

K. L. Seshagiri RAO, *Mahatma Gandhi and comparative religion*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979. xvi + 154 pp. Rs. 35 (paper).

This is a book that has both irritated and fascinated me. It irritated me because I was initially somehow misled by the title and the author's credentials. A book with the title "Mahatma Gandhi and Comparative Religion," written by a distinguished scholar with a Ph.D. in comparative religion from Harvard made me believe that here would be a study of Gandhi presented in the tradition of the scientific study of religion, with its self-claims to objectivity and ethical neutrality—insofar as these are possible, or even desirable, as the Wilson discussion in the pages of this journal has shown. Instead, I found the book to be a kind of hagiography, written by a man who is strongly committed, from the first page to the last, to the righteousness of Gandhi's cause and Gandhi's insights into religion and the religions. And yet, the further I read Dr. Rao's book the more I felt myself drawn into sympathy with what he wanted to convey: the fascination of Gandhi's own spiritual quest and of his attitude toward other religions as a result of his own "study of comparative religion."

After an opening chapter dealing with the "Spiritual Unfoldment of Gandhi," Professor Rao describes how Gandhi studied and "sympathetically" looked on

the great religions with which he came into contact and which he to a certain extent claimed to have accepted as his own: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Following this second chapter, entitled "Gandhi's Comparative Study of Religion," the author turns to what he calls "Principles of Creative Religion," taking up such fundamental religious concepts as religious experience, the concept and reality of God, and prayer. Often referring to what Western students of religion have had to say about these topics, he tries to show how the Mahatma's views have an exemplary significance for the whole of humanity. He develops this theme still further in the fourth chapter, "Inter-religious Relations," which in a sense forms the core of his exposition. He explains how Gandhi embodied more fully and clearly than anyone had before the central concept of "reverence for *dharmā*" that has run throughout Indian thought and culture and which has led to its peculiar religious tolerance. After a short chapter on "Some Common Problems"—among which is that of conversion—Rao concludes with a few "exhortations" for a creative dialogue among the religions of the world, in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi.

The view of religion and religious dialogue held by Gandhi as well as the author of this book is one which originated in the pluralistic situation of India. It can be overlooked neither by Westerners, who are equally engaged in dialogue at this time, albeit from a different perspective, nor by the Japanese, who have also been living in a pluralistic world—although this is a pluralism that has led to quite different views of religion and its significance to society from those held by the people of India. If the spiritual witness of Gandhi and of India as a whole are but one approach to the problem of the meeting of different religious traditions, they have a meaning for all of us. Dr. Rao's book might not be a masterpiece that will attract world-wide attention. It is, however, a welcome contribution, not only to students of Gandhi and India—who will be more competent to judge its values than this reviewer—but also to all people who are interested and engaged in interreligious dialogue.

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