

Book Review

Jayādvaita Swami, *Vanity Karma: Ecclesiastes, the Bhagavad-Gītā, and the Meaning of Life: A Cross-Cultural Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (USA: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2015). 384 pages. ISBN-13 978-0892134496.

Reviewed by Sarva-Daman Singh

Jayādvaita Swami explores the purpose of life through a revealing dialogue between the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the great Hindu philosophical poem embedded in the *Mahābhārata*. He introduces us to *Qohelet*, the principal preceptor in Ecclesiastes, which discerns a disturbing emptiness in the world with all its bristling contradictions. The author tries to comprehend the agonizing concern of *Qohelet* with the help of Jewish and Christian commentaries of both devout and critical categories. He sifts the existential issues raised by *Qohelet* and, together with us, seeks a measure of meaning in our lives – a note of harmony in our quotidian occupations. Born to Jewish parents, Jayādvaita Swami lays bare before his readers his deep unease at *Qohelet*'s characterization of everything around us as vain and empty. His inner tumult spurs a search, which takes him to the *Gītā*. His immersion in the *Gītā* for a full 45 years leads to the total dedication of his life to the realization of Kṛṣṇa the Absolute. More than the summation of the Cosmos around Him, Kṛṣṇa creates the world out of a fragment of Himself and yet remains! Indeed, it is in the service of Kṛṣṇa that the author finds true happiness and fulfilment.

Juxtaposed, the two texts speak to us, as they sway the Swami: as we come to grips with the meaning of life. The author *traverses* cultures, inviting us to do likewise, and puts together the thoughts of Rabbis on *Qohelet* as well as insights from the *Gītā*. He also explores Christian commentaries and Buddhism, and adds experiences from his own life and travels.

The Swami sees dialogue as the door to revelation. It is only in and through spiritual dialogue that the secret of union with the Divine will be revealed – *guhyaṁ param yogaṁ*. Dialogue, willingness to listen and unrestricted receptivity to ideas elevate one to new levels of experience and understanding. This kind of introspection, like the author's, would doubtless contribute to a heightened awareness of the world as one family, *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*, and to a deeper devotion to the Divine finding expression in us all.

"Nothing is new, and whatever we do has no meaning." So much that happens around us is entirely irrational. The Swami recalls reading "New Day, Same Shit" on a T-shirt. *Qohelet* sees vexation in wisdom, sorrow in knowledge. And then, he sees it all end in death. He emphasizes the futility of material pursuits in our search for the ultimate good, which depends on "the special favor of God." And Time is God. Kṛṣṇa says: "I am Time."

Qohelet's cry to revere God, to obey God, arose from the realization that God will judge everything. The meaning of our lives will therefore depend on the recognition of our spiritual nature, when we give up chasing material rewards and commune with Kṛṣṇa, in love with the Unlimited!

In his journey from *Qohelet* to Kṛṣṇa's wisdom, the Swami found not vexation, but rather a path to the joy of fulfilment. A rewarding read!