

## Reviews

### A Christian Folk Religion in India: A Study of the Small Church Movement in Andhra Pradesh, with Special Reference to the Bible Mission of Devadas

P. Solomon Raj

Centre for Contemporary Christianity: Bangalore, India 2004

and

### The New Wine-Skins: The Story of the Indigenous Missions in Coastal Andhra Pradesh, India

P. Solomon Raj

ISPCK: Delhi, India and Mylapore\_Institute for Indigenous Studies: Chennai, India 2003

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These two books are closely related, as even the subtitles indicate. The first is Solomon Raj's doctoral work under Walter J. Hollenweger in Birmingham, originally published in 1986. This new edition is updated and revised. The second is from follow-up research, looking more for breadth than depth.

Hollenweger's foreword to New Wine is based on his foreword to the earlier study, but begins by referring to that earlier work as "a milestone in modern church history". He then explains why this is so, which is due to the importance of the new indigenous church movements that are growing across the globe.

Raj uses "non-white indigenous Christianity" terminology from David Barrett, but also "folk religion" and just "indigenous" expressions. His Birmingham thesis presents a detailed look at the Bible Mission and at Father Devadas (1875-1960, but his followers date his birth to 1840) who founded it out of the Lutheran Church. Devadas was a master of communication in the oral context of rural Andhra, and some of his songs have been adopted even in the mainstream churches. This is a rather Pentecostal type of movement but without re-baptism or speaking in tongues, two central doctrines to traditional Pentecostalism.

Therein lies a key to this type of study. New church movements across the globe defy neat characterization. Careful study needs to be done of each particular movement, and Raj's study of Devadas is an excellent example of that. Most fascinating (beyond the two divergences from Pentecostalism already noted) in the Devadas story is his teaching on meeting saints and angels and Christ in vision. It is claimed that Devadas himself spoke messages through a medium at one point after his death, and the content of those messages is outlined in Raj's study. A tradition developed of placing a chair at prayer meetings for the spirit of Devadas to sit among his people.

How should one evaluate such practices? Solomon Raj is far from uncritical, but is careful not to throw stones. His central thesis in both books is that the new church movements have developed due to obvious and glaring inadequacies in the traditional churches (generally called "mission churches" by Raj). The future of Christianity lies with the new movements, which he wants to encourage. Seeking to criticize will only drive the new movements further from historic Christianity; seeking to empathize might encourage the kind of dialogue between churches that Raj recommends (because the new movements do need help, and need

to learn as well as teach). So, regarding the chair for the spirit of Father Devadas, Raj is appreciative of the doctrine thus represented. In the new Afterword to Folk Religion he rather objects to some in the Bible Mission ceasing this practice; but he calls for a focus on central rather than peripheral issues.

New Wine-Skins is based on surveys of 73 "indigenous missions" or "new church movements" in the four districts of coastal Andhra Pradesh in south India. Broad perspectives on the church, oral communication, lay ministry, leadership training, literature, the miraculous, and stewardship are introduced with examples and insights. The difficulties in this type of research are openly acknowledged; many did not want to talk about their finances, and membership statistics are often among the least of priorities. Just the insights into the problems of this research make this an important book.

Libraries of international Christianity need to hold these two important works on new Christian movements in south India. Students who want to understand the meaning of Christianity need to look beyond creed-based definitions to the grass-roots realities of the movements introduced here. The church international can only be grateful to Solomon Raj for presenting these important cases studies. Note that Raj is also an artist, and his works adorn the covers of each of these books.