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**Woven on the Loom of Time: Many Faiths and One Divine Purpose
by M. Darrol Bryant**

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uted to Jesus in the Gospel of John that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me." Acceptance of such a statement, Sullivan argues, can only lead to hatred, misunderstanding, and warfare against people of other faiths. To the contrary, thinking Christians should rejoice in religious pluralism and stand ready to learn from other faiths. For Christians to accept a belief such as the doctrine of reincarnation from Hinduism or Buddhism does not mean they are betraying Christianity, but merely appropriating new insights that will help Christianity develop further, a process that has gone on from the beginning of Christian history. Since shedding beliefs that no longer make sense in the modern world is also part of this process, Sullivan is unconcerned about attacks by fundamentalists and others who would claim that he is abandoning Christianity. In the final analysis, a Christian for Sullivan is someone who finds Christianity to yield greater spiritual insights than other religions while at the same time finding value in many of the insights of other religions and maintaining an openness to learn from them. Such a view must surely command the respect of thinking persons in our current world of ethnic, political, and religious strife.

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Woven on the Loom of Time: Many Faiths and One Divine Purpose. By M. Darrol Bryant. New Delhi: Decent Books, 1999. 134 pp., glossary, index. Hardcover. \$18.95.

An important voice in interreligious dialogue for over twenty years, Professor Bryant has given us a fine little book on one of its biggest questions: how to understand the ineluctable plurality of the world's faiths. John Hick, a beacon in the field, has shown that tacklers of this question fall into one of two groups: naturalistic interpreters of religion who deny the reality of the supernatural but see religions as culturally varied sets of universally necessary psychological and social coping mechanisms, or religious interpreters of religion (like Hick) who, even while admitting the cogency of

aspects of the naturalistic interpretation, hold finally that religions are culturally varied responses to a truly existent ultimate spiritual reality. Bryant belongs to this latter camp, pointedly rejecting the proposition that, in the matter of interpreting religion, God is an unnecessary hypothesis. Like Hick, in characterizing his approach, Bryant uses the metaphor of the rainbow: religions are like differently colored bands, each reflecting a light that is beyond it, a light fully present though differently manifest in each. With Bryant roughly positioned in the field, we can turn to his particular contribution in this volume.

In the crucial first chapter he advances the seven assumptions and four affirmations at the heart of his work. The seven assumptions are: 1) that religious traditions are the source of wisdom on life's deepest questions; 2) that in our postmodern situation we must seek that wisdom not only in one tradition but across traditions (but not syncretically); 3) that history is the story of humanity's encounter with transcendence; 4) that the mythic narratives of religious traditions are inexhaustible sources of meaning and should continue to claim our attention; 5) that the primary purpose of a mythic narrative is to provide individual and collective humanity with meaningful orientation to our lives in time; 6) that humanity's destiny must be read in wider-than-Christian terms; 7) that humanity's spiritual meaning and purpose are not static but unfold in the very quest for the Absolute that is central to humanity's sojourn through time.

Upon these assumptions Bryant bases the four interlocking affirmations of his work. They are (slightly rephrased): 1) that humanity's deepest purpose is to be related to the Ultimate; 2) that history is the spiritual story of human unfolding toward that relation; 3) that humanity makes itself [evolves spiritually] by relating itself to the Ultimate; 4) that the harmony of the great religions does not lie in any identity of doctrine, rite, or practice, but in their telos, the Ultimate itself. There is some ambiguity here. For Bryant, as we learn in chapter 2, "humanity is constituted by the Transcendent." But if this is so, then the "relation to the Ultimate" that Bryant proposes as humanity's End would seem instead to be in some sense a given. I therefore expected him to qualify our historical journey toward relation to the Ultimate with a phrase such as "increasingly con-

scious" in order to echo the progressive implications of the rest of his argument. When he did not, I was left with an unresolved tension between his dynamic view of human unfoldment over cosmic time and the rather static "relation to the Ultimate" that is supposed to be its Omega. I also could not deduce if affirmation 2—history is the story of our developing relation to God—meant that humanity's spiritual apotheosis was *inevitable*. But it would seem so since Bryant does not hint at the possibility that human freedom could lead to the *unmaking* of humanity and a general failure of right relatedness to God.

In chapter 2, "Dialogical Humanity," Bryant builds on the insights of Martin Buber and Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy to affirm that humanity is constituted by the Transcendent. Understood in this light, religious traditions are ongoing dialogues with Transcendence in a way that mirrors the common fact that every individual human life is an ongoing dialogue with human others. To these two facets of dialogical humanity our age has added a third, the dialogue between and among individuals of different religious traditions. Bryant thus sees humanity's deeply dialogic nature as the key to its spiritual unfoldment.

In chapter 3, "The Multiform Religious Traditions," Bryant sketches the distinctive ways in which Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Confucian, and Sikh traditions contribute to the making of humanity through relatedness to the Ultimate. Here Bryant's assumptions 4 and 5 come into play and he is careful to characterize each tradition in its own mythic narrative terms. However, despite emphasizing the meaning-fullness of those narratives, Bryant admits that modernity is the story of their erosion and loss. He doubts that we can in the future create a New Story, for he rightly recognizes that truly powerful sacred narratives erupt from the unconscious or descend from above. Bryant therefore prays for the revitalization of the great narratives of the past and even sees it occurring in the contemporary encounter and dialogue of religions. We can hope he is correct, but it seems that mythic narratives retain their power in inverse proportion to the numbers of people who understand them to be culturally variable and *mythic*.

In the unique and unusual chapter 4, "A Grammar of the Spirit," Bryant further elaborates the philosophical anthropology of Rosen-

stock-Huessy, whom he credits as a major influence on his own thought. Certainly Rosenstock-Huessy's Hegel-like conviction that all human biological and cultural evolution are aspects of a more fundamental and encompassing spiritual unfoldment is a recurring leitmotif in this book. Certainly, too, Rosenstock-Huessy's belief that history is the story of the creation of national human types each of which play their role in a "polyphonic" international humanity is central to Bryant's vision of a harmonious religious pluralism. Bryant provides an illuminating discussion of these aspects of Rosenstock-Huessy's thought. But when the author delves into the details of Rosenstock-Huessy's "twelve tones of the spirit" – the four normative behaviors appropriate for each of three major stages of life (childhood, adulthood and elderhood)—I had trouble discerning their connection to the religious outlooks sketched in the prior chapter and their relevance to the work as a whole.

Bryant's chapter 5 provides the reader with a cogent and very helpful review of the entire book, a valuable one for all students of the world's religious traditions.

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Malay Muslims: The History and Challenge of Resurgent Islam in Southeast Asia. By Robert Day McAmis, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002, 173 + xii pp., paperback. \$20.00.

This work seeks "to present the history, characteristics, present situations, and future prospects of the Malay Muslims – including relations with Malay Christians – in a fair, objective way that will be acceptable to and appreciated by Malay Muslims and Christians." The author, Dr. Robert Day McAmis, notes that he has had nearly fifty years of experience living among the Malay Muslims of Southeast Asia (over forty-five years in Mindanao) as an American Lutheran missionary, who has done extensive reading and research on this subject.

This book is clearly written and gives much valuable information for understanding that Muslim world of Southeast Asia, which is "little known" but which constitutes "the largest ethnic commu-