

JOHNSON THOMASKUTTY and MATHEW CHANDRANKUNNEL (eds.), *Wider Contextualized Biblical Spirituality* (Bangalore: Ecumenical Christian Centre and Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2021). Pp. 302. Hardcover. US\$42.00.

One of the great new realities in Christian theology is the emergence of a host of non-western voices in the conversation/s. Latin American, African, and some Asian theologians are becoming increasingly well known. Indian authors are less well known, in my experience. Indian Christianity is a small minority group (2.3% of population in the 2011 census of India) but there are more Indian Christians (27.8 million in 2011) than Australian. So, it shouldn't surprise us that Indian Christian theologians are making themselves heard in increasing measure. This new collection of 17 articles by leading Christian thinkers, all working in Indian institutions and published in India, is a sign of this positive development.

The title of this book reflects the focus of the discussion. As one of the editors, Dr Johnson Thomaskutty (Associate Professor of New Testament and Dean of Biblical Studies at Union Biblical Seminary, Pune), writes, "The articles aim to answer the following questions: How can we conceptualize and interpret the Christian Scriptures and extra-Biblical documents for a borderless spiritual formation and orientation? How can the Biblical spirituality cross the human made boundaries like caste, colour, ethnicity, gender, denomination religion, and others? How can the Bible be used as a paradigm to cross the traditional boundaries, create contextual and ideological constellations, build dialogical relationships, incorporate Indian categories, and rhetorize the discourse toward a 'Third Space'?" (xvii).

Clearly these authors are intent on reinterpreting the Bible and Christian spirituality in a way that does justice to the Indian context and the issues that concern Indians, which may be very different to the concerns of the West.

The book begins with a Preface by Mathew Chandrankunnel, a Foreword by Cardinal Archbishop Mar George Alencherry of the Syro-Malabar Church (reminding us that Indian Christianity is very ancient), and an Introduction by Johnson Thomaskutty, which includes a summary of each article in the collection. Then the 17 articles discuss a range of topics ranging from prayer to eco-theology, poverty, marginalized people, Pentecostalism and inclusive spirituality, but all in conversation with various texts from the Old and New Testaments, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Indian religious concepts.

A summary or appreciation of each article would be too difficult in a review like this and probably not very profitable. Instead, I will discuss some of the points that especially grabbed my attention. The first article, "Cry from the Margins as Prayer: A Search for Biblical Spirituality of Prayer," by Joy Philip Kakkanattu, made the very simple but powerful point that even wordless cries from desperate situations (like Abel's murder) get the attention of God and lead

to definite responses, more so than sophisticated or elaborate prayers from the comfortable.

The second article, “Eco-Gender Spirituality in the Hebrew Bible,” by Shiju Mathew, gently reminded me that the “Ancient Near East” (ANE) of most Old Testament scholarship should better be described as “Ancient West Asia” (AWA), a small example of Eurocentric criticism, as it surveyed the similarities between the Genesis creation story and creation legends of other AWA cultures. He then points out that “humanity needs creation in order to exist, but creation does not need humanity to the same extent or level” (21). He laments the idea that both the earth and female are often seen as property of the male. The earth is rather to be cared for by humanity with respect, as accountable to God as our covenant partner, unlike the exploitation that has now led us to the verge of “a scary ecological catastrophe” (23).

The fourth article, by Akanksha Samuel Makasare, addresses the current world- and Indian-crisis due to the COVID19 pandemic in the light of Jeremiah’s “subversive spirituality.” The state of Judah was promoting a temple and monarchy-centred pseudo-spirituality that preached an expectation of security based on God’s protection but without recognising the covenant obligations that the nation had before God. This was a form of religious manipulation and Jeremiah thus challenges civic religion and the use of religious observance to promote loyalty to the state and nation, a problem not unique to India.

In “Male-Female Pairing in Luke-Acts: Spirituality of Inclusive Humanism,” Prema Vakayil begins with a careful study of parallels between male and female characters in Luke and Acts, and particularly the two Lukan parables of lost sheep and lost coin and Jesus’s encounter with the Pharisee Simon and an infamous woman. On this basis she builds an argument that the author is advocating an ethic of “inclusive humanism,” which she sees as “not an abstract theory or idea but concrete reality through which God reveals his mercy and love as that of a father or mother moved to the very depth out of love for their child” (133). It meets needs regardless of merit. Vakayil goes on to explore how such an ethics applies in India and other countries in relation to the plight of women, LGBTI people and religious minorities.

This small sample shows that these articles cover a range of issues and explore a variety of biblical texts. Native English speakers will sometimes find some of the expressions of Indian authors unusual, even jarring, but once one gets over that, one develops a great appreciation for the developing academic strength in Indian Christianity and the unique issues and situations they work in. Each of the articles challenges us to a thoughtful response.

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