

BOOK REVIEWS

George Chemparathy, *La Bible et le Veda comme Parole de Dieu. Un Essai de Théologie Comparée*, Vienne: De Nobili Research Library, Department of South Indian Studies, Vienna University, 2010. Pp. xxvii+ 373. No price.

The dialogue between Christian and Hindu Scriptures is an important *locus* of Indian theology. To be fruitful, it calls for precision of thinking and accurate information. These are the qualities brought by George Chemparathy, Emeritus Professor of Indian Philosophy at Utrecht University, in his comparative study on *Bible and Veda as God's Word, an Essay in Comparative Theology*. Professor Chemparathy is eminently qualified for the task. He holds a Doctorate in Philosophy of Vienna University (Austria), a Doctorate in Literature of Utrecht University (Netherlands) and a Doctorate in Theology of Louvain-la-Neuve University (Belgium). He has also the background of a distinguished career of Indologist at Utrecht University and he has published several books and a number of articles in English, German and French.

Actually the present volume is a revised and enlarged edition of his doctoral thesis in Theology, presented at Louvain in 1975^① and revised in 1995. Presented to the Western academic world, the thesis assumes that "the essential characteristics of the Bible as God's word are known to theologians and historians of religions", whereas to them "the particularities of the Veda as God's Word are either unknown or insufficiently known" (p. xxiii). Therefore the reader should not expect new insights on biblical inspiration: the viewpoints clearly set forth are those of any basic Introduction to the Bible. The main thrust will be

① must be: 1977

to bring to the debate the input of his Indological competence especially as regards the vast field of Vedic writings.

So the first part of the book provides a general introduction to the Vedas and their transmission in the Smṛti and the Vedānta. Among the various systems, the author singles out the Nyāya-Vaisheshika *darshana*, which is his particular field of expertise since his doctoral thesis in philosophy had treated of "The Origin and Development of the doctrine of a Supreme Being in Nyāya Vaisheshika (NV)." Unlike the Mīmāṃsā which considers the Veda as uncreated, issued from the eternal *śabda* (pp 24-41), the Nyāya Vaisheshika (NV), at least in its later form came to admit the existence of *Bhagavan Mahēshwara* (Īshwar as supreme God) and attributed to him the paternity of the Veda" (pp. 74-75). It is in the NV therefore that a better basis of comparison can be found with the Christian conception of the Bible as Word of God.

Having thus defined the field of his research, the author engages the comparison in three connected areas: inspiration, truth, canon. He is conscious that these are Christian concepts cast on a different thought structure (p. xxii). His is an explicitly theological perspective. He intends to clarify concepts rather than engaging in dialogue (p. 97). His awareness of the limitations of his research will save him from the dangers of too easy concordism.

Concerning Inspiration, after having reviewed rapidly the theories of Inspiration up to K. Rahner, the thesis passes on to the Hindu position. It reviews the positions of Ishanand Vempney and of the Bangalore Seminar on *Non Christian Scriptures* (1975). Examining Vempney's hypothesis of an "analogical aspiration," he finds it "unclear and deceptive" (*imprécise et trompeuse*). Hindus themselves might not react favourably to a concept "alien to their own mental categories" (p. 165). From a theological point of view, says Chemparathy, we cannot postulate degrees of inspiration, not even between the Old and the New Testament. Inspiring books are not necessarily inspired. Here it

can be noted that the great Bible scholar P. Benoit, OP, had a more nuanced view in his important article on "The analogies of Inspiration" (1959) in which he said that "scriptural inspiration is no longer an isolated and exceptional phenomenon; it is to be viewed in the centre of a great current, that of the divine Breath, that runs all along through salvation history" (*Exégèse et Théologie* III, p. 29).

Between Vedic and biblical inspiration, an important difference noted by Chemparathy is that Christian theology views God as the main "author" of the Scriptures whereas the NV sees him rather as the "speaker" (*Vaktr*), "proclaimer" (*proktr*), "instructor" (*upadestr*) of the Vedas. "He communicates the Vedas without having heard it from anybody. Human beings are primarily listeners of a master's Veda and transmit it in turn..., which justifies the designation of the Veda as *shabda*, lit. 'sound', 'word'" (p. 126). One could speak of an oral or even "auditive" inspiration, whereas Biblical inspiration is *ad scribendum*. When Jesus replies to Satan at the time of the temptation, he says: "It is written..." (Mt 4:1-10). When referring to the Vedas, Hindu tradition will rather say: "such is the *sruti*; so it is heard." Printed editions of the Vedas are a concession to weakened memory and to the needs of scholarship. "But even nowadays, the Vedic instruction of the youngster preparing for the celebration of Vedic rites is made by a master teaching in person, with well marked accents and intonations" (p. 135).

Coming to the question of "truth," the author surveys rapidly the on-going debate on the nature of "biblical truth." For the Vedas, the question is not so much of its "truth" (*sathyatva*) as its "validity" (*prāmānya*) (p. 204). This "validity" is understood in different ways. The Mīmāṃsā is mostly concerned with ritual efficiency (pp. 212-213). For the Sankaran school, the validity of the Vedas concerns the unique reality of the *Brahman* "clearly formulated in the *Mahāvakyā* asserting the identity of *brahman* with individual souls and all that exists" (p. 213). The NV explains the repetitions and contradictions of the Vedas by having

recourse to the metaphoric sense. Parallels can easily be found in the history of biblical exegesis but the NV makes no recourse to human instrumentality (pp. 214-229). A "spiritual" interpretation of the Vedas continues to prevail in modern Hinduism (pp. 231-237).

As regards the Canon, according to Chemparathy, from the Christian point of view, the position is clear enough since there is *de facto* agreement between all Christian denominations at least in so far as the proto-canonical books are concerned. For the Deutero-canonical books, Catholics have clear statements of the Church as expressed in the councils. The situation is more complex in Hinduism. A clear distinction can be made between the Vedas which form the *sruti* (what has been heard) and the *smṛti* (what has been memorized and handed over). The Vedas form the Samhitā (collection) and are considered as norm of faith and life. But if the "Rigveda, Sāmaveda and Yajurveda are considered as canonical without doubt" (p. 291), the canonicity of the Atharvaveda is sometimes doubted or rejected. On the other hand "the distinction between the Samhitā and the Brahmana and Āranyaka is so vague that an exact catalogue of the Vedic texts is difficult to realize, if not impossible" (p. 298). To which must be added the Upanishads, an enormous body of different date and authority, so broad and vague as to include an Allah Upanishad and a Kristopanishad (p. 299). Among a total of 300 or so Upanishads, fourteen have been commented by Sankara and could be considered as properly Vedic (p. 301). Then come the Purānas and the texts of the various sects. Among them the Bhagavad Gītā stands out as a kind of "Hindu Gospel", and, according to Sankara, "a summary of the essence of the contents of the entire Veda" (p. 320), a kind of Canon within the Canon. For the NV, the divine origin and authority of the Vedas is known by the authority of the *mahājana* (great or numerous people) (p. 321). But the precision found in the Christian Canon, especially as defined by the Magisterium, lacks in Hinduism. In such a

complex situation, Champarathy would speak of a “canonicity of the Vedas analogous to that of the Bible” (p. 330).

The foreword informs us that the thesis was submitted in 1977 and revised in 1995. On some points, the information is somewhat outdated. The Qumran discoveries and the new outlook on the LXX have given a new turn to the question of the biblical Canon. In so far as archaeology is concerned, Albright is no longer the ultimate authority and Keller’s defense of the truth of the Bible has never been taken seriously (cf p. 187, n 32). However on the whole, we must be grateful to the author for having brought clarity and precision on a debate often clouded by theological preconceptions. The author has provided a useful tool for further speculations.

He himself does not venture into more advanced exploration. But on the basis of the data he has provided, it would be legitimate to pursue the dialogue. For instance, concerning Inspiration, the stress on the oral character of the Vedas concurs with new lines of approach to the Bible. It is true that the Bible is a book and that the end product of Inspiration is a set of writings (*ad scribendum*). However these writings stand in the midst of a double oral process. *Before* the writing is completed, an oral communication of the message takes place. Oral tradition precedes the Scripture, not only chronologically but also fundamentally. Jesus did not write; he proclaimed the Good News and so did the Apostolic Church. *After* the Scriptures are given, they remain open to creative interpretation. This is what is called *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the history of the way the Scripture texts function in the living conscience and praxis of the believers. Linguistic explains that language is not only informative but also performative. As the recent Pastoral Exhortation *Verbum Domini* has reminded us, Christians are not people of the Book but people of the Word. The new approach brings us closer to the Vedic exegesis based on the dynamism of the *vāc*, of the *shabda*. There is much to learn from an interpretation that starts with phonetics and follows

the stages of linguistic dynamism up to its deepest evocative and hermeneutic implications.

Similarly for the question of canonicity. Chemparathy has shown that the boundaries are blurred between *sruti* and *smṛti*. Canonical criticism points to a similar interaction between Scripture and Tradition. The given texts are carried and reinterpreted by a living tradition. The Second Isaiah (Is 40-55) is a reinterpretation of the Proto-Isaiah (Is 1-39). The description of the Suffering Servant (Is 52-53) is a reinterpretation of the Emmanuel oracles (Is 9:11). This interaction between Scripture and Tradition continues after the final composition of the text. There is more in the Canon than the declaration of the Council of Trent. This declaration did not come ready-made from heaven. It emanated from the *sensus fidelium* guided by our *mahājana* who are the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. The Magisterium is rooted in the prophetic endowment of God's people. The concept of the *mahājana* as criterion of canonicity rings a bell in present research on the formation of the Canon.

Scriptural and theological considerations of that type could be carried further. They show the interest of the material supplied by Professor Chemparathy. Exegetes, theologians and Indologists will benefit greatly from the clear inventory and appraisal which he has offered. As his thesis moderator, Prof J. Ries of Louvain University, says in his "Presentation": "This work called for a valid method and a critical sense able to assess similarities and differences between two mental worlds quite distant from each other" (p. xiv). Those are indeed the qualities found in a study which is the fruit of a life devoted to build a bridge between those "distant mental worlds."

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