

Book Review

The Unknown Christ of Hinduism : Towards an Ecumenical Christophany : by Raimundo Panikkar. Bangalore : Asian Trading Corporation, 1982, revised and enlarged edition. Pp.xii + 195. Price Rs. 25.

Fr Panikkar's approach to the inter-faith situation has often been characterized as fitting the "fulfilment" model of J. N. Farquhar *et al.* Perhaps the title of this book contributes to such a judgement. In fact, this is to miss the point of the work. Referring both to the earlier (1964) and to the present edition, the author himself directs the reader's attention in quite a different direction.

The thesis of this book was and is that the Christian, in recognizing, believing in and loving Christ as the central symbol of Life and Ultimate Truth, is being drawn towards that selfsame Mystery that attracts all other human beings who are seeking to overcome their own present condition (p 23).

The supposition of the "unknown Christ" is that there is something in every individual that does not alienate the human being, but rather empowers him/her to reach the fullness of being. Christians have called this reality the Christ, and rightly so according to Fr Panikkar. Indeed, he urges Christians "not to give it up too lightly and be satisfied simply with Jesus—however divinized." It is in and through Jesus of Nazareth that Christians have come to experience and believe in the reality of what they call the Christ, but is the Christ which is the decisive reality, the fundamental Mystery at the heart of cosmic

as well as human existence, which is neither purely transcendent nor purely immanent. Disastrous results have attended a diminishing of this insight.

When the mystical insight into the theandric nature of Christ weakens and is replaced by a merely historical understanding of the human actions of Jesus, then this Christian position appears untenable. When the myth of history begins to take hold of Western Christianity, Jesus Christ becomes the embodiment of the supreme Imperium, Incarnation becomes just a little slice of history and 'exangelization' consists in 'civilizing' others and incorporating them into one 'Christian' (and post-Christian) world-order (p.83).

Presumably the thesis of the book could be argued with respect to any authentic experience of this fundamental mystery. Fr Pannikar's primary concern is with Christian and Hindu spirituality. The first chapter deals with the encounter of Christianity and Hinduism on its ontological and existential level, with the intention of demonstrating that there is in Hinduism a 'living presence' of the fundamental mystery. "Christianity and Hinduism meet each other in a reality which partakes of both the Divine and the Human, i. e. in what Christians cannot but call Christ." Fr Panikkar admits that it is not possible to prove such a statement rationally, but he tries to establish its truth in terms of "a Christian meditation" whose aim is to understand its own position without diluting the nature of Christianity and without doing injustice to Hinduism.

The second chapter explores the complementary question of the doctrinal relationship between Hinduism and Christian faith. This is not a question of comparing two doctrines, but of trying to discern a Christian attitude towards "Hinduism understood as a fully-fledged, legitimate and valid religion." The context is that of a wider 'human ecumenism'. The question is boldly posed in terms of the role of Hinduism in

God's economy of salvation, to which it is suggested there are only two possible kinds of answers. Either Hinduism is not a channel for any possible action of Christ whatsoever, or somehow Hinduism is incorporated into the universal salvific work of God through the Christ. Finally Fr Panikkar comes to the conclusion that "there is probably no single analogy that will characterize the relationship of Hinduism and Christianity in all its complexity. Perhaps each religion is a dimension of the other in a *sui generis* co-inherence or co-involvement, just as each human is potentially the whole of Mankind, though each one develops and actualizes only a finite number of possibilities in a limited way" (p 95),

Taking a concrete example, in the third part of the book Fr Panikkar endeavours to demonstrate the presence of a religious truth within more than one religious tradition, and how the exposing of that truth may be to the mutual enlightenment of all concerned. With Hindu friends in mind, he adopts the interesting and promising method of the exegesis of a fundamental text from Hindu Scriptures : *Brahma Sutra* I. 1.2. The text reads : *janmādi asya yatah* whose approximate meaning, according to the commentators, is 'Brahman is that from which the origin, etcetera, of this world proceeds'. If, however, *Brahman* is the unconditioned Absolute, as Śankara held, how can the world be said to proceed from it ? This is one of the major problems of Hindu philosophy—bridging the gap between *Brahman* and the world. Śankara's later followers were obliged to admit that it is not *Brahman* but *Īsvara* who is the cause of this world, though they, of course, maintained that *Īsvara*, the personal God, is, in fact, none other than *Brahman*, but *Brahman* in its aspect of personal God and Creator. Thus, *Īsvara* became the 'link' between the undifferentiated *Brahman* and the created world, including the world of human beings. It is precisely here, says Fr Panikkar—and this is the heart of his argument—that we are to find our point of entry. The unresolved antinomy of the one and the many in Hinduism can be solved if we realize that *Īsvara* is no other than the Christ, the

Logos, the Agent of creation, the Mediator between God and his human creatures. And so with an impressive wealth of scholarly detail, Fr Panikkar interprets his text as meaning, "that from which this world comes forth and to which it returns and by which it is sustained, that is *Īśvara*, the Christ" (p. 162). For Hindus, then, *Īśvara*—true Revealer of *Brahman*, personal aspect of *Brahman*, Agent of creation, origin of grace, yet at the same time himself fully *Brahman*—is the 'hidden Christ'—hidden and unknown, yet present and at work because he is not far from anyone of us; in him all things subsist.

The book does not make easy reading. Fr Panikkar manages to be profoundly technical in both Thomistic and Vedantic terminology simultaneously! He also has a way of coining phrases, e. g. 'ontic-intentional stratum' or 'gnoseological intentionality', which often are more obscure than obvious. A more serious drawback for some may be Fr Panikkar's open and generous attitude towards the Hindu religious tradition, which involves transgressing the traditional parameters of orthodox Christian language and doctrine, including, some would contend, the centrality of the historical Jesus.

Whether or not one finds these elements in the book irritants or even major flaws; whether or not one is convinced by Fr Panikkar's argument, his impressive command of the details and thorough knowledge both of scholastic philosophy and Sanskrit texts command respectful attention. Indeed, his attempt to bring Vedantic wisdom within the scope of Christian thought cannot but contribute to a more critical Christian self-understanding in the context of the growing awareness of the religiously pluralistic situation in our times. Perhaps the significance of this approach is akin to the incorporation of the wisdom of Plato and Aristotle into the Christian religious tradition centuries ago. Certainly few Christian writers have welcomed so generously, though not uncritically, the wisdom of Hinduism. Fr Panikkar has amply demonstrated here, and

in his many other writings, his considerable skill in exposing a *sensus plenior* in both Hinduism and Christianity through his ability to bring about a creative encounter of these religious traditions. Both Hindu and Christian have been put decidedly in his debt. Almost twenty years after the first edition of this book appeared, Fr Panikkar's ventures of discovering, or perhaps even creating new forms of human consciousness remain not only stimulating and suggestive, but productive.

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