

## Book Reviews

**God as Feminine : Hindu and Christian Visions - A Dialogue :**  
by Joseph Sebastian. Tiruchirappalli : St. Paul's Seminary Publications, 1995, pp. xxiv + 370. Rs. 200.

The images of the Divine that human societies fashion are often their own magnified mirror images. Such images also often function to legitimize the prevalent social order with its stratifications and injustices. Hegemonic groups have always sought to control religions and to project gods and goddesses with features similar to their own and thus by association to gain for themselves the aura of the Divine. Liberation groups, on the other hand, have called into question such god-images.

One such group that has effectively critiqued the exclusive male images of God in traditional Christianity is the feminist theologians. While radical feminist thinkers have rejected the God of Christianity as irredeemably patriarchal, more moderate feminist theologians have explored the Christian scriptures and traditions to highlight the feminine images of God that have in the past remained mostly hidden. They have insisted on an inclusive concept and language of God as a necessary prelude for women to get equality in all the spheres of the Church.

Dr. Sebastian's book also is an eloquent plea in this vein. He is a professor of Systematic Theology in St. Paul's Seminary, Tiruchirappalli, Tamilnadu. The present book is a slightly reworked version of his doctoral dissertation at the Gregorian University, Rome. An earlier edition of the dissertation was published by Peter Lang, Frankfurt, in the well known collection, *European University Studies*. The uniqueness of the work is that it brings together in dialogue two of the most important religions of the world, namely Hinduism and Christianity, through a comparative study of a representative mystic from each, Subramania Bharati and Julian of Norwich, on the theme of God as feminine.

The book has three major sections. The first four chapters, forming section one, study the life and thought of Bharati. The second section, chapters five and six, analyse the feminine images of God in Christianity and particularly in the *Showings* of Julian. Section three is the last chapter which deals with the convergences and divergences between the two mystics and apply them to the pastoral situation.

Dr. Sebastian's exposition of the thought of the two mystics, particularly that of Bharati, is quite thorough. He deals at length with the various metaphors, symbols and images they employ and it is a delight for the reader to delve with him into the content of each. Through painstakingly detailed analysis he brings out the striking agreement, despite many differences, at the core of the two religious traditions on such a significant area.

The footnotes are abundant and the bibliography extensive. The table of contents is quite detailed. What is missing is only an index of subjects. The author's own translation of the poems of Bharati is generally adequate and at times quite elegant.

As for the subject matter of the book one might wonder as to how appropriate is the author's choice for study and comparison two mystics who lived nearly four centuries apart and who are rather marginal to the mainstream of their respective religious traditions. I, however, find his choice quite felicitous for each in his own way has given, perhaps, the most articulate and daring expression to the Divine in feminine categories. Also some of the most basic insights of a tradition are often kept alive, only in its margins and the centre can often revitalise and renew itself by turning to the periphery.

Apart from some repetition of certain themes and ideas, unavoidable in a work of this kind, I find the book stopping precisely where one would be asking for more. Though it cogently argues and irrefutably concludes that the use of feminine images

of God is native to the Hindu as well as Christian traditions, one may not find his conclusion all that exciting, unless, of course, one is a stranger to the current theological discussions, particularly in the feminist circles. In such a study, which ends with a pastoral proposal, one would certainly expect the author to spell out at least in some minimal manner the more practical implications to the life-style, spirituality, ministry and structures of the Church today that are consequent to our imaging God in feminine categories. For considering God as feminine is by no means a matter of merely changing our concepts and linguistic forms. It is a symbol of our readiness to fully accommodate in all areas of ecclesiastical life and expression the feminine experience. Given the limited scope of a doctoral dissertation, maybe, we should look to the author to do such an elaboration in a further work.

The author's desistence from rushing to find easy and superficial similarities in two diverse traditions is laudable. However, his claim, that the Hindu metaphor of the feminine half of God and portrayal of *Sakti* as his consort are not found in Christianity (p. 306) is questionable. Does not one find traces of the feminine half of God in the following biblical passage: "God created humankind in his image.....male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27)? Similarly is not the portrayal of lady wisdom (see Prov 8:22-31; Wif 7:24ff; 9:9ff; etc.) coming rather close to considering her as God's consort?

Another statement of the author is intriguing to me. "Principally, Christian tradition does not admit any possibility of speaking of the feminine aspect in God's being. It only portrays God as feminine through metaphors, symbols and thus articulates the feminine attributes, activities and characteristics of God", (p. 304). Do not metaphors, symbols and images seek to express, though in a very analogical and therefore ambiguous manner, something real about God's very being? Is there any other way of speaking about God's very being except through metaphors, symbols and images? Are not the attributes, activi-

ties and characteristics of God giving us some insights into God's very essence? Certainly here one misses the author's explanation of the terms metaphor, attributes, activities etc.

Despite such minor limitations, I find Dr. Sebastian's book a model of thoroughgoing scholarly research, masterly argumentation and exemplary inter-religious openness. His appeal for the use of feminine images of God in all forms of ecclesiastical discourse is wholly acceptable. The book is a treasure trove for people with a varied range of interests: Bharati, Mysticism both Hindu and Christian, feminism, inter-religious dialogue etc. It is of interest to all of us so that, "our experience of God becomes authenticated, our relationship with God becomes greatly enriched and thus the dignity and equality of both men and women will be realized in full measure." (p. 324).

**D. Alphonse**

**YOU ARE FREE: Women in the New Testament.** By R. J. Raja S.J. NBCLC, Bangalore, India, 1993, pp. VI + 121, price not indicated.

From the N.T. the writer has selected 28 women to reflect on their role in the context of their living conditions and the society at that time, thus bringing us in touch with the reality of today in the biblical context. This book is divided into three sections. The first section (Women with a Name) depicts the role, which some prominent women in the bible, have played. The second section (Women without a Name) brings us into contact with some unknown women, but who have left a great impact by the role they have played.

The third section (Parable Women) deals with three women who appear in the Parables of Jesus. Each chapter deals with a woman who became a Model Disciple. Each one is studied from the perspective of the synoptic writers or as they appear only in the individual Gospels. The footnotes at the end of each chapter give ample explanations of the exposition on a particular topic

for clear understanding of the matter so that even those who have not done any special Biblical studies may be able to profit by it. The questions given for reflection at the end of each chapter are very useful to make us aware of where we are, personally and as communities, in living our commitment in the light of the exposed values.

This book will be of great help for reflection and sharing in communities of sisters, priests, groups of women, even for high School, Higher Secondary and College students.

**Sr. Rachel I.C.M.**

**The Perfect Triangle : Towards the Spirituality of the Indian Family.** By Dr. John Kulandai, Tiruchirappalli, St. Paul's Publications, 1995. PP. xii + 376. Rs. 120.

Dr. John Kulandai is a professor of Spiritual Theology in St. Paul's Seminary, Tiruchirappalli, Tamilnadu. The present book is his doctoral dissertation at the Gregorian University, Rome.

The factors like poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, unemployment, lack of housing conditions, population explosion, caste, religious pluralism, slavery of women, dowry system, child labour, etc., really hamper family life and unity. At this juncture, for the families in India to find their relevant spirituality this excellent book is so to say a boon. Based on precise documentation, deep reflection and firm objectivity the author presents the family spirituality as a "communitarian spirituality" including the parents, children and all in the home as partners, distinguishing it from the conjugal spirituality.

The book has been divided into 3 chapters. In the First chapter the author lays foundation for the development of the family spirituality with the treatment of socio-cultural and religious aspects of the families. It is not only informative but also

sets the background that conditions the spirituality of the family with its contradicting elements of hierarchy and equality, harmony and intolerance and secularism and religiosity.

In the second chapter the author deals with the teachings of Familiaris Consortio about the spirituality of the family in a detailed manner placing the emphasis on the human person in his totality. Basing himself in the Familiaris Consortio he explains the family as the very plan of God, Image of God, Covenant and the Domestic Church, thus proposing the basis for the spirituality of the family. Explaining the above aspects with proper documentation he brings out the originality of marriage and the family in Familiaris Consortio looking at it from the point of view of Christian anthropology. He summarises the newness and originality of marriage and the family in the following words : There is a clear shift of emphasis from the creation of man to man as created, from the image of God in Man to man himself as the image of God, from the redemption of man to man himself as redeemed, from the action of man to man himself as the subject of his actions, from the freedom of man to man himself as the subject of freedom, from the work of man to man himself as the subject of his work and from the family of man to man himself in his family (p. 210). Thus the change of outlook is very well affirmed.

In the third chapter the author allows the teachings of Familiaris Consortio to dialogue with the situation of the Indian family, which results in the development of the spirituality of the family in India. Against the dichotomist view of spirituality of the past which considered religious activities such as formal prayers and worship, evangelization and catechetics, spiritual exercises and works of charity as spiritual and human life namely marriage, sex, family, economic, social and educational activities, works and leisure, science and technology as temporal (p. 229-230), the author proposes an INTEGRAL SPIRITUALITY which views spirituality of the family as totality of life filled with the presence of the Spirit and as a journey towards the

Trinitarian fulness (p. 324-325). The Trinitarian model of spirituality for the family goes along with the Indian mind. Proposing of a model of spirituality the author underlines the main characteristics of such a model without which the model will not be complete; neither fully Christian nor fully Indian.

Theology-in-context is the method adopted for this book, as its very purpose demands it. In allowing the Christian doctrine to dialogue with the situation and the religious cultural traditions of India attention has been drawn to the predominant religious values that have a bearing on the family situation in India, though adequate treatment of the Indian religious cultural traditions has not been given in this work. The model proposed by the author for the spirituality of the family in India though not comprehensive, includes various elements of different levels which make the model viable.

The language and style of the book make it easy to read. The abundant foot-notes, extensive bibliography and proper index enhance the value of the book. A characteristic of this work, fruit of years of experience, is the author's non-dogmatic approach. In my estimation many families can be helped by this book to be more realistic in their spiritual journey. It is not only a valuable addition to the literature on family spirituality but definitely a significant contribution to it.

**Fr. Antony, P.**