

Book Review

Yisu Das: Witness of A convert. By Ravi Tiwari. Delhi: ISPCK (1654, Madarsa Road, Kashmere Gate, Delhi.110 006) 2000. Pp.xvi-280. Rs.125, \$12, £9. ISBN 81-7214-513-6

By: Cecil Hargreaves

(Former professor at Bishop College and Asia Secretary of Church Missionary Society, London, Late Professor Hargreaves, was a personal friend of my father. He was one of the first to recognize my father as one of the prominent Asian Theologian in his book, *India's Search for Reality and the Relevance of the Gospel of John*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1975.)

This book provides us with a splendid record of Yisu Das Tiwari's life, thought, conversion and vision. The record consists of Tiwari's own writings: personal memories and tributes from friends, colleagues and students; and a biographical section, with final substantial contribution on his father's theology and witness, from his son Dr. Ravi Tiwari.

Almost forty years ago CISRS held a conference of converts from Hinduism, at which Yisu Das Tiwari's paper, which forms Chapter 1 of this present book, was delivered. M.M. Thomas, about that time, urged Christian theologians to get a good grounding both in history of early Christian thought and, also, at the same time, in Indian metaphysics: he said that it was that background that would help the further development of a theology of spirituality. In this book we learn more about one particular participant in the conference, later to be known as the Reverend Yisu Das Tiwari, who had been brought up and nurtured in the scriptural and philosophical terminologies of Indian classical religious heritage, as well as having had an experience of conversion linked initially and closely with someone's quoting of words from the Gospel of John.

Ravi Tiwari's comments include some references to the relationship between classical terminologies just referred to and praxis-oriented theologies. The issue of old and new contexts for the interpretation of scriptures and for theology is clearly given recognition in the book. It is an issue which many of us would say emerges clearly now a days in relation to the Gospel of John just mentioned: since its chapters 5 to 8 give us words of challenge and a call to action, and its chapters 14 to 17 give us quieter and more contemplative words about personal mystical fellowship. Obviously Yisu Das' personal and philosophical mysticism leads us deeper especially into the latter, more contemplative aspect.

Well over fifty pages of this book deal directly with the Gospel of John, especially the Prologue, the Farewell Discourses and with detailed commentary on John 14.1-19. Ravi Tiwari's comments on the commentary help to unpack the meaning of some especially condensed sentences in the commentary.

There is space only to dwell on two points in any detail. One is Tiwari's distinctive material on *Shabda/Vachana*, the words used by him for 'Logos' in his biblical translation work. He defines the biblical concept of Word as 'revelatory word'. In comments, Jesus

is given the title *Shabdeshwara* of *Shabda-Brahman*. Since the concept of divine Word seems to find a prominent place in so many faiths (Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity), Tiwari's focus on it may surely be of particular significance for the future. It is true that the early Christian Irenaeus said that we should not focus too selectively on the one title 'Logos'. And, more recently, thinkers outside the Christian tradition or within it (such as John Arapura) have wanted to go behind or deeper down than Word to Symbol and contemplative Silence: Tiwari himself having material on symbolism. But such thinkers, not least Dr. Arapura, have also emphasized the central place of Word in Indian religious traditions and in the history of religions generally.

The second point, also Johannine, concerns Tiwari's simple but profound comment on the much-discussed verse John 14.6 "None comes to the Father but by me". He writes: 'some people may see the communal narrowness of John in this phrase, "but me". One may have to go back, for the answer, to the first fifteen verses of the introduction (to the Gospel) where Word-God (*Shabdeshwara*) is described: the "Word was God", "all things were made by him", "in him was life". "glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth".'

But the book, as the subtitle shows, puts a big emphasis on Yisu Das Tiwari's witness, his vision, conversion, way of life, religious experience, as well as on his thought and reflection. His own modest statement that he did not pretend to be a theologian is well discussed: it is a statement that Ravi Tiwari responds to with some good words of his own: 'The term "theology" perhaps is a misnomer-term when applied in the context of a convert'. He calls it 'a theology of the Way', that underlay his father's life and thought.

The brings out clearly what Yisu Das saw to be some of the main perplexities and difficulties experienced in his own journey and life, as a convert, and in the lives of others of a similar background making a similar journey. He mentions John 14.1 as a biblical verse that proves difficult for many: the words of Jesus: 'believe in God: believe also in me'. He writes that the objection is raised: "Why 'also in me'? Is belief in God not sufficient?". And he follows with a ten-line response. Also touched on are the perplexities felt by those who have been accustomed to and wanted to call Jesus *Guru*, but have hesitated to go on to call him *Prabhu*.

However, this is a book not only for those coming from Tiwari's own background, upbringing and nurture, but also for the rest of us. It is a book that demands a willingness to cross frontiers of different language and cultures in the reading and in one's mind: but it has impact, and points us towards a freshness of vision, faith, understanding and spiritual experience.