus Christ and Christianity in truth and depth.

Hence, Sebastian Athappilly deserves our recognition and appreciation for his intellectual pursuit and integral approach in interpreting the faith about the truth of Christ, Church, and Eucharist in a manner logically consistent, theologically sound, and officially right.

**Paulachan Kochappilly**

**Kuncheria Pathil, *Theology of the Church: New Horizons*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006, pages 230, ISBN: 81-86861-90-4.**

India has been called the ideal "testing ground" for the application of the documents of Vatican Council II. The rich and multifarious Indian context provides opportunities for the application of practically all the documents of Vatican Council II, which have the Church as their focal point. This is a point amply illustrated by the book under consideration.

The book, *Theology of the Church: New Horizons*, by Kuncheria Pathil is a welcome addition to the rather scanty literature available in the sector of Indian ecclesiology. Pathil, a former president of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) and *peritus* of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), is undoubtedly one of the foremost ecclesiologists in the contemporary Indian scenario. The book in question comprises a series of articles written by the author in the course of years, on various occasions such as the Colloquium between Bishops and Theologians. These articles touch on all sectors of ecclesiology as the titles themselves indicate: (1) *The Communion of Churches in the Early*

*Centuries and the Development of Primatial Structures, (2) Vatican II and the Paradigm Shift in the Theology of the Church, (3) The Self-Understanding of the Church in India Today, (4) Towards a Theology of the Local Church, (5) Vatican II and Theology of the Laity, (6) Magisterium and Sensus Fidelium in the Interpretation of Revelation and Faith, (7) Inter-Ecclesial Relations in India, (8) Infallibility Debate Revisited, (9) Basic Christian Communities: New Ecclesial Models, and (10) Signs of Hope.*

Obviously, the articles in this collection are of a disparate nature: some tend to be explanatory; some investigative; others are contextual and yet others constitute an attempt at trail-blazing. Consequently, on the part of the reader, these articles may, likewise, elicit varied reactions: from ready acceptance to a more reflective stance which would like to gauge some of the implications; or even an attitude of challenge! Nevertheless, underlying all these, certain elements transpire clearly: the author has a deep sense of loyalty to the Church; he has a thorough knowledge of the documents of Vatican Council II; he is profoundly rooted in the ecclesial tradition to which he belongs, viz., the Syro-Malabar tradition; and he manifests a deep sense of communion with the Universal Church.

**Dominic Veliathe**

**Anand Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2006.**

This is a truly groundbreaking book! Despite all our talk of overcoming dualism, our historical and systematic accounts of the history of religion rarely take the relation of human beings and their natural environment seriously into account. Veeraraj devotes several chapters to recent interpretations of what Jaspers calls the “Axial Age” to show how oblivious most of them are to the natural world. I myself certainly ignored nature in my account until I was educated by Veeraraj through working with him on his dissertation. That experience was revelatory for me. This book is a further outcome of the research he did for his dissertation.

Taking the changing relation of human beings to their natural environment into account deeply transforms the understanding of the history of religion. Veeraraj does not merely note that all the axial or higher religions express alienation from nature; he provides a rich historical analysis of why this is so. Focusing on Mesopotamia, he traces

the changing experience of the natural context from hunters and gatherers, through archaic agrarians and the first cities, to the rise of imperialism in the context of which the axial religions were born. Objectively, the relation to nature changed, and subjectively this was registered in religious sensibility and doctrine. Once this is pointed out, it is hard to question.

A green history requires the author to draw on many fields of knowledge. Veeraraj had done so responsibly, although he could claim no expertise in most of them. Breaking ground in this way invites the participation of many with greater specialized knowledge in such fields as the history of climate change and its effects on population movements and agriculture. No doubt the details of his history will need revision as research continues, but I suspect that the basic account and the associated theses will survive criticism. Whether they will be internalized by students of religion in this deeply dualistic culture remains to be seen. I hope that scholars influenced by process thought will not be resistant to greening their historical perspective.

At one point Veeraraj was inclined to blame the axial religions, especially Christianity, for the degradation of the Earth. The picture he now gives is more nuanced. The alienation of human beings from nature was caused, not by the axial religions, but by the actual human condition under imperial rule. The axial religions reflected this alienation and even transmitted it to peoples whose historical situation was different. The role of these religions, including Christianity, has thus been destructive in relation to the natural environment. Nevertheless, Veeraraj appreciates their positive contributions to human self-understanding and morality and that they also contain and can develop a different understanding of the natural world. It is their transformation, and not their destruction, for which he now calls.

One of the many suggestive ideas he develops is that Egyptian religion, despite its imperial context, expressed a much more positive relation to nature. He sees this as resulting from the behaviour of the Nile which annually renewed the land. The Egyptian experience was very different from that in Mesopotamia, where irrigation required immense labour and, over time, resulted in diminishing yields.

This difference of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian experience points to the need for far more work. Veeraraj has truly broken new ground. The project has been well begun, but there is much more to do. Although Veeraraj is an Indian and his book is published in India, he does not

discuss the rise of axial religions in India. There are also Persia and China to be considered, as well as other imperial contexts in which axial religions did not arise. These limitations are appropriate to breaking new ground. This book is an invitation for many others to take on parallel projects.

Veeraraj's deepest concern is not the past but the present and the future. How can religion become a contributor to the healing of the Earth and sustainable human living within it? He deals briefly with this in the end.

His passion for the present and future is shown by the book jacket. The back flap announces that all profits from sale of the book will support a program of supplying sun ovens to Indians for whom acquiring fuel is crucial to livelihood. My fear is that certain academia will not take seriously a book that so directly promotes a critical social cause. So much the worse for academia!

**John B. Cobb, Jr.**