Book Summary – Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India

The ancient Hebrew faith was notoriously iconoclastic, with faithful followers of God from prophet to king warring against idolatry among the people. The early Church followed in this path, but after Constantine the emerging Catholic Church made its peace with images, whether paintings, sculptures, or another medium. The Greek influence began to supersede the Hebrew influence in Christian worship. Idolatry was still a risk, but images are powerful ways to communicate God to man. Imagery grew ever more important in the Catholic and Orthodox churches, despite the Great Schism of 1054. Over the centuries in many places, imagery grew into idolatry, and the Protestant Reformation revolted, in part, against such worship. Modern Protestant Christians have a tense relationship with the visual arts. How difficult it is for us to understand Hinduism, an intensely visual religion.

Diana L. Eck, a professor of religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University, wrote Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India, to reveal the visuality of Hinduism to a Western, and often largely Protestant, audience.

Running the Pluralism Project at Harvard and editing On Common Ground: World Religions in America, she certainly has the knowledge to pen such a tome.

Eck begins by explaining that Hindus expect to see (Darsan – seeing) the sacred. Unlike Christians, who may hope to “see” God with the eyes of the Spirit, Hindus expect to physically see Durga, Siva, or Vishnu in their temple, or even in their household shrine, made visible and physical by the idol in which they temporarily dwell. The temple and the idol provide the link between visible humanity and the invisible divine. By adorning the idol with flowers, prostrating oneself before it, and showing care by feeding it, washing it, and putting it to bed, Hindus serve their god. The god, in gratitude for their faithfulness, allows him/herself to be seen, thus giving a blessing to his or her human benefactor.
Hindus also try to “take the darsan” of places or people. Pilgrims would gain great spiritual power by viewing the summits of the Himalayas or catching a glimpse of Mahatma Gandhi. Hindu idols have prominent eyes so the god and the person can best “see” each other. In Hinduism, seeing is intimate, more a form or touching and even “knowing” than in the West. While we may envision seeing as passive, receiving information from the outside world, Hindus see it as active, traveling outside of themselves to touch and know what is around them.

The idea of an invisible god is foreign to Hindus, and their religion reflects their lives – intensely visual. Colors, patterns, and images are vivid in Hinduism, so it should come as no surprise that film is highly popular. Perhaps that is why the largest producer of films in the world, Bollywood (Hindi Cinema), is in Mumbai. Some of the most popular movies in history were dramatizations of the Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabrata.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are religions of the book, and this textual basis profoundly affects how followers think. Hinduism has many sacred books, such as the Vedas, but it is more fundamentally a religion of images. One must therefore understand the idols to understand Hinduism. For example, monotheism breeds individualistic thinking, while the adoration of images, varied as they inevitably are, breeds polytheistic thinking. Even when Hindus claim to be monotheistic, their meaning is vastly different than Muslims, Christians, or Jews.

The second chapter concerns the nature of Hindu images. Such images can be iconic, representing recognizable forms, or aniconic, which attempt no representational likeness. Iconic images are anthropomorphic, resembling human shape (however vaguely), or theriomorphic, combining human and animal shapes. The lingua, a smooth stone representing a phallus (a symbol of a penis) but containing male and female components, is the most famous aniconic image for Siva. Images are “visual theologies” and

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1 Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India, 10.
2 Ibid., 25.
“visual scriptures”, with Siva dancing in a ring of fire being a well-known example. Images are a focus of concentration and an embodiment of the divine.

The presence of physical images allows the Hindu to show kindness to his god. A worshipper can bring offerings of flowers, money, food, or drink. They can wake the idol, wash the idol, dress the idol, or put it to bed. For all of these acts of service, the devotee expects a blessing, or at least avoidance of a curse. Images are produced by specially trained craftsmen in a ritually prescribed manner; there is no room for artistic license or even interpretation here. The idols then “receive life” by a complex ritual. When an image becomes old, it is removed and disposed of in another ritual. In addition to their routine temple use, Hindu idols lead processions and preside at festivals.

The third chapter describes the relation between images, temples, and pilgrimages. The architecture of Hindu temples themselves are intended to make them images. The floor plan is a geometric “map” of the cosmos. Northern temples in the nagara style resemble the mountains of the mighty Himalayas. The inside of a temple is often small, resembling a cave or a womb and holding the “seed” of the universe. Worshippers reenact a pilgrimage whenever they come to worship, circumambulating outside and inside before they come to the center.

Many Hindus consider all of India to be sacred geography, but there are many specific pilgrimage sites. The city of Varanasi, or Kasi, the City of Light, is the most holy. In fact, to die in Kasi is to gain liberation (moksha) from the endless circle of life (samsara). Small wonder that many retirees go there.

The final section is Seeing the Divine Image in America. This section describes the spread of Hinduism in the United States and the building of temples here.

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3 Ibid., 41.
4 Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India, 54
5 Ibid, 73
Comments

*Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*, is informative and well written. It reflects the pluralistic world view of the author, but does not seem fundamentally anti-Christian.

The first chapter is by far the most insightful. Chapters 2 and 3 are useful, but are also an apologetic for Hindu idols. Eck takes pains to explain that the lingua of Siva is not a phallic symbol and that early Europeans in India were chauvinistic and judgmental in their initial responses to Hindu idols. She fails to mention the ties between idolatry and sati, in which a Hindu widow would immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. Thus Eck produces a sanitized image of Hinduism which may be true now, but was clearly not true of Hinduism in the past. The final section about Hinduism in America is largely celebratory and not very interesting.

One wonders if the Western view of sight really is passively receiving information, or if it is not far from the Hindu one. For example, when an American steps on to an elevator, everyone else in the car looks down, back, or straight ahead, avoiding the glance of everyone else. It is as if no one wants to talk to others, to begin a relationship with them.

Conclusion

*Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India* was a worthwhile read, at least the first three chapters. However, it was not balanced. It is useful to students of world religions and perhaps missionaries and pastors serving Hindu background believers or evangelizing in Hindu populations. For others, read something else.