**Vinod Ramachandra, Faiths in Conflict? Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World; original edition published by Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, U.K.; Indian edition: Secunderabad:OM Books, pp. 1 92; Rs.69.OO.**

The book, the blurb claims as a "fascinating and ground-breaking study" and "examines the complex interaction of four major world faiths." The author, it says, "looks at the distinctiveness of the Christian message in a world of many faiths, and asks if a truly tolerant and pluralistic society can emerge from a rejection of universal truth-claims". The book is described by Colin Chapman (of Beirut, Lebanon) as "A remarkably perceptive and stimulating study from an author who is rooted in a Third World context and understands how issues of faith impact on real issues in the lives of individuals and nations."

One is quite impressed, and expects to read an intelligent and balanced study that addresses itself to the complex problem of plurality of faiths. After even a cursory feeling one is left wondering whether this book is not a sophisticated presentation of the common (often quite impressionistic) arguments that boil down, ultimately, to the uniqueness of Christ and Christianity as nearly the sole criterion.

It is unfair to put it like this. But then, one is left wondering whether the book attempts, at all, to get into the identity of other faiths without presuming (or pre-assuming) the unassailable coherence of Christian faith. Its historicity, for example, as opposed to the mythic bases of Other traditions is a recurrent argument. It is a bit tiresome, too, since "historicity" and "historical" are concepts so pervasive in sacred traditions that to cling to linear notions of history and text is, to say the least, intolerable reduction of the complexity to simplistic notions. For instance, in Hindu systems, there is "history" imbedded in texts that call themselves itihasa and purana which need careful scrutiny.

It is not that one is contesting 'historicity". It is only to suggest that in different world views there may be divergent perceptions of history and other insights which determine that religious tradition's basic attitudes to cosmos, society, individual, etc. similarly, there is also, in the book, a streak of privileging—an intellectual heresy, I naively thought, was laid to rest by post-modernism. To quote one example: Describing Christian missions in India as "in fact.... The soil from which both modern Hindu reform movements and Indian nationalism sprang," Vinoth Ramachandra says, "Gandhi may have claimed to have been nurtured in the spiritual atmosphere Of the Bhagavad Gita but it was not from this that he derived his philosophy of ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (truth-force)". (emphasis added). As if this is not enough of an assertion (one wonders at the author's total denial of Gandhi's own claim, but then assertion often masquerades as argument), Ramachandra tells us with disarming authoritativeness that "the deepest influences on Gandhi came from the "renouncer" traditions of Jainism and the New Testament, particularly the Sermon on the Mount as mediated through the works of Tolstoy." So, in spite of Gandhi's statement that (still available or any one to check in his commentary on the Gita), Ramachandra chooses only "the deepest" and not the peripheral influence. Binaries can go no further in naiveté.

This tendency to marginalize is very difficult for writers on interreligious situation or the plurality of faith to get rid of. Ramachandra at many places, shows himself to be no exception. How this operates subtly is evident from even the authors he quotes. Richand Young, for instance, is quoted as saying that .historically it can be argued that until Protestant Christianity arrived in South Asia the organizational infrastructure for expressing disinterested benevolence was almost entirely lacking...it might be said that the wheel of social change in South Asia has a Christian hub and a Buddhist-Hinduism. "

The simple reason for the absence of organizational infrastructure is that poverty is one of the legacies of colonialism and the exploitation of resources is a saga which one should better forget. Hence, one can uncharitably say that "you created the problem and you found the solution." (Perhaps hub and rim are right, if some irony is allowed.) I do not mean to dismiss the argument frivolously. I am at pains to make a point which Ramachandra seems to have missed in his response to other faiths. At least in matters of spiritual traditions, the principle "variety but no hierarchy" is what saves us from predictable fallacies.

Ramachandra rightly says that "if we cannot be challenged about our most basic assumptions are concerned, then what we have is not dialogue but a monologue." What is being discussed is, among other faiths, neoVedanta which, exemplified in Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda, is "simply religious imperialism masquerading as tolerance." In this, the 'other" is "never taken seriously as a challenge in the entire framework of discourse." All such ecumenical exercises, in fact, according to  Ramachandra, "share in this subtle arrogance." And such exercises are "mutual 'back-scratching' rather that genuine understanding," Then what is the remedy? "Far from being dishonest and unethical, the possibility of conversion is what makes dialogue real and exciting." ("Imperialism", "arrogance": I thought arguments avoid such juicy epithets.)

Conversion to the Other's views, more often than not, simply means religious conversion. In short, proselytization is seen as nothing wrong, except the fact that it may give rise to fantasies of enlightenment as an exclusive right. One dominant field is interpretation of symbols. A striking example is, fortunately, provided by the author himself. He says that Christian criticism of Hindu "idolatry" led to a change in understanding Of what an idol, an icon, etc., are. "For example, most books on Hinduism, written in the English language today." says the author, translate muni as 'icon' rather than 'idol' or 'image', and most educated Hindus assume that the image in the temple is indeed a representation of the deity rather than the deity itself. It is an aid to contemplation, but this was not the traditional understanding. The murti was alive because the 'breath' of the deity has been infused into it in a special ceremony called pranapratishta. Such a change in understanding came about through Christian (and perhaps earlier Muslim) criticism." In short, the fruitful form of dialogue is "criticize and enlighten"! (I for one, am at a loss to know, also, what sources led the author to assert that this is ffi10t the traditional understanding."

I found that, in spite of clearly written, analytically presented views, the perspectives seem to me heavily impressionistic (and often sweeping generalization). Thus what promises to be a well-reasoned study is flawed. Perhaps, it is naiVe to expect fair play in dialogue. That largely depends on equations of power, etc., an area that needs urgent engagement, is left barren and dry. But then it is commendable that Vinoth Ramachandra attempts it sincerely and honesty. ('The Jesus Enigma' is for me, the most interesting.)

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