

BOOK REVIEW - I

Nayak G. C. *UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON*,
Banglore, Dharmaram Publication, 1997 PP. XVII+94, Price Rs. 120/-

Understanding Religious Phenomenon is a thoughtful exposition and reflection on the significance and role of religion in our modern age, based on a life-long career of teaching and research. The author impressively intergrates insights from the Western and Eastern traditions and is at home in both of these worlds. This is particularly evident in Chapters Three and Four where he identifies some of the central criticisms against the theistic world view and where he delineates his own position. His arguments on the nature of God and problems of human language are reasonable and pragmatic. Readers in the Western world would be very interested in seeing how his arguments on these subjects are grounded in the Indian religious traditions. The author may want to consider amplifying the scope of these chapters with further illustrations from the Indian traditions and with a more detailed treatment of the positions of Vedānta Desika, Śhankara and Rāmānuja. These commentators are briefly mentioned.

In Chapter Five, Prof. Nayak discusses the problem of language and experience (anubhava). His position is that experience is the core of what it means to be religious, and language is secondary in its role as the symbolic expression of this experience. There are many assumptions in this position. One is the possibility of pure experience unmediated and uninterpreted. In recent years, the relationship between religious experience and language has been the subject of much discussion. Some philosophers have been arguing that the idea of a pure, unmediated experience is contradictory. Interpretation is not post-experiential but is prior to and involved in making the experience itself possible. It would be inter-

esting to see Prof. Nayak articulate his views in relation to this critique, articulated prominently in the work of the philosopher, Steven Katz.

Prof. Nayak's passionate call for religion without bigotry is one that all traditions need to heed. Religious traditions will be enriched by his emphasis on vital place of human reason in religious inquiry and the spirit of openness towards the other which should characterize religious relationships. In his final chapter, I wonder if the problem about which he is concerned is "dogmatism" rather than "dogma." I am not sure what the word "dogma" has come to signify in India, but, in the West, it may not have all of the negative resonances which are implied in this use of the term. Perhaps religious exclusivism is what he has in mind. In any event, it may be helpful to clarify in more detail and with the help of illustrations what the author suggests by dogma.

From a specifically Hindu standpoint, I am heartened by his call for a new way of thinking about the meaning of *Varṇa-āśrama*, one that moves away from the traditional emphasis on birth and towards relationships of justice and equity. I am also gratified for his emphasis on love and compassion as the central expression of what it means to be religious and to be human.

ANANTANAND RAMBACHAN