

**Book Review of *Ramakrishna and Christ: The Supermystics*
by James M. Somerville, *The American Vedantist*, Summer 2002**

For Ramakrishna devotees, Paul Hourihan's book, *Ramakrishna and Christ*, will serve as a refreshing review of the many stages of Ramakrishna's spiritual development. For newcomers, the book offers an engrossing introduction to a great Hindu mystic. By entering sympathetically into the well-documented spiritual life of this nineteenth century holy man, we should be able to understand better Jesus of Nazareth, his first-century precursor. Though the two are removed from one another in time and space, not to say in religion and external practice, what they have in common at the highest level as mystics overshadows cultic and cultural differences.

Human and Divine

People who have difficulty in reconciling the transcendent Christ of the Fourth Gospel with the less exalted, engagingly human Jesus of the first three Gospels may find it reassuring to learn that Ramakrishna, like Jesus, was able to live in the Impersonal world of the Absolute "I Am," as well as in a world in which one relates to God in a personal way; that is, as Mother in the case of Ramakrishna and as Father in the case of Jesus. Ramakrishna learned at the peak of his spiritual maturity to hover in the Bhavamukha state, between experiencing God as impersonal and personal. At times he would be lost in the impersonal Absolute, while at other times he would relate on the devotional level to God as person, that is, in the feminine form of the Goddess Kali. When he was deep in the one state it apparently excluded the other. However, when he was not fully engrossed in one or the other, he tried to remain in Bhavamukha, a mood in which he was, at least virtually, in both.

In like manner, Jesus could abide in a relationship of identity with God as Transcendent Being and at other times relate to God in the personal mode as Father. Thus, in one poise he could say that no one knows when the heavens and the earth will pass away, not even he, Jesus, the Son of God the Father (Mk.13:32). Then he would turn around and declare, "I and the Father are one.... Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn.10:30; 14:9). In the latter state the dualism of the first was completely overcome. And we have reason to believe that Jesus, like Ramakrishna, was able to keep both modes in a state of dynamic tension.

Among the most difficult aspects of Hindu spirituality for Westerners to understand is the practice of Tantra, in which very attractive and very repulsive experiences are presented to the aspirant, who is expected to remain detached from both. Under the guidance of Yogeswari, a Hindu Brahmani, Ramakrishna, far from yielding to either desire or disgust, withdrew entirely into himself and fell into *samadhi*. The *samadhi* did not differ in kind from the type he experienced in the most sublime moments of his mystical absorption, that is, when the senses were stilled and he had entered into union with the Absolute. Hourihan's account in Chapters Seven and Eight throws considerable light on Tantric practice, while warning of its dangers. It seems not to have scarred Ramakrishna in the least, and, in fact, prepared him for his next teacher, Tota Puri. It was he who taught Ramakrishna how to attain spiritual union with the Absolute as Nirguna Brahman, God without form.

Another parallel between Jesus and Ramakrishna, at least in the telling, is the way most of the people around them turn out to be flawed in one way or another. Thus, Yogeswari, proved to be possessive and jealous of anyone who got close to her client. Tota Puri, the teacher of Jnana Yoga, was exposed as an intolerant exclusivist who could not measure up to Ramakrishna's openness to all faiths and spiritualities. In like manner, Jesus stands head and shoulders above his bumbling apostles. They fail to understand him; they doubt, betray, deny him. He alone is without sin or fault. By exposing the flaws of the disciples, the virtues and prowess of the master are set in relief.

Magdalene as Spiritual Consort

Ramakrishna and Christ makes a point of showing how Jesus, like his Hindu counterpart, had a high regard for women and that both he and Ramakrishna benefited by a close association with one particular woman. For the latter it was primarily Sarada Devi, Ramakrishna's wife, devotee, and future apostle. Paul Hourihan sees Mary Magdalene functioning as Jesus' female consort in his earthly mission, a role traditionally assigned to Jesus' mother Mary in Roman Catholic dogmatic and devotional practice. In fact, says the author, Jesus' attitude toward his family, including his mother, was to keep them at a distance. Aside from the legendary infancy tales found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mary plays no significant role in Jesus' ministry, at least in the three Synoptic Gospels. This does not seem to be the case in John's Gospel, where Mary induces her Son to work his first miracle, and she was with him at the end when she stood at the foot of the cross. Still, a case can be made to show that during the time of his public ministry and during the decades after Jesus' death, it was Mary Magdalene who played a major role in his life and in disseminating his ideas. Few scripture scholars today believe that Magdalene was the unnamed sinful woman—traditionally a prostitute—who came in from the street and washed the feet of Jesus with her tears. Luke's Gospel presents Magdalene as the companion of wealthy women who supported Jesus and his disciples out of their personal resources (Lk.8:3). In any case, as Hourihan points out, it was to Magdalene, and not to any of his apostles, that Jesus first appeared after his resurrection. Short of thinking of Jesus and Magdalene as lovers—a temptation some recent novelists have been unable to resist—it is not beyond the realm of possibility that they were bound together in a holy friendship, inseparable from the work of spreading the Jesus message. If Sri Aurobindo had his Mira Richard and Ramakrishna his Sarada Devi, are we to suppose that Jesus alone dispensed with any kind of close friendship with a woman coadjutrix in his active ministry?

The Importance of Who Killed Jesus

It might be wise to eliminate in future editions of the book the statement that Jesus was killed by the Pharisees (p. 53). Jesus was arrested (Jn.18:12) by a Roman cohort (*speira*) headed by a Roman legionnaire (*chiliarchos*) and crucified by the Romans. Though Jesus disputed with some of the ultraconservative Pharisees, he also had friends among them, was invited to dine at their homes, was saved from being executed by Herod Antipas, as was John the Baptist, because of the timely warning of some friendly Pharisees, and he was buried with the loving assistance of Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee.

The question of who killed Jesus is of monumental importance. For nineteen centuries, “the Jews” without distinction have been called “deicides” and have suffered indescribable indignities because of the libel that “they” killed Christ. Jesus was killed by Romans on the false charge of insurrection. The Pharisees had nothing to do with it, and Caiphas, the High Priest who collaborated with the Romans, was universally despised by the Jewish masses and rightly regarded as an illegitimate occupant of the High Priestly office. He was anything but a representative Jew.

Paul Hourihan’s book is a glowing tribute to his knowledge of Hinduism. He is masterful in his command of the information he incorporates into his text. By his profound understanding of Ramakrishna, he has in the bargain introduced us to a Jesus more plausible than the one usually presented in theology textbooks and Sunday school classes.