

## Book Reviews

**Nirmala Jeyaraj (ed.) *Women and Society: A Reader in Women's Studies* (Madurai: Vanguard Press, 2001) pp. xv and 593. Rs. 200.**

In recent years, several colleges in India have introduced 'Women' studies as a required discipline at the undergraduate level. One of them is the Lady Doak College, a prestigious institution in the temple city of Madurai. With a view to bring out a reader in women's studies, Nirmala Jeyaraj has edited the book *Women and Society*, using the expertise of the faculty members of the college. Written by women the book reflects a wide range of feminist perspectives across numerous disciplines including science and technology, economics and globalisation, literature art and politics.

The critical theoretical concept involved in this enterprise is that of 'gender' introduced as a way of distinguishing the social constitution of masculine feminine, from the biological categories of male and female. With 'gender' as a social construct, women are now able to examine why and how some spheres of human life are described as masculine and some as feminine. Such a perspective has enabled women to offer persuasive and dramatic interpretations of several phenomena in many areas of intellectual enquiry.

From the 1970's the feminist perspective in any discipline has been greatly facilitated by the feminist movement with its enquiry into the ways in which the conventional disciplines had been shaped excluding the lives and experiences of women. In earlier time, the struggle of women was confined to issues of widow marriage, purdha, access to education and legal emancipation of women. Today feminism, as an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society has emerged both as an ideology and as a quest for socio-political change towards equality and justice in society. The study of women's issues, no longer belongs to the exclusive domain of women. Both women and liberal-minded men are viewing feminism as a radical movement for women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice in every aspect of life.

The different essays in the book are united in pointing out that our behaviour; thinking and our self-identity are all socially constructed. The authors clearly show how easy it is for women to internalise their secondary status in society; the book also indicates the variety of ways in which masculine bias can express itself in the content and process in several areas of life. One of the areas is the home; behind a peaceful home, one can find the much-maligned individualism, dissent in concepts and practice leading to unending violent acts. The discipline of science and technology, the most sophisticated cultural achievement in contemporary times, also finds a place. Technology has provided a number of household gadgets, which are of immense help to women. If women are to manage their own lives, they have to trust their own judgements. This calls for intellectual development and technical efficiency. If women are intellectually dependent, they can never be free. The book puts stress on the necessity of women to awaken themselves from mental and physical slavery. What adds an aesthetic touch to the book are the essays portraying the ways in which women are viewed in the religions of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, in literature both English and Tamil, and in the arts.

The book is fairly well structured and offers a delightful series of insights and concrete examples leading to a new gestalt. The strength of the book lies in the collective enthusiasm and commitment to a theme of current interest. The comprehensive scope and clarity of the book ought to make it a valuable guide to those institutions interested in the emerging discipline of women's studies.

**Sarojini Henry**

**Lawrence W. Fagg, *Electromagnetism and the Sacred: At the Frontier of Spirit and Matter* (New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. 144, US \$ 24.95.**

As the title suggests, this is a book that relates, academically, modern science to contemporary religion. Electromagnetism, according to Lawrence Fagg, ultimately underlies all of earthly nature from rocks and plants to humans and their brains. Electromagnetic radiation – light – has symbolized divine presence in the spiritual life of humankind for millennia, and yet following the increasing disenchanting of nature, we have lost that contact between the physical and the spiritual.

In this hymn to the natural currents with which we are surrounded and which pulse through us, the author, a Fellow of the American Physi-

cal Society, argues that the ubiquity of electromagnetic phenomena constitutes a powerful physical analogy for the ubiquity of God's indwelling presence. By presenting the scientific information in a simple and straightforward manner, Fagg opens up the rich and unexplored dimension of electromagnetism for the theologians and challenges them to take physics critically and creatively.

Coming to theology, the author is emphatic: "The inherent beauty that characterizes so much of nature and that is elicited in religious scriptures worldwide should be a significant component of any theology, whether natural or revelatory" (122). Thus the author pleads for an aesthetic theology (along with a theology of analogy) to join hands with theology of nature, to make it more meaningful. The author is humble enough to admit that the book does not argue for the existence of God, but assumes God's existence, tries to relate to one of the most profound scientific theories and comes out, purified, enamored and enchanted with God and nature. Without naively equating electromagnetism with the sacred, the author compares both of them and draws out the significance of such a comparison done analogically. The author agrees with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "without the slightest doubt there is something through which material and spiritual energy hold together and are complementary" (87).

The book is a typical example of theology being enlightened by physics, and it can be profitable to theologians who are not scientifically sophisticated. This book is a significant contribution to interfacing science and religion.

**Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ**

**Johnson J. Puthenpurackal (ed.) The Postmodern...: A Siege of the Citadel of Reason (Delhi: Media House, 2002), pp. 176, Rs. 150/US \$ 9.95.**

Both reviled and revered, postmodernism has come to stay. There is no single academic discipline where insights from postmodernism have not been taken seriously, even if it is with disdain.

The editor does not claim that the book presents a coherent picture of postmodernism (can it ever be attempted?). But he hopes that the book would create a 'stir' in the 'citadel of reason.' The editor hopes that this stir will gather momentum, bringing in new intellectual and existential concerns.

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