

## Book Reviews

**The Gospels with an Indian Face.** By R. J. RAJA, S. J.  
Chennai; CLS, 1996. Pp. viii + 81. Rs. 40.00.

Every interpreter comes to his text with a pre-understanding and hence his reading is very much conditioned by the society in which he lives. This is a widely accepted hermeneutical principle today. *The Gospels with an Indian Face* is but a modest attempt to re-read the synoptic Gospels in the Indian religious context by a renowned Bible scholar, Fr. Raja.

The book under review consists of two chapters. Through a careful study of a few texts chosen from the Gospels, R. builds on the hypothesis that the Matthaean Gospel portrays the *jnana marga* (the way of wisdom), and the Gospels of Mark and Luke present the *karma marga* (the way of action) and the *bhakti marga* (the way of devotion) respectively. However, this attribution, the author points out, is not exclusive (chapter 1).

The author's efforts are certainly in line with the pioneering efforts of some Indian thinkers like A.J. Appasamy who have sought to interpret the Gospel of John in terms of Indian Christian bhakti. Strange that R. fails to take note of this! One also wonders why this attempt at an Indian reading is limited to the synoptic Gospels and not been extended to the Johanne Gospel which has fascinated the Indian mind with its profound mysticism.

In chapter two, R. probes deeper into the Gospel of Luke and shows the varied types of roads trekked along the journey: "incidents and narratives, persons and places, words and teachings, miracles and parables - all of which have been linked together through the mile-stones of the bhakti marga" (p. 80). Bhakti movement itself was born

as a protest against Brahminic domination and one of its cardinal principles is the fundamental equality of all human beings, independent of the class or caste one belongs to. This liberative aspect of bhakti is also the central thrust of the Gospel of Luke (cf 4:16-30) which has often been called the 'Gospel of the poor', the 'Gospel of women', etc. Bhakti consists, therefore, not simply in love or devotion, but in liberative action which springs from love, on behalf of the oppressed and the marginalised. Had the author identified and highlighted this point, his book would have acquired a more genuine 'Indian face'!

This work is an attempt by the author "to paint with the brush of the Indian 'spirit' (the meaning - for - us) the Palestinian or Hellenistic 'letter' (the meaning - in - itself) of the Gospel", and "to liberate the 'letter'..... from its imprisonment to allow it to be breathed by the ancient but fresh, ever old and ever new, 'spirit' of Indian religion and culture" (p. 42).

Although the size of the book is small, it is indeed a serious study which deserves the attention of scholars. That it has been published by CLS speaks for its high quality.

This booklet, which is a collection of articles that appeared earlier in the theological journal *Vidyajyoti*, is an initial effort which needs to be pursued further and one would expect a separate study on each of the Gospels (p. vii). This is the future task of the author!

**J. Susaimanickam**

**Bioethics: A Primer for Christians.** *By Gilbert MEILAENDER, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996. Pp. xii+120.*

Bioethics is generally understood as a systematic study of human behaviour in the fields of life sciences and health care, in so far as this behaviour is examined in the light of moral values and principles. The need for ethical reflection and guidelines in the area of medicine and life sciences is increasingly being felt today as urgent. As a branch of "applied ethics", bioethics is no more the privileged preserve of "bioethicists" but has become the concern of the "common man" especially in recent years.

When a few years ago poverty-stricken farmers were lured into the posh clinics of Bangalore where they were made to "donate" their kidneys for a monetary compensation without ever being asked for their "informed consent", or when fertility clinics in the major cities of India fill their coffers at the expense of childless couples by putting forth tall claims of "producing" children through IVF & ET and thus pretending to satisfy the longing of the Indian psyche for offspring, preferably male, it is not only the "experts" who voiced their concern, but the "common man" too wanted to have a say in the matter. Interestingly, the discussion was centred not merely on the technical feasibility of a particular bio-medical intervention, but on the attending circumstances, the ruthless profit motive and the uneven and unjust distribution of health care prevailing in the country. That a new sensitivity is emerging, together with a new approach to moral discourse is seen in the establishment of ethical commissions and the drawing up of laws at various levels to deal with broad health issues which incorporate an ethical component.

One aspect of the ethical reflection in the area of medicine and the life sciences (as is the case with other branches of "applied ethics") concerns the "approach". There are some who advocate a "secular" approach while others put forward a "religious" approach. In the context of India one has to decidedly opt for a secular approach

which goes beyond narrow considerations of religion and religious belief. There must be a common search for the basic *humanum*. The harrowing experiences of religious fundamentalism and fanatic communalism are not the only reasons for this. There is a valid theological reason, too. Human beings share in the ineffable mystey of Being and notwithstanding their contingency and fragility, they must engage in a *common search* for fuller humanity. Christians are co-travellers with people of other religions.

And yet the question is inescapable: has Christianity anything to contribute to bioethics? Gilbert Meilaender is of the firm belief that there is a moral vision shaped by a Christian understanding which he brings under the category of the "deontological". Without rejecting "teleology" he still feels that human actions cannot be evaluated only in terms of progress or only in terms of the beneficial goals and objectives to be realized. Goals alone do not determine moral action but the exercise of human freedom in search of goals should always be within certain *limits*.

A theme running through M.'s book is that *human freedom* should acknowledge its *limits*, and not seek to be god-like. Writing on "assisted reproduction" M. says, "The shift from 'procreation' to 'reproduction' is in part a manifestation of *human freedom* to master and reshape our world" (p 12, italics mine). As for abortion, while allowing for exceptions in the case of danger to mother's life and pregnancy due to rape or incest, M. insists that the worth and dignity of the child's life are not dependent on our evaluation, and that our continuing task is "to let our estimate of the child be shaped and formed by God's. To seriously attempt this is to learn our *limits*" (p 37, italics mine). Other instances of this approach followed by M. are found on pp. 42 (Genetic Advance), 55 (Prenatal Screening), 66-67 (Suicide and Euthanasia), 69 (Refusing Treatment), 83 (Who Decides?), 92 (Gift of the Body: Organ

Donation), 113 (Gift of the Body: Human Experimentation), and 118 (Sickness and Health).

According to M. "we place our ultimate hopes for Health and Wholeness in the God who himself has been broken by death - and who nevertheless lives". He concludes the book with the words of G. K. Chesterton: "Hope is the power of being cheerful in circumstances we know to be desperate" (p 118).

Gilbert Mailaender's book is indeed a "primer", a first school text book, on bioethical issues. It examines some of the major bioethical issues from a practical standpoint. But it has been written with a clear focus: the Christian vision. According to this vision, human life and progress bear the mark of a basic ambiguity and tension between the goodness of creation and the frailty of the human person; the autonomy of the individual and the limits of human freedom; the mythical Promethean gift of fire which gives light and warmth and the same fire which harms.

M. has largely succeeded in arguing that Christians ought to consciously think about bioethical issues as *Christians* if they want to enter into a meaningful dialogue with other approaches to bioethics and continue to provide a valuable service to humankind through the inspiration of the gospels.

V. Paul Leon

**Life's Living Toward Dying: A Theological and Medical-Ethical Study.** By Vigen GUROIAN. Grand Rapids, Michigan | Cambridge, U.K., 1996. Pp. xxviii + 108.

A controversial law passed in the northern territory of Australia legalizing euthanasia and the report that a certain Dr. Philip Nitschke helped cancer patient Bob Dent, 66, become the first person ever to commit legal euthanasia on

Sept. 22, 1996, have brought into sharp focus the debate on the ethical and legal aspects of physician-assisted suicide. Taking advantage of the same law, a second person, Janet Mills, is reported to have committed doctor-assisted suicide on Jan 2, 1997 by activating computerized equipment that pumped a lethal cocktail of drugs into her bloodstream.

Legalization of euthanasia is but one of the many issues discussed in the book under review. As the author says, "I have found too few books that seek to bring together the concerns of theology and medicine, of faith and medical ethics, and it is this omission that I have sought to address here, bringing to bear both general Christian theological views and some insights specifically associated with Orthodox beliefs and practices" (p. xxvii).

In the Preface titled "Dr. Kevorkian and the Thanatos Syndrome" Guroian examines the thought of Dr. Jack Kevorkian ("Dr. Death") who, as is well known, has been carrying on a relentless campaign for physician-assisted suicide or voluntary euthanasia, attractively labelled by him as "medicide" (see Kevorkian's book *Prescription Medicide: The Goodness of Planned Death*, 1991). G. exposes the assumptions of Kevorkian and the euthanasia movement as "unlimited freedom of the patient" and "medical competence" which would make any ethical code superfluous. The term "thanatos syndrome", taken from a novel of the same name stands for a society which prides itself of having got rid of the "mystery" of death, where the killing of humans, from fetuses to those geriatric wards, knows no limit.

The rest of the book, divided into three parts, has five chapters in all. Part I deals with "the culture of death". G. finds that the attitudes toward death in contemporary Western society pose a serious challenge to traditional Christian teaching on the subject. Many have become victims of a "great spiritual emptiness" as they either

dread death as absolutely evil or are under the illusion that life is for the living and death is for the dying.

The Christian vision of death is presented in Part II. Here G. analyses several literary works and brings out vividly the existential drama of those who had experienced the death of their loved ones. There is the personal struggle of C.S. Lewis to hold on to his faith after the death of his wife (*A Grief Observed*, 1961); the lamentation of St. Augustine over the death of his boyhood friend (*Confessions*, see section 4:4,5-6); the final solution of a character in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Svidrigaylov, who decides to commit suicide out of boredom with a life that seems to have no purpose other than indulgence in banal pleasures and so ends his life in despair that he has not managed to win the love that might have supplied his life with meaning; and the experience of conversion which Ivan Ilych undergoes at the moment of his death, after he had been convicted of his pride and arrogance (Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*). G. also explores the writings of Orthodox theologians and some Eastern Fathers of the Church and shows the vision of death as affirming not simply a terminus of biological life, but as embracing spiritual and eschatological dimensions of human personhood.

In Part III of the book G. deals with euthanasia and caring for the dying in the Christian faith. First he takes an extended look at what has come to be known "the case of Baby Rena", the perplexing real-life case of a fourteen-month-old infant who died a painful and tragic death at a Washington D.C. hospital in 1991. When brought to the hospital, the young patient was dying, a victim of AIDS and heart disease. In the doctor's judgement, keeping the baby even after six weeks on the respirator was not so much a life-saving measure as an intrusion into her dying process that prolonged and intensified her suffering and so the respirator could be removed but medication to relieve her

severe pain could be provided. The foster parents of the baby, however, objected to this recommendation in the name of "obedience to God". G. defends the distinction between direct killing (euthanasia) and allowing to die and concludes that having faith sometimes requires people to voluntarily give control over a situation to God.

While dealing with euthanasia G. follows the thought of Paul Ramsey, Alexander Schmemmann, Daniel Callahan but surprisingly makes no reference to the recent reflections of the Catholic Church on the issue. The distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means of preserving life, proportionate and disproportionate means used to prolong a merely biological life and the use of drugs to relieve pain even when this procedure could lead to an early death have been proposed by the official teaching of the Catholic Church in a faith perspective (*Declaration on Euthanasia* [1980], *Evangelium Vitae* [1995]).

The two central theological principles G. considers necessary for the care of the dying are, first, that sin and death are mystically related, and second, that healing and salvation are intimately connected. Drawing upon the rich theological tradition and the sacramental practices of the Eastern Churches, G. concludes that the Christian practice of *penance* corresponds to the first principle while *suffering under the sign of the cross* corresponds to the second principle. There is a difference between curing and healing. A person can be healed even as he is dying - this is healing as reconciliation with others and with one's own past and this is a crucial thing for the dying irrespective of whether or not the person is religious or secular.

While Guroian has looked at the complex reality of human death from a variety of angles - theological, ethical and medical, he has not paid sufficient attention to the economic and socio-cultural aspects. One reason for this restricted view is perhaps his first world, western perspective.

Death today in the developing world cannot be understood apart from what has come to be known as "social euthanasia" or the responsibility for mass deaths through malnutrition, unhygienic living conditions and the lack of essential and simple medicines.

Written with clarity and sensitivity, G.'s book gives a Christian view point for the care of the dying that is consistent with the value the Christian tradition has ascribed to human life as gift of God, a great gift indeed, but not the ultimate. One would agree with Nicholas Berdyaev who once stated that "a system of ethics which does not make death its central problem has no value and is lacking in depth and earnestness".

V. Paul Leon

**A Christian Theology of Religions : The Rainbow of Faiths.**  
By John HICK. Louisville, Kentucky; Westminster John Knox Press, 1995. Pp x + 160.

This is a book about the issue of the uniqueness of Christianity and how it is to be interpreted meaningfully from a theological perspective in today's world. Since the publication of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness : Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* edited by John Hick and Paul Knitter (1987) a lively debate has been going on about a new understanding of the great religions of the world and Christianity in the light of other faiths, an understanding that has been termed *pluralistic*. This pluralist position was contrasted with the traditional approaches *exclusivism* and *inclusivism*. It was seen as a move away from the insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity towards a recognition of the independent validity of other ways.

Reactions to the pluralistic theology of religions articulated in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* were not late in

coming. In fact, within three years of its publication there appeared among others a significant work *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (1990, ed. Gavin D'Costa).

The book under review is John Hick's reply to the varied reactions to his pluralist position in regard to a Christian theology of religions. It is an expanded version of the Auburn Lectures H. delivered in April 1994 at Union Theological Seminary, New York. The subtitle of the book is explained by the author thus: "The rainbow, as the sun's light refracted by the earth's atmosphere into a glorious spectrum of colours, is a metaphor for the refraction of the divine Light by our human religious cultures" (pp. ix-x). There are of course different versions of religious pluralism and H. says, "My own particular version of religious pluralism holds that the great world religions constitute very different but so far as we can tell more or less equally valid ways of conceiving, experiencing, and responding in life to the ultimate reality with which religion is concerned" (p. 149).

In the introduction H. presents in broad strokes the contours of the theological controversy surrounding the recent discussions on a Christian theology of religions. In chapter 1 the author puts forward his own version of religious pluralism ("The Pluralist Hypothesis"). In chapters 2-5 the discussion proceeds in the form of a dialogue that takes place between the author ("John") and two other interlocutors, one a philosopher ("Phil") and the other a theologian ("Grace"). This section covering a substantial portion of the book (pp. 31-124) contains H.'s responses and reactions to the criticisms levelled against his pluralist position. He declares his intention thus "to correct some misapprehensions, to clarify some issues, to show why a Christian pluralism is permissible and why it is attractive to a growing number of people both inside and outside the churches" (p. 9).

Chapter 6 titled "Christianity as One True Religion Among Others" shows how an "intellectual revolution" has occurred in theological reflection and which has led to "the acceptance of Christianity as one valid human response to the Divine among others" (p. 132). H. makes a giant leap of the imagination and considers what the state of Christianity may be in two generations time (year 2056 C.E.) within the more progressive wing of Christianity if the pluralistic vision continues to gain acceptance within it (pp. 134-139). H. then gives a sampling of the spiritual riches contained in the religious scriptures like the Talmud, the Bhagavadgita, the Adi Granth, the Dhammapada, the Koran and in the writings of spiritual masters such as Kabir, Tao Te Ching, Rumi, Shankara, Martin Buber, Rabindranath Tagore (pp. 139-147). A pluralist approach to religions will not shy away from savouring and drawing inspiration from "the enormous wealth of varied riches that await us in the spiritual writings of humankind around the world and through the centuries" (p. 147), and this will only be the natural consequence when "we have come to see the other great religious traditions as different but (so far as we can tell) equally valid human responses to the ultimate reality that is the ground and source of everything and the condition of our highest good" (p. 139).

A helpful section is given in the form of an Appendix, (pp. 151-156) which lists several of H.'s works and also critical studies (books, journal articles, dissertations) on his thought.

H. admits that he is putting forward a "hypothesis" a theological possibility when he advocates a pluralist approach to the theology of religions. He considers the exclusivist approach ("salvation is confined to Christians only"; "outside the church there is no salvation") as having disappeared from mainline Catholicism. Inclusivism speaks in such terms as "anonymous Christians" and "the unknown

Christ of Hinduism". According to him, "religious inclusivism is a vague conception which, when pressed to become clear, moves towards pluralism" (p. 23).

While the attempt of Hick and many others who have adopted a pluralist approach is basically an attempt to re-interpret the Christian *faith* so as to grasp meaningfully the diversity of religious faiths, there is yet another call to go beyond the three-fold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. According to this view point, the religious traditions of the world are not so much a challenge to re-interpret Christian faith as to re-interpret its understanding of *love*. A valid theology of religion will focus on love that seeks to re-interpret itself in its true universality by taking seriously the faith of the other. No one can fault H. if he understands this view point as but a "variation" of pluralism (see p. 19)!

H.'s *A Christian Theology of Religions* must be regarded as a major contribution which brings in greater clarity to the ongoing discussion on the significance of the religious traditions of the world. The *rainbow* is indeed a harbinger of hope!

**V. Paul Leon**

**Give Happiness A Chance.** By Phil BOSMANS. Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 1996. Pp. 136. Rs. 40.00

This book belongs to the category of "inspirational writings". It offers hope, a sense of direction, comfort, encouragement, and a feeling of self-worth to people who, as all of us do sometime or other, grope in the dark. Head of a Belgian organization that helps people cope with the crises of everyday life, Phil Bosmans says that he has put into writing what he had been telling people over the phone for several years through a telephone answering service

which handles numerous calls from people seeking a word of understanding and encouragement.

The content of the book is organized under 70 titles like "A friend", "Comfort", "Pessimism", "Be gentle", "Accept life", "We need to be understood", etc. Here is a sample :

*Talk is 'in'. Action is 'out*

Talk is 'in'.

Action is 'out'.

Never has there been so much talk as there is today.

Never has such an avalanche of holoow, pointless words crashed down on people's heads.

Everyone wants to talk.

Everyone wants to put in a word.

Everyone wants to interrupt.

But only a few have anything to say.

Because only a few can bear the silence and effort needed to think.

There are several drawings and photos which enhance the get up of the book. A Christian perspective is discernible throughout the book.

**V. Paul Leon**