

# Raymond Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*\*

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Raymond Panikkar is well known to many people who are concerned with Hindu-Christian dialogue. The son of a Hindu father from Kerala, and a Roman Catholic mother from Spain, a doctor in Science, Philosophy and Theology, and a student of Indian religions, having lived a number of years in Varanasi, he appears to be eminently qualified for the task he has set himself—to point out Christ *in* Hinduism rather than to bring Christ *into* Hinduism.

The book under review has received wide attention both among Christians and among Hindus. Reactions have been very mixed. Some have recognized its profound originality and sincerity and its grasp of the issues, but there has also been a good deal of polemic from either side. Some are disappointed that it is a very Christian book: others have thought that they could conclude that Christians have finally realized that they have to acknowledge Hinduism as superior to Christianity. A good deal of controversy seems to centre round the title of the book, and this fact is the justification for another attempt at a review of the book almost two years after the date of its publication.

The title of the book does not give a completely accurate idea of the actual contents of the book. It is not a full systematic treatment of the theme, but it consists of three chapters that could well be published separately. The first chapter on 'Encounter with India' (28 pages) points out that for a true Hindu-Christian encounter neither a purely cultural nor a doctrinal ground of meeting will suffice, but that the 'meeting ground of East and West is in Christ'. One sentence from this chapter well illustrates both the author's position and style: 'It is an encounter in naked faith, in pure hope, in supernatural love—and not a conflict of formulae, an expectation of getting them "over" (where to?)'

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\* Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1964. Pp. xiii+163. Price 25s.; paper cover 12s. 6d.

The second chapter on 'Hinduism and Christianity' (35 pages) seems to be the best part of the book. It is clear and profound: it reveals both learning and insight: it is subtle and sincere. It is not a historical or doctrinal comparison of Hinduism and Christianity but rather an analysis of their relationship in general. In quite characteristic fashion the author develops his main ideas round the word 'and'—revealing some quite interesting facts, but on the whole perhaps going rather too far with it. That becomes quite evident in the last two pages of this chapter in which the author adds 'a word of caution'. Despite this he has been misunderstood. He rightly puts the emphasis on the existential level and points out that the issue between Hinduism and Christianity will be decided by tasting 'who has more to give, who is more ready to serve, who is more ready to lay down his life for his friends, who ultimately loves more'. Several statements reveal in unassuming language the fire in which they had been purified and moulded. In this chapter the author collects a good number of quotations from the New Testament to prove that 'Christ in Hinduism' is not a misunderstanding of either Christianity or Hinduism but the real meaning of both.

The third chapter on 'God and the World according to the Brahma Sutra I:1, 2' (75 pages) is the longest and the most technical, and many readers may not have the courage to go through it because of its numerous Sanskrit quotations and its strictly technical terminology. From one point of view, however, it is the most interesting and the most original. The author states that he neither wanted to write a Christian *Bhāṣya* nor a piece of apologetics: it is in a certain sense a Christian meditation on a Sanskrit text with an attempt to formulate it in theological language.

I hope that I have expressed clearly enough my full appreciation of the book as such—of its general tenor as well as of many of its excellent and striking formulations. If I fulfil that unpleasant duty of the reviewer to find faults also, I would like to emphasize that the faults concern details and that the suggestions brought forward here are meant as a modest contribution to the immensely important task of interpreting the *Unknown Christ in Hinduism* both to Hindus and to Christians.

The basic theology of the book is sound: it is Biblical as well as classical scholastic theology. There is perhaps too much identification of Christianity with 'religion' in the technical, professional sense. The same applies to the idea of Hinduism given in the book. It appears too much of a solid block, too much of an exact parallel with Christianity as 'religion'. I would not agree with the following sentence: 'Hinduism is the starting-point of a religion that culminates in Christianity' (p. 58). Also to call Hinduism 'a kind of Christianity in potency' seems to be rather misleading. The act-potency scheme of

Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy may not be sufficient to express the exact relationship between Hinduism and Christianity. As far as religion is concerned, Hinduism may in fact be more highly developed and far more sophisticated than Christianity. We cannot say that Christianity begins where Hinduism ends, for from the religious standpoint Hinduism is as 'complete' a religion as Christianity; and there is much more in Hinduism than religion. Nor can we consider the essence of Christianity as being the final stage of religious evolution. This 'religious' misunderstanding is also apparent in a formulation such as the following: 'What other means of salvation has God provided to the people of India down the ages, even before the appearance of historical Christianity, if not Hinduism?' The author thinks it is a rhetorical question—but it is a real one. Actual Hinduism is not in all its aspects a means of salvation and there is much in it that would tend rather to the contrary. Can we unreservedly call a socio-religious system a 'means of salvation' which deprives a large part of the population of all human rights? Certainly the 'natural' love of a mother for her child, selfless service for the sick and other impulses and acts that are not strictly 'religious' are far more effective of salvation than a good deal of Hinduism.

From the theological viewpoint one would like to see fewer generalizations of 'Christianity' and 'Hinduism' as a whole. Also the quotations need in some places more careful treatment. In a note on page 137 the author refers to St. Paul's sermon on the Areopagus. He quotes the most relevant portion in Greek, underlining and commenting, 'Note the change of the gender of the subject "who is being worshipped unknowingly, that I am proclaiming into [*sic*] you"'. First, the translation is wrong. It should be: 'What you unknowingly worship, that I announce to you.' There is no change of gender: both times it is neuter. And it is the object the author refers to, not the subject.

Similarly, there are many minor but sometimes disturbing mistakes in Sanskrit quotations. Regularly the sign *ḥa* is used where there should be *ḥna*; instead of *anubhava* there is *anabhava*; many diacritical marks are missing or misplaced; the translation of quite a number of Sanskrit terms is haphazard and arbitrary. A footnote on page 76 mentions a good number of commentators of the *Brahmasutras*. Some missing commas might mislead the non-expert.

Again, some statements such as 'Hinduism is a way of life, a path to mysticism . . . Hinduism hardly commands or leads . . . Hinduism has no dogmas . . . no essential contents' (pp. 12-20) are oversimplifications. The various sects which together constitute Hinduism do have essential contents, they have very definite dogmas, they do lead and command their followers to a great extent, and Hinduism in general is very much more than a path to mysticism. When we read a sentence like 'No Hindu

would dare say that the meeting should take place in Vishnu for instance', we are obliged to object. I have many times heard Hindus explaining Christ as a Vaisnava and Christianity as a kind of Vaisnavism: what else does this mean but that Vishnu, the 'all-pervader', is the meeting-place of all religions?

It is certainly an exaggeration to say, 'If the *Brahmasutras* represent the quintessence of the *Vedanta* this second *sutra* following the first purely introductory one is a corner-stone on which rests the whole structure of Indian philosophical speculation' (p. 76). In fact this *sutra* is rather a commonplace in Indian philosophy and it is the commentary on it that has importance. Sankara laid his corner-stone in the introduction before the first *sutra* in which he explains *adhyasa*. Ramanuja laid his corner-stone in the commentary to the first *sutra* which occupies by itself about a hundred pages of text. It is also incorrect to call a *sutra* a 'philosophical text from a time before the separation of philosophy and theology' (p. 77). A *sutra* is not a 'text' but a kind of symbol, a shorthand expression which summarizes a fair number of real texts that are dealt with in the commentaries. There has never existed any *Brahmasutra* without a commentary. The commentary (*bhāṣya*) is an essential part of the *sutra* and it cannot be divorced from it. Though there are different commentaries, they refer mainly to the same Upanishadic texts and a real *bhāṣya* has therefore to go to these texts rather than meditate on the isolated *sutra* expression. On the whole, the third chapter seems to over-interpret to rather a large extent.

There is also a somewhat unnecessary philological excursion—*Isvara*—which contains some misunderstanding. *Isvara* is an adjective: as such it is found in the *Vedas*. All the Hindu names of God are not proper names but adjectives. Therefore it does not make much sense to try and trace their 'origin'. It is also not true that the *Isvara* does not represent the cosmic aspect of the Godhead but only its anthropomorphic aspect. *Isvara* is very much 'cosmic'—all the non-*advaita* theologians maintain that *Isvara* is also the material cause of the universe, and in their systems *Isvara* is *Brahman*. It is not Tulsidas who fully identifies *Isvara* with *Brahman* and speaks of him as *saguna* as well as *nirguna*, as the author maintains, but it is the whole of the *Bhukti* tradition many centuries before Tulsidas. The summary of the functions of *Isvara* in Indian thought is to some extent misleading: it is a scholastic view rather than an Indian one. Not even Sankara would fully agree with it—far less Ramanuja.

In ending, I would like to repeat that the book as a whole is highly to be commended to all those who are interested in Hindu-Christian dialogue. It is stimulating, deep and 'Christian' in the best sense of the word. It does not claim to be the last word on the problem, but it is certainly a very important contribution and a starting-point for further attempts.