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Religions and Discourse

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Synthesizing the Vedanta

The Theology of
Pierre Johanns S. J.

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Introduction

Research topic

Synthesizing the Vedānta: the theology of Pierre Johanns S.J.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was an intriguing development that took place within the Roman Catholic Church in regard to a Christian rapprochement with Hinduism.¹ A leading Bengali intellectual and patriot Brahmabāndhab Upādhyāy (1861–1907), a convert to Catholicism, began to formulate an Indian Christian theology that conveyed a positive appreciation of aspects of Hindu *advaitic* philosophy.² Upon his early tragic death, a group of Belgian Jesuits in Calcutta sought to develop the project initiated by Upādhyāy. In 1922 the Jesuits Pierre Johanns (1882–1955) and

1 ‘Hinduism’ to indicate a family of religions is contentious. See Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, New York: Routledge, pp. 5–21 for discussion on this issue.

2 See Chapter Two for more information on Brahmabāndhab Upādhyāy. Francis X. Clooney has argued persuasively that the *Vedānta* contains both philosophical and theological dimensions. See Clooney, ‘Binding the Text: *Vedānta* as Philosophy and Commentary’, *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*, ed. J. Timm, Albany: State University of New York, 1991, pp. 47–68. The *Vedāntins* are exegetes of sacred scriptures as much as they are theoretical philosophers. One cannot ignore either facet of their identity without misrepresenting the character of the *Vedānta*. Thomism similarly contains both philosophical and theological components, since it wrestles with biblical texts as well as Aristotelian metaphysics. However, since Johanns usually focused on the philosophical dimensions when explaining the *Vedāntic* systems, they will be referred to as philosophies in this book. And since Johanns as a neo-Thomist engages in a theological evaluation of these materials, Thomism will be referred to as a theology. These distinctions cannot be imposed in a rigorous way, and while they may be analytically helpful, they are admittedly artificial.

Georges Dandoy (1882–1962), both Oxford-educated Orientalists in Calcutta, released the first issue of a monthly periodical entitled *Light of the East* in India. The purpose of the periodical was to facilitate the encounter between Christian theology and Indian philosophy. The journal ran for twenty-four years and is regarded as one of the more innovative periodicals in Indian church history.

Nothing so characterized the objectives of the journal as the monthly submissions of Fr. Pierre Johanns, the most articulate figure of these Belgian Jesuits. Johanns submitted well over one hundred articles which carefully scrutinized the prominent schools of the *Vedānta* from his Thomist perspective. In these he engaged in a thorough explication and analysis of the thinking of the Hindu religious leaders Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha, pointing out what he believed to be the strengths and the weaknesses of each position. He attempted to fashion a creative synthesis of their views, constructing a new metaphysic from the raw materials of their respective philosophies. He was convinced that when the metaphysical strengths of the key Hindu thinkers are synthesized, the result is something akin to classic Thomist theology.

Such an endeavour may not initially strike a modern reader as particularly bold or innovative. In order to appreciate why Johanns is often described as a ‘pioneer’, it is necessary to situate him within the theological climate of his time.³ Only twenty years had passed since Upādhyāya’s writings were banned by his Catholic superiors. Upādhyāya died ‘disowned and discouraged by his Church authorities’.⁴ Dr J.A. Cuttat has described the prevalent attitude of the worldwide Church towards other faiths in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a *Wertblindheit*, indicating a blindness to the significance and importance of other religions and cultures.⁵ Many missionaries

3 Joseph Mattam, *The Land of the Trinity: A Study of Modern Christian Approaches to Hinduism*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1975, p. 34.

4 Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, p. 91.

5 Dr Jacques Albert Cuttat was a Swiss diplomat who had a personal interest in furthering the interaction of Christianity in dialogue with Indian religions.

had adopted a rather literal interpretation of the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* declaration.⁶ Excluded from the Church, ‘infidels’ were seen as ‘dwelling in the shadow of death’ and ‘hurrying to destruction’, to cite the *Maximum Illud* of Benedict XV, published in 1919.⁷ The notion that Asian or African religions were something that missionaries should attempt to understand sensitively, and to engage respectfully, was not the typical Christian position at this time. The approach was rather more negative, and the other systems of thought were viewed as unwelcome competitors.

Within this milieu, the writings and ideals of Catholics such as Upādhyāy, William Wallace, Georges Dandoy, and Pierre Johanns were daring and progressive.⁸ They initiated a new attitude towards Hinduism, enabling later missionary-scholars to appreciate openly many facets of Indian thought and spirituality. These forward-thinking men based in Bengal, later dubbed the ‘Calcutta school’, were pioneers in the true sense of the word. As Joseph Mattam remarks, ‘They considered Hinduism not merely as something to be tolerated but as containing positive values for Christ and His Church’.⁹ This willingness to learn from Hindu philosophy and to

During his stay as ambassador in India, he initiated a series of meetings for Christians interested in finding points of religious contact with Hindus. Cuttat wrote *The Encounter of Religions: A Dialogue Between the West and the Orient*, New York: Desclée, 1960.

- 6 The *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (‘outside the Church, no salvation’) maxim was first formulated by Cyprian (*Epistles*, 73.21) and Origen (*In Iesu Nave Homiliae*) to indicate that those who broke away from the authority and guidance of the Church were in grave spiritual danger. It was later cited by Pope Innocent III in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and in the bull of Boniface VIII entitled *Unam Sanctam* in 1302. The Council of Florence (1438–1445) discussed its implications for unbaptized infants. The declaration was originally used in reference to heretics of the Church, but it was later applied to the adherents of other religious traditions. See M. Eminyan, ‘*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*’, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, New York: McGraw Hill, 1967, p. 768.
- 7 Joseph Mattam, ‘Interpreting Christ to India Today: The Calcutta School’, *Indian Journal of Theology*, 23 (July 1974), p. 191.
- 8 The lives and thought of these men are discussed in Chapter Two.
- 9 Joseph Mattam, ‘Interpreting Christ to India: A Pioneer, Pierre Johanns, S.J.’,

acknowledge its profundity had not been prominent since the time of the ‘first Catholic quest’ conducted by such towering figures as Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656) and Jean Calmette (1693–1740), who sought a ‘fundamental rapport between Christianity and the *Vedānta*’. Much of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missionary literature, especially of the Protestant variety, was confrontational in its tone. It was Brahmabāndhab Upādhyāy who initiated the ‘second Catholic quest’, which marked the transition to a more positive appraisal of Indian religiosity.¹⁰ The later Catholic approaches to Hinduism developed after the time of Johanns and Dandoy would move away from their particular ‘fulfillment’ approach,¹¹ but without the shift toward a more receptive appreciation of Indian spirituality sparked by the Calcutta school, the modern approaches would simply not be palatable within Catholic circles.

Scholars who study the history of Christian, and especially Catholic, engagement with Indian religiosity are in agreement that the body of written work produced by Johanns constitutes a significant contribution in the area of Hindu–Christian intellectual discourse. In 1973 Joseph Mattam published the following assessment: ‘The work of Johanns is so far the only systematic and serious attempt to study the whole of the *Vedānta* in the light of Thomist philosophy and theology’.¹² There has not been any significant theological development in the last thirty years to change the state of affairs recounted by Mattam. This assessment of Mattam is vital in understanding Johanns’ importance in the history of Hindu–Christian interaction, because Thomism has been the theological point of

The Clergy Monthly, 37 (February 1973), p. 47.

- 10 Richard Fox Young, ‘Seeking India’s Christ-Bearing Word’, *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 19, 3 (Fall, 2002), pp. 22–4. See Chapter Two for a discussion of the earlier missionary-scholars such as De Nobili and Calmette who interacted with Indian religions.
- 11 See footnote 18 for an initial description of Catholic fulfillment theology. Chapter One contains an extended treatment of Catholic and Protestant versions of fulfillment theology.
- 12 Joseph Mattam, ‘Interpreting Christ to India: A Pioneer, Pierre Johanns, S.J.’, *The Clergy Monthly*, 37 (February 1973), p. 55.

departure for some of the most important Catholic missionary-scholars in India.¹³ Johanns was a ‘pioneer’ in the sense that he was a seminal thinker who sought to initiate a detailed exploration of Catholic and *Vedāntic* spiritualities from a Thomist perspective within a context that did not encourage this sort of theological project. Despite his importance, it has been claimed that ‘Johanns has not received the attention he deserves neither in his life time nor posthumously, probably because he wrote most of his articles in a small magazine with limited circulation’.¹⁴ This book seeks to make an original contribution to the study of Hindu–Christian relations by drawing attention to, and examining the theological explorations of Fr. Johanns, showing his significance in the historical encounter of Hinduism and Christianity.

Justification of topic

There are several reasons why a detailed study of the writings of Johanns is justifiable:

1. Classical Indian philosophy implicitly undergirds and informs the religious expression of millions of Hindus in India. The dominant form of indigenous philosophy is the *Vedānta*, a complex body of thought that is comprised of the subtle intellectual positions of certain key thinkers. In the last two centuries, Christian theologians and philosophers in India, whether missionaries or indigenous leaders, have recognized the need for a correct understanding and an adequate response to the *Ve-*

13 Boyd cites De Nobili, Upādhyāy, Monchanin, le Saux, and PaniKKar as examples of Catholic theologians operating from a Thomist framework in *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, p. 261.

14 Joseph Mattam, *The Land of the Trinity: A Study of Modern Christian Approaches to Hinduism*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1975, p. 34.

dānta. Johanns carried the intellectual exploration of the *Vedānta* further than most Christian theologians, both before his time and after; he conducted one of the most detailed analyses of the *Vedānta* from a Christian perspective available.

2. Historically, Johanns was a leader of the ‘Calcutta school’, which was a circle of Jesuit intellectuals who were heavily influenced by Upādhyāy’s desire to engage creatively with the *Vedānta*. They sought to perfect the project initiated by earlier pioneer Catholic thinkers, exploring the value of indigenous philosophy in Indian Christian theology. Thus, Johanns is a key figure representing an important movement in Catholic history for Hindu–Christian encounter.
3. Many Indian Christian theologians have focused upon one primary figure or movement in Indian religious history, making that particular philosophy the hermeneutical key for constructing their own indigenous theologies. Examples would include Upādhyāy, who relied upon Śaṅkara’s *advaitism*, A.J. Appasamy, who interacted primarily with Rāmānuja’s *viśiṣṭādvaita*, and P. Chenchiah, who utilized the thought of Aurobindo Ghose.¹⁵ Johanns, on the other hand, interacted with various traditions and movements within the wider parameters of *Vedāntism* (Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Vallabha). His theological explorations of the *Vedānta* were wider ranging and more comprehensive than those of his predecessors or contemporaries.
4. Johanns is a premier example of a Western Orientalist who used Indological scholarship for mission. He similarly provides an illustration of the legacy of Jesuit scholarship and educational work in India. Jesuits before and after Johanns have immersed themselves in the serious study of Indian religious texts and rituals; an examination of Johanns’

15 For more on these theologians, see Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.

concerns sheds light on some motivations and assumptions which fueled Jesuit scholarship.

Research questions

This book is limited to an analysis of Johanns' interaction with three principal *Vedāntic ācāryas*: Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha.¹⁶ The scope is restricted to examining his theological writings which have been published and his lectures which have been preserved in manuscript form. While Johanns addressed other topics in Indian religiosity, such as Buddhism, Yoga, and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, his central scholarly focus was upon the *Vedānta*, and especially the systems of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha. And although Johanns wrote expositions of the thought of other *Vedāntic* philosophers such as Madhva, Nimbārka, Caitanya, and especially Jīva Goswāmi, he did not engage in any lengthy or systematic theological critique of their positions.¹⁷ This book is therefore delimited to Johanns' treatment of the three philosophers that he considered most important to Indian intellectual history, and it sets out to answer the following research questions:

16 An *ācārya* is a spiritual leader who founded a school of Hindu philosophy.

17 In *Light of the East*, Johanns explicated the philosophies of Madhva and Nimbārka in articles that are not part of the 'To Christ through the *Vedānta*' series. The discussion of the thought of Caitanya and Jīva Goswāmi is included, however, in the 'To Christ through the *Vedānta*' series, but there is no systematic theological evaluation which is provided, rather only pure exposition. Since Johanns provided no comparable theological evaluation for Caitanya as he did for Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha, it cannot be affirmed that Caitanya plays a vital role in Johanns' synthesis. Johanns considered Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha as the creators of the 'three greatest systems' of Indian philosophy. *Light of the East*, June, 1930.

1. How did Johanns interpret and exposit the three *Vedāntic* systems of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha?
2. How did he seek to synthesize three prominent *Vedāntic* systems into what was, in his view, a holistic metaphysic? How did Johanns allow the *advaita* of Śaṅkara, the *viśiṣṭādvaita* of Rāmānuja, and the *śuddhādvaita* of Vallabha to cross-fertilize into a fresh synthetic perspective by bringing them into conversation with each other and with the Thomist conception of *creatio ex nihilo*?
3. How did Johanns, motivated by neo-Thomist presuppositions, attempt to remain faithful to the spirit and individual emphases of each *Vedāntic* school, while at the same time seeking to discover a ‘perennial philosophy’ which can be derived from the *Vedānta*?
4. What did Johanns mean by expressing the relationship between Christ and the *Vedānta* in terms of fulfillment? How does his model of fulfillment theology compare with other Catholic and Protestant models that were contemporaneous with his period?

The book assesses the degree to which Johanns was successful in his project of expounding three key *Vedāntic* systems and synthesizing them into a coherent perennial philosophy which could function as an Indian natural theology that would be ‘fulfilled’ by the supernatural aspects of Christian faith.¹⁸ Several components of the

18 An explanation of the most important terms will be beneficial. Johanns used the word ‘synthesis’ in the sense of drawing together various metaphysical and practical components of diverse philosophical and theological systems in order to construct a perspective that is holistic and which does not denigrate important aspects of reality by over-emphasising certain features over against other vital ones. His understanding of synthesis is derived from neo-Thomism. ‘Perennial philosophy’ refers to this developing holistic perspective, first introduced by the Greeks, extended by medieval scholastics such as Aquinas, and fine-tuned by neo-Thomists, which most adequately depicts the stable

project are examined in order to determine its degree of success or failure. A number of lines of inquiry are pursued. Was Johanns accurate in his interpretation and exposition of the *Vedāntic* systems of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha? Did he provide a convincing synthesis which does not damage or misconstrue the original emphases and thrust of each *Vedāntic* school? Was Johanns' neo-Thomist desire to search for a perennial philosophy based upon *Vedāntic* metaphysics an unnatural imposition upon, or a natural outgrowth of, *Vedāntic* concerns? How credible or superficial was his particular version of fulfillment theology in terms of its specificity and range when compared with the other fulfillment models?

Research methodology

This research is primarily a close textual study of the theological writings of one Jesuit educator in Bengal, particularly with respect to his neo-Thomist approach to *Vedāntic* philosophy. Johanns was a lecturer in philosophy during his service in Calcutta as a Jesuit missionary. His writings overwhelmingly reflect his interest in making a theological evaluation of various Indian philosophical perspectives. If this justifies a mode of analysis of Johanns' writings which takes into account the theological/philosophical components of his project, it is also important to set Johanns within the wider intellectual context of the Catholic and the Orientalist responses to Indian religiosity. To illuminate the historical factors which would have influenced Johanns' thinking adds clarity and depth to the the-

metaphysical structure of the universe. 'Natural theology' refers to truths which can be ascertained by the unaided human intellect and conscience. Johanns believed that the *Vedāntic* 'natural' truths would be 'fulfilled' and brought to completion when the seeker went on to accept the higher Christian supernatural truths, such as the Trinitarian doctrine, which were accessible only through divine revelation. See Chapter One for more discussion on these important technical terms.

ological analysis. Understanding the intellectual background which informed Johanns' reflections is a necessary prerequisite to appreciating his project of synthesizing the *Vedānta*. Thus, textual study which is sensitive to historical context is the main method of appraising Johanns' theological contributions. The nature of the book topic allows for the scrutiny of issues which arise from the intersection of philosophy and theology.

Primary sources

Johanns' writings

Johanns is best known for his articles on the *Vedāntins* which comprised the 'To Christ through the *Vedānta*' series. He also published over seventy articles in *Light of the East* which were not part of this series. After completing the lengthy 'To Christ through the *Vedānta*' project, Johanns began another installment of articles entitled 'Short Outlines of Hinduism', which provided a chronological sketch of the major trends and developments in Indian religious thought from its beginnings.¹⁹ He also surveyed and critiqued 'The Great Theologies' of the major Hindu *ācāryas* who founded *Vedāntic* schools. Other topics addressed by Johanns in *Light of the East* articles included 'The Quest for God' in various Hindu Scriptures, 'Outlines of a Philosophy of the Ideal', and 'Pure Actuality and World Possibility'. He continued to explore the boundaries of *Vedāntic* and Scholastic metaphysics upon his return to Belgium in such articles as '*La Divinisation dans le Vedanta*', '*Pierres d'Attente du Christianisme dans la Philosophie Indienne*', and '*Théologie Catholique et Sagesse des Indes*'. His major book, *La Pensée Religieuse de l'Inde*, was published by the University of

19 For the full references of these articles, see the list of published works by Fr. Johanns provided in the Bibliography.

Namur.²⁰ In addition to his scholarly works, Johanns also composed a series of mystery plays (Mother of Apostles; Veronica; Refuge of Sinner; Annunciation) meant for the edification of those under his care. He had a particular fascination for the childlike spirituality of St. Theresa of Lisieux, who provided inspiration for his devotional work entitled *The Little Way*; this work was a compilation of thirty-seven meditations on the life of simple devotion to Christ exemplified by Theresa.²¹ Thus, one can detect from the writing output of Johanns that the *Vedāntic* commentaries, along with the Scriptures that the *ācāryas* accepted as authoritative, were the focus of his scholarly inquiry, but he was also interested in general matters of Christian spirituality and piety.

Archives/libraries

The written works of Fr. Johanns have been published in a select number of periodicals, mainly Catholic journals. *Light of the East* had a life-span of twenty-four years (1922–1946), but copies of it are hard to find. Through a combination of conducting archival research and accessing published sources in certain libraries, a corpus of extant texts written by Johanns can be clearly identified. These primary textual sources, mainly contained in Jesuit institutions in Calcutta and in Belgium, are the bulk of the information that is preserved regarding Pierre Johanns.

- 20 P. Johanns, *La Pensée Religieuse de l'Inde*, Namur: Secrétariat des publications, 1952.
- 21 These mystery plays and meditations on St. Theresa's spirituality will be excluded in the analysis of the book, since they contain no discussion of the *Vedānta* or the synthesis.

i) Calcutta

The Goethals Indian Library of St. Xavier's College, University of Calcutta has the complete set of *Light of the East*, as well as many other articles of Johanns that are relatively inaccessible. The Goethals Library is a treasure trove of precious materials dealing with Jesuit mission in Bengal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Goethals is open for consultation by students and academics, and the Librarians are helpful and will photocopy any requested materials. The Library is well organized, and the Librarians are concerned to ensure the preservation of their unique holdings. Many rare manuscripts and articles of Upādhyāy, Animananda, and William Wallace are kept here. There are collections of unpublished material, letters, and other personal items by Upādhyāy and Wallace listed as *Varia* in the Goethals catalogue that can be found nowhere else.

ii) Belgium

The Centre de Documentation et de Recherche Religieuses of the Facultés Universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix in Namur is the other major library that has many writings of Johanns. There is a good collection of Catholic periodicals and monthlies that pertain to mission in India at the Centre, such as *Clergy Monthly* and *India Missionary Bulletin*. As a University library, the Centre is in a good state of upkeep and organisation, and xeroxing is permitted. Two Jesuit Archives in Belgium contain several publications of Fr. Johanns, along with other writings of the prominent Jesuits of the Calcutta School. Special permission by the head archivist is required for consultation in the case of both Archives. Photocopying is done by the archivists, and scanning of documents is permitted. The Archives of the North-Belgian Province of the Society of Jesus in Heverlee, near Leuven, have many articles and books on Jesuit mission in the collections. The Archives of the South-Belgian Province of the Society of Jesus in Brussels have a large selection of primary sources in the holdings regarding mission to Bengal and the Congo. Many of the Jesuit missionaries have personal files con-

taining letters, unpublished writings, and obituaries. Over twenty unpublished manuscripts of Johanns have been preserved by the Archives of the South-Belgian Province in Brussels. These manuscripts are all type-written and are undated. Many are unedited and contain hand-written corrections by Johanns over the typed print. They were donated to the Archives by the Facultés Universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix of Namur. It is possible that many were lecture-briefs of Johanns.²²

iii) Other libraries

The United Theological College of Bangalore has published the *Light of the East* ‘To Christ through the *Vedānta*’ articles, although other writings of Johanns in *Light of the East* and elsewhere are not included in this publication.²³ The library of the United Theological College does not contain much primary material that is relevant for researching the Calcutta school. The Indian Institute of the University of Oxford has an incomplete set of *Light of the East*, making it an important library in the United Kingdom for researching Johanns.

22 Many of these type-written manuscripts are unedited and quite unpolished, and they contain much information which merely repeats what Johanns has already conveyed in the *Light of the East* articles. Therefore, the main text of the book contains exposition and analysis of information derived from the *Light of the East* articles, which Johanns carefully edited and scrutinized. Supplementary information, derived from the unedited manuscripts, which is helpful for clarifying the arguments provided in the main text is included in footnotes. Primacy of place in the analysis should belong to the material which Johanns published and which he had thoroughly edited.

23 *To Christ through the Vedānta*, 2 vol., ed. T. de Greeff, Bangalore: United Theological College, 1996.