

# Gospel Ferment in India among both Hindus and Christians Seeking India's Christ-Bearing Word Some Reflections—Historical, Indological, and Theological— on the Quest for a “Christian” Vedanta

by Richard Fox Young

## *Who Needs to Rethink Hinduism and Why?*

To start these discussions off, let me share with you a few cursory observations of a philological nature on a Sanskrit word commonly used in the Vedantic tradition, a word that comes close to describing what I regard as a necessary predisposition for doing what this forum invites us to do, which is to “rethink” Hinduism. The word I wish to draw attention to is *jijnasa*, a desiderative form of the root verb *jna*, to “know” or “understand.” In the Vedantic tradition, salvific knowledge, *mokashajnana* or *muktijnana*, isn't for just anyone, isn't a universal entitlement. To qualify for it, one must seek for it single-mindedly, out of an overwhelming sense of urgency, because no other knowledge is more desirable, more salvifically consequential. *Jijnasa*, of course, isn't the only prerequisite (among other qualifications, one must also have a front-to-back familiarity with the Vedas), but without *jijnasa*, the predisposition to rigorously *rethink* the assumptions we routinely make, one might as well stay home (in the idiom of the Indian tradition, as a householder, *grhastha*), conduct oneself well according to the *dharma*, pursue the good things of life (*artha*, wealth, and *kama*, pleasure), and transmigrate a while longer to realize just how inconsequential all these things really are, compared with salvific knowledge. To repeat, one just isn't ready for Vedanta unless the glint of *jijnasa* shines in one's eyes.<sup>1</sup>

Since at this forum we too are being invited to *rethink* certain assumptions, the assumptions we routinely make about Hinduism, it wouldn't hurt to muster up some *jijnasa* ourselves, or to talk about doing so in a Vedantic idiom even though the idiom isn't ours. Otherwise we'll find ourselves going around and around in a *sansara* of our own making, an endlessly repeating, ever worsening cycle of ignorance, superimposing upon Hinduism the same invidious misunderstandings of the past, like people who jump back in fear every time they see a coil of rope because they can't help seeing it as a coiled snake. I'll switch to a more familiar idiom in just a moment, but Vedanta here provides us with its own analogy for what we're doing, a very familiar analogy for the way in which the true and the real (*sat*) gets confused with

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the false and the unreal (*asat*). It is an analogy that can also speak to us cross-culturally about the need to rethink Hinduism and not be deceived by appearances. For that task, the predisposition of *jijnasa* is a prerequisite.

Since, however, we are invited here to *rethink* Hinduism as Christians, the glint of *jijnasa* in our eyes isn't the only thing, or even the main thing, required of us. Christian *jijnasa* must be accompanied by a change of heart and not only of mind, which is to say, in a more congenial idiom of our own, that the proper predisposition of a Christian for the task at hand is that of *metanoia*, a turning *from* the false and the unreal *toward* the true and the real. We need *metanoia* as well as *jijnasa* because of the misunderstandings we superimpose upon Hinduism, as if the Commandment not to bear false witness against our neighbors doesn't apply to the faithful of this religion or others.

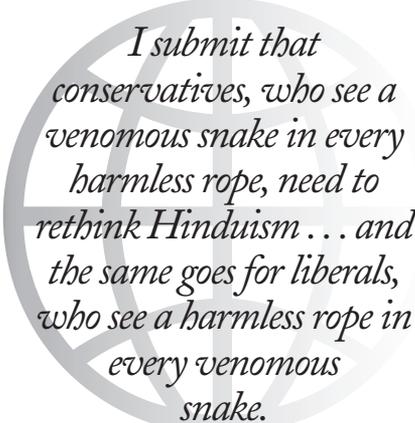
It isn't, therefore, only to rethink Hinduism that we are meeting, but also, I would suppose, to rethink Christianity and who we are as Christians in relation to Hinduism. I would further suppose that rethinking Hinduism—intellectually and meta-noically—as faithful Christians who confess that the misunderstandings we've been content to perpetuate, is something we all need to do, whatever theological tag we care to wear, conservative, liberal, or something else.

At the risk of caricature, I submit that conservatives, who see a venomous snake in every harmless rope, need to rethink Hinduism (Buddhism, Islam, etc.), and the same goes for liberals, who see a harmless rope in every venomous snake. As unlike in their theologies as conservatives and liberals are, they are at least alike in being aloof from, or indifferent to, the deep, *jijnasa*-like and metanoic engagement with Hinduism (or, for that matter, Buddhism, Islam, etc.) that this forum refers to as “rethinking” what we think we already know.

To say that Christians across the board need to “rethink” Hinduism, intellectually and metanoically, isn't saying very much, of course, because

at this point a whole cluster of collateral questions rears up. Among them, I address the following: *which* Hinduism do Christians need to rethink? *where* should Christian rethinking begin? *how* should Christian rethinking proceed? and—the most difficult of all—*what* purpose(s) should Christian rethinking serve?

Let me anticipate for you the trajectory of my discussion by re-phrasing the last question, the toughest, like this: would any other purpose than thinking about Hinduism with a view toward its Christ-bearing potential be sufficient to warrant a call for



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radical “rethinking”? That is not to deny, of course, that other, non-theological purposes would be served by rethinking Hinduism, or that I downplay the need to be more aware of them—I refer here to the academic discipline of the history of religions, about which theologians need to be more cognizant if their theologies of religion are to be anything more than *a priori* abstractions.

### ***Which Hinduism Do Christians Need to Rethink?***

Because “Hinduism,” like all world religions, our own included, is a semi-fictional construct of European origin, superimposed upon a loose agglomeration of variable and contrastive phenomena, any rethinking of it, by theologians or non-theologians, ought to be contextually specifiable, by which I mean verifiable in regard to concrete particularities. One can hardly afford in today's academic climate to be slack in this regard, even though concerns about the essential-

izing, reifying effect of referring to this loose agglomeration by a single name, “Hinduism,” sometimes seem exaggerated or simply pedantic. The caution, however, is to be taken seriously, especially here, because to talk of rethinking Hinduism without reference to contextually specifiable, concrete particularities would only end in abstractions that would themselves need further rethinking at a subsequent forum.

To sort through the multiform phenomena that we sloppily, if inadvertently, render uniform with the label “Hinduism,” anthropology offers some helpful schemes of classification, especially the Great Tradition/Little Tradition distinction formulated years ago by Robert Redfield. According to this, one of the primary and most symptomatic features of Great Tradition Hinduism would be its textuality, the fact of its being embedded in the Veda and its auxiliary literature in Sanskrit, and along with textuality there is the literacy that textuality implies. It follows from this, of course, that Great Tradition Hinduism is about as universal, or pan-Indian as Indian religions ever get, because literate communities everywhere enjoy virtually unlimited access to it.

Where Little Tradition Hinduism is concerned, one of its most primary and symptomatic features would be orality, the fact of its being embedded in unwritten texts, which implies the absence of literacy, although oral texts can be just as complex and highly developed as written texts. It follows from this that Little Tradition Hinduism is geographically localized and linguistically restrictive, since for reasons of language anyone who isn't a part of the community will find it difficult of access.

As obvious as it seems, it needs to be further observed in this connection that Great Tradition Hinduism, being Sanskritic, contextually specifies the religious complex of the privileged minority, a miniscule community in terms of percentages, whereas Little Tradition Hinduism contextually specifies the religious complex of the marginalized majority, known in today's nomenclature as Dalits (or in

the outdated Gandhian terminology of the past as Harijans, and so forth).

One can get more contextually specific than this, and it would, of course, be the responsible thing to do, but my purpose is only to suggest a way, a way among others, in which our rethinking of Hinduism might be made more verifiable in regard to concrete particularities. In my own case, since I have thus far already alluded to it several times, it hardly needs to be said that my own point of reference for the duration of this discussion will be the Vedanta.

This may sound contextually specific, but really isn't, because the word "Vedanta" (*veda* + *anta*) can be used in more than one sense, first in the literal sense of being a name for the Upanishads, the collection of texts at the "end [*anta*] of the Veda," second in the sense of being the culmination, essence, or perfection of the ante-Upanishadic portion of the Vedic corpus, and third in the sense of a name for any of the several lineages (or schools) of Upanishadic interpretation, which are primarily three: that of Shankara (early 8<sup>th</sup> century), known as Advaita Vedanta (Non-Dualism), that of Ramanuja (11<sup>th</sup> century), known as Vishishtadvaita (Qualified Non-Dualism), and that of Madhva (13<sup>th</sup> century), known as Dualism (Dvaita Vedanta). At one time or another down to the present, each of these Vedantas has elicited the interest and attention, the admiration and concern of Christians, Indian and European, but none so much as the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara.

Why Advaita came to have a corner on the market for Vedanta, inside India and outside, would be better explained on another occasion; likewise, discussion of the particularities of Advaita's historical development will have to be deferred (and some basic knowledge assumed), because we are dealing here with a highly complex, internally differentiated tradition that includes a pre- and a post-Shankarite Advaita as well as modern departures from classical Advaita, not to mention an early Shankara who can be differentiated from the later Shankara. At the risk of oversimplifying the symptomatic

themes that Advaita Vedanta perennially addresses with a variety of permutations, two stand out as being of special relevance for Christian rethinking: the Brahman/*Isvara* dichotomy, or the ontological difference between unqualified (*nirguna*) and qualified (*saguna*) being (*sat*), and its corollary, the epistemological trichotomy between 1) transempirical (*paramarthika*) reality, which is the absolute reality of Brahman; 2) empirical (*vyavaharika*) reality, which is the contingent reality of the world of human transactions that we inhabit, as well as that of *Isvara* (lit. 'the Sovereign Lord,' the highest divinity imaginable by theistic religions, including Christianity); and 3) the most idiosyncratic category of the trichotomy, illusory (*pratibhasika*) reality, like that of the snake superimposed upon the rope. As a total system imbued with a distinctive form of perspectivism, Advaita sometimes speaks of reality transempirically, sometimes empirically, and to crack its hermeneutical code, one will need to be familiar with the whole range of Vedantic terminology: *sat* (being), *chit* (consciousness), *ananda* (bliss), *atman* (self), *avidya* (ignorance), *maya* (illusion), and much, much more. Obviously, there's a great deal in Advaita that will perplex and challenge even the most rigorous of thinking Christians.

Before we get on with the task of rethinking Advaita, a bit of apologetic on its behalf would be in order, because a very pertinent question now arises, Why do I single out for preferential attention a variety of Hinduism identified with a privileged and hegemonic strata of Indian society, when so many other contexts could be specified for which Christian rethinking is also sorely needed? And, when the majority of Indian Christians come from the marginalized majority that chafes under the yoke of brahminical bondage, doesn't it smack of elitism to focus on Vedanta, which is Great Tradition Hinduism? Wouldn't it be more responsible, for the sake of the newly-emerging Dalit theologies, to rethink the more representative varieties of Little Tradition Hinduism in terms of their Christ-bearing potentialities?

The objection is one to which I am sensitive. One would have to search long and hard for a Vedantic counterpart to Christian theologies of liberation, because the only liberation of interest to classical Vedanta is the liberation from rebirth (*samsara*). But such theologies have emerged among neo-Vedantins even in Dalit communities, as was demonstrated in a doctoral dissertation by Vazhayil Varughese, a recent Princeton graduate, whose study of the Sri Narayana Guru movement in Kerala during the early decades of the twentieth century found that the downtrodden Ezhava (Ilava) community self-consciously rejected its Little Tradition Hinduism—as well as Christianity—in favor of the self-transcending powers of Vedanta to rise above the social obloquy to which it was traditionally consigned. This itself is an indication of the need to rethink Advaita, which among Dalit theologians is nowadays emblematic of everything about Hinduism that seems unjust and immoral.

My apologetic, however, goes a step further. Think for a moment of how hard it would be for today's Indian theologians to talk theologically in their own languages, were it not for Great Tradition Hinduism, so dependent are they on Sanskritic terms that have become Christ-bearing words. In short, to say that rethinking Vedanta pays theological dividends doesn't mean that it's the ideal Hinduism or the only Hinduism that needs rethinking.

### *Where Should Christian Rethinking Begin?*

"Rethinking" implies that some thinking has already been done, that instances can be adduced from history that provide starting points for further reflection. That is indeed the case; looking into the past in this connection can be instructive, because Christians before us have had a great deal to say about Vedanta, sometimes ignorantly, sometimes insightfully. I leave it to other colleagues here at the forum, however, to engage some of these individuals in depth, since the best that I can do for this presentation

is to characterize in broad strokes, with a few pauses to fill in the details, the complex historical and theological dynamics of Christianity's on-going encounter with Vedanta.

Of this encounter we already have some four-hundred years, beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with a Catholic quest for a fundamental rapport with the religions of India, including and perhaps especially Advaita, followed by a Protestant interregnum marked by confrontation in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some of it conscientious confrontation and not all of it contentious confrontation, followed by another, somewhat different phase in the Catholic quest for a fundamental rapport between Christianity and Vedanta, which brings us down to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the present. This is a long history that other scholars might reconstruct and periodize differently, and a general historiography of the Christian encounter with Vedanta (or, for that matter, any other form of Hinduism) remains to be written. What follows is meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive. In any event, rethinking begins in the past with the thinking that others have already done, some of it for the very first time.

In a deep-time perspective, the first Catholic quest for a fundamental rapport with the Vedanta takes us back to the early decades of the seventeenth century, to the Madurai Mission founded in South India by the Italian Jesuit Robert de Nobili (1577-1656), who in some respects is better known for the adaptation of his European lifestyle to the upper-caste Hindu codes of social conduct than for any serious and sustained engagement with Advaita (Clooney 1990b, 1999). The whole corpus of his writing, however, is suffused throughout with so much Advaitic technical terminology that one is never left in doubt as to the contextual specificity of the Christ-bearing word that he articulated, whether in Tamil, Telegu, or Sanskrit.

We know, moreover, from de Nobili's correspondence and his European-language treatises, that he had a first-hand acquaintance with the living traditions of Vedanta and its concrete particularities, from his contacts with

local communities of indigenous advocates, whom he called the "sect of the Gnanis" (the "Spirituals"; lit., "Wise Ones"; De Smet 1976). De Nobili admired the "Gnanis" for their ambivalence to image-worship (idolatry, as he called it) and their insistence on the immateriality and the unity (the *advaita*; lit., not-two-ness) of Brahman, which as a name for the Christian God seems to have struck him as having the right connotation but the wrong denotation.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because the Vedantins already enjoyed a monopoly on Brahman, de Nobili turned to other undenotated names—*sarveshvara*, *paraparavastu*, *parapara*, to cite only a few of Sanskritic derivation—and in so doing enriched the South Indian Christian vocabulary.

Moving on rapidly to the next generation of Jesuit missionaries, one finds the same reserve about Brahman, but also a bit of flirtation and courtship. Consider, for instance, Jean Calmette (1693-1740) of the Carnatic Mission, author of *The Essence of the True Veda* (*Satyavedasarasamgraha*; "True Veda" being a periphrasis for Christianity), who utilized the nomenclature of Advaita to a greater extent than even de Nobili did, and of that the following line (actually a verse) would be a particularly pregnant example:

[*Sarveshvara* (lit., The Sovereign Lord of All)] is devoid of stain (*niranjana*) and change (*nirakara*)/ without form (*arupa*) and invisible (*adrishya*)/ without qualities (*nirguna*), without blemish (*nishkalanaka*)./ He is undivided (*akhand*), the Sovereign Lord of All.

The passage has a distinctively Vedantic ring to it, but keep in mind that the text from which it is extracted, like virtually all Jesuit writings of the era, belongs to the genre of apologetics and is forthrightly anti-Vedantic even though it cannot say what it intends to say without Vedanta, that the Christian is the true *brahmajnani* (the one who knows Brahman)—note how Brahman as the name of the Christian God slips in!—and that Christianity is the true religion (the literal meaning of *satyaveda*). Interestingly and significantly, Calmette also composed a variety of prayers in Sanskrit, many of them

from the Catholic breviary, for the use of Indian converts, and in them we not only find the same Vedantic vocabulary that we've seen thus far but also a tantalizing fondness for referring to God as *saccidananda*. I would surmise that because the prayers were only meant for Christians, Calmette felt freer about the problem of denotation and went for the connotation instead, believing that repeated use of *saccidananda* over time would transform even the most Vedantically monopolized *Brahman*-bearing word into a *Christ*-bearing word.<sup>3</sup>

When I say that literary productions like de Nobili's and Calmette's signify a quest for a fundamental rapport with the Vedanta, I mean, theologically speaking, that theirs were Thomistic endeavors, that Catholicism's dichotomy between Nature and Grace informed their undertakings, and that Christianity perfects Vedanta. I do not mean that Vedanta and Christianity were seen as entirely commensurable, for in fact in most respects de Nobili and Calmette saw them as incommensurable and yielded no ground in arguing that the truths of Vedanta, even though encased in glittering Sanskrit ornaments, are more like fool's gold than real gold, until transformed into a Christ-bearing word.

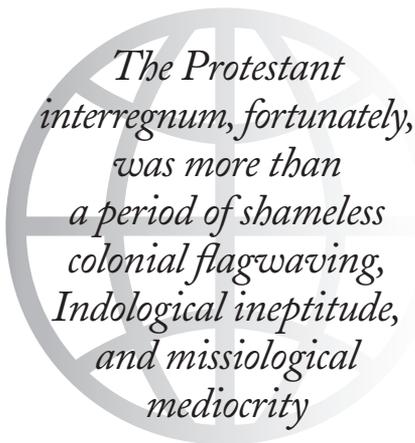
The long eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestant interregnum that follows upon the era I have just discussed, was, as I have already mentioned, marked by confrontation that was sometimes conscientious, sometimes contentious, in which the disjunctions between Christianity and the Vedanta were magnified and the conjunctions minimized. Insofar as I know, none of mission history's superstars—the German Pietist of Tranquebar, Bartolomaeus Ziegenbalg (1683-1719), for instance, or the English Baptist of Serampore, William Carey (1761-1837)—ever engaged in a serious and sustained study of the Vedanta, although in other respects these were individuals whose Indological and missiological contributions were rarely excelled thereafter.<sup>4</sup> Even more unfortunate is that the interest in Christianity being evinced by Vedantins was often con-

sidered suspect, as we see in the clash between Carey's colleague, Joshua Marshman (1768-1837) of Serampore, who heaped polemic scorn upon the neo-Vedantic Hindu reformer of Calcutta, Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833), in whose landmark study of the Christian gospels, *The Precepts of Jesus*, he failed to see how far Ram Mohun had come in his appreciation of Christianity and instead only harped on how far he still had to go (Robertson, 1995: 39-42).

During the Protestant interregnum, the Vedanta begins to be perceived as more malign and less benign, as it was earlier when Jesuits took the trouble to gain a first-hand acquaintance with it. Take Joseph Mullens of the London Missionary Society in Calcutta (Bhowanipore), whose vicious caricature of the Vedanta in *The Religious Aspects of Hindu Philosophy* (1860), based on sloppy, second-hand research, starts with the ludicrous claim (p. 246) that, "The Vedanta ... declares all matter and spirit to be identical with Brahma." Mullens is here mischaracterizing the Vedanta as a crude Pantheism, an accusation that should have been put to rest long ago but is still being echoed.

Not only is the analysis badly skewed and the tone unnecessarily contentious, *The Religious Aspects of Hindu Philosophy*, which was widely acclaimed at the time, is a sad example of the "discourse of domination," to borrow a phrase from postcolonial scholarship. I mean by this that the author, who wrote the book in the form of a dialogue between a Vedantin and an Englishman—not a Christian even!—commits himself to the colonial project, to British domination, by depicting Vedanta as emblematic of everything wrong with India, which in this view was too mystical, too impractical, too effeminate to govern itself. And, as if this were not already bad enough, Mullens' Englishman, whom he casts in the role of a magistrate in the British colonial administration, orders his imaginary Vedantin, as the discussion comes to a close, to hush up and listen as he dictates "an outline of the truth."

The Protestant interregnum, fortunately, was more than a period of shameless colonial flag-waving, Indological ineptitude, and missiological mediocrity, and for this we have to give thanks for India's Christian intellectuals, among whom Nilakanth-Nehemiah Goreh (1825-1885), a converted brahmin of Benares and a leading figure at mid-century, exemplified some of the very best virtues of the lesser-known conscientious confrontation with Vedanta in *A Rational Refutation of Hindu Philosophical Systems* (1860), originally in Sanskrit but widely read in English



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translation until not many years ago. Goreh, who knew Vedanta from the inside as a living tradition and was himself a Vedantin until he became a Christian, was of the same mind about Hindu philosophy as the early theologian Tertullian about Greek philosophy: Jerusalem had no more in common with Benares than Athens. One therefore looks in vain in *A Rational Refutation* for any hope that the Vedanta can be converted or become a Christ-bearing word (Young 2002).

As a convert who had once been an insider (Young 1981), Goreh understood that Vedanta had to be dealt with organically, as a total system, and so, since he realized that Christians and Hindus cannot conduct their discussions by citing their own respective self-authenticating sacred texts, the Veda to Christians and the Bible to Vedantins, *A Rational Refutation* relies on logic alone, syllogism after nit-picking and mind-numbing syllogism. But since the syllogisms were formulated according to the standard

rules of Indian logic (*nyaya*), anyone serious about getting a Christian perspective on Vedanta from the era of the Protestant interregnum ought to slog through *A Rational Refutation*, even though it was more important to Goreh to affirm things that were new for him in Christianity instead of things that Christianity could affirm in common with Vedanta. Missionaries of the time generally approved of his approach, and there the matter stood for a good many years to come, marking the Protestant Interregnum as an era of open confrontation, clear boundaries, and—thanks to Indian Christians like Goreh—honest and forthright recognition of the Vedantic "other" in all its concrete particularity and radical otherness.

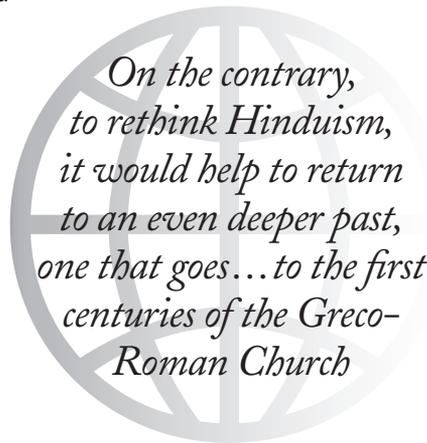
The next distinct phase of serious Christian engagement with Vedanta, the one that brings us down to the present, which I call the second Catholic quest for a fundamental rapport with the Vedanta, can be characterized more briefly than the previous two. One reason for brevity is that we have Timothy Tennent's recent book, *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations* [2000] on Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), an interstitial, transitional figure of hyphenated identity who considered himself a *Hindu-Catholic*. In Brahmabandhab, we see suggestive continuities as well as discontinuities with the first Catholic quest for a fundamental rapport with the Vedanta, for his was an identity that the early Jesuits would never have dreamed imaginable except as a social identity, not as a religious identity.

To get a feel for the complexity of the man, one should read *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations* in one hand with Julius Lipner's biography of Brahmabandhab, oddly subtitled (as if Brahmabandhab were some kind of Che Guevara when he was really an Indian Christian nationalist) *The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary* (1999). Between the two there is little agreement as to whether the foundations on which Brahmabandhab constructed his theology were more Indian

or European, more Vedantic or Thomistic. Whichever side of the Tennent-Lipner debate one takes up, there was in Brahmabandhab a streak of the Catholic contemplative that we do not find in earlier representatives of the Catholic quest for a fundamental rapport with the Vedanta, which was a more text-based engagement.

Brahmabandhab, however, marks the gradually increasing shift away from engaging Vedanta on the basis of texts to engaging Vedanta on the basis of experience. We see this shift even more clearly in the post-Brahmabandhab period in Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda) of *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point within the Cave of the Heart* and Bede Griffiths of *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, to mention only two of the best known figures, who bring us down to the second half of the 20th century. The change of epistemological paradigm from sacred text to sacred experience as the point of engagement between Christianity and Vedanta did not occur all at once, of course. One must not overlook in this connection *To Christ through the Vedanta*, the series of studies by the Belgian Jesuits Pierre Johanns and Georges Dandoy, who were classic Thomists, or the *River of Compassion* of Bede Griffiths, a Christian commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is good proof that the most recent Catholic engagement with Vedanta remains radically textual.

Even though the shift to which I am alluding becomes increasingly evident with the appearance of generically Hindu and sometimes specifically Vedantic prayer and meditation techniques in the spiritual praxis of the Catholic contemplative movement, the same concern for the Christianizing transformation of indigenous religious elements that we saw in the first Catholic quest is seen in the second as well. Consider, for instance, this passage from *A Benedictine Asbram* (1951: 77) by Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, on the monastic community founded by them early in the second half of the twentieth century, where spiritual discipline included meditation on the best-known linguistic



symbols of Vedanta—*sat* (being), *chit* (consciousness), and *ananda* (bliss). Under *pre-Christian* conditions, these terms would have been evocative of Brahman, but here we see them being transformed into the words of a Christ-bearing prayer:

Repeating that sacred formula *saccidananda*, the Christian gives it a new and mysterious meaning, unknown to man, because such a knowledge is above any created intelligence, but was communicated ... to all mankind through ultimate Revelation by the Word made flesh.

There it is again!—Grace perfecting Nature (*gratia perficit naturam*). And so, from this perspective, it cannot be said of the second Catholic quest, that it was any less opposed than the first to making Christianity and Vedanta equivalent or interchangeable. As pregnant linguistic symbols, *sat*, *chit*, and *ananda* are not being perceived or treated as if they already are Christian. Nonetheless, because we are dealing not only with the vocabulary of Vedantic *theoria* but also with the spiritual disciplines of Hindu *praxis*, the boundaries between pre-Christian Vedanta and Christian Vedanta nowadays seem fuzzier than ever before—a concern that leads me to make some concluding observations about how our rethinking ought to be properly catalyzed and galvanized.

### ***How Should Christian Rethinking Proceed and for What Purpose?***

If my purpose in reviewing the three epochs of Christian engagement with the Vedanta had been to adduce evidence that the many pioneering

individuals who preceded us had a *jijnasa*-like glint in their eyes and a *metanoic* change in their hearts and minds, there would be plenty to praise or blame. Being at a “rethinking” forum, however, shouldn’t mean—and of course doesn’t—that we look down at the past, condescendingly, from the Olympian heights of the present. On the contrary, to rethink Hinduism, it would help to return to an even deeper past, one that goes beyond the four centuries of Christian engagement with Vedanta dealt with thus far, to the first centuries of the Greco-Roman Church and the engagement of its theologians with “pagan” philosophy, not only because their circumstances are much like India’s (and, for that matter, ours in the Euro-American world) but also because there is much to learn from them about how our rethinking ought to be properly catalyzed and galvanized theologically. And so, to rethink the present, I invoke antiquity, which I review in the same way I reviewed the last four centuries—briefly—and with a debt to the Catholic scholars who have most influenced my perspective in this connection, the late Paul Hacker of Münster (1970a, 1970b, 1971, 1980), Halbfass (1994) and Paul J. Griffiths of Chicago (1997, 2000).

A more thorough review than mine would include Old and New Testament references to the “nations” and the “gentiles,” Justin Martyr’s two *Apologies* (155-65 a.d.), which identify Christ with the Logos, and the *Stromata* (ca. 200 a.d.) of Clement of Alexandria, in which Greek philosophy is welcomed into the Church—provisionally—as a gift of God but also only as an adumbration of the gospel. Other texts and individuals, Origen especially, could be singled out for what they tell us about the Church’s engagement with its cultural heritage during the first few centuries, which for them always had contextual specificity with respect to the concrete particularities of Paganism. I restrict my scope, however, only to texts from a somewhat later period in which the Greek term *chrēsis* (χρησις) and the Latin term *usus* (and their related verbal forms) have already become technically connotated terms signify-

ing a theological process by which pre-Christian symbols—linguistic symbols of the kind already discussed in connection with Vedanta and other kinds as well—become Christianized. To exemplify the technical meanings of *chrêsis* and *usus*, I take Gregory of Nyssa's allegorical interpretation of an event in the life of Moses—the Exodus account of his sojourn among the Egyptians—and Augustine's similarly allegorical interpretation of the "Egyptian Gold" passage (*spolia Aegyptiorum*) in Exodus, which together contain some of the most illustrative instances of how early theologians deployed the terms.

Of the several meditations in Gregory's *Life of Moses* (390-392 a.d.), perhaps the one most pertinent to this discussion would be that of Pharaoh's daughter (Ex. 2.1-10), who functions for Gregory both generically as a symbol of "pagans" and specifically as a symbol of Egyptian Paganism, while Moses, of course, symbolically represents Christians and Christianity. Although Pharaoh's daughter nurtures Moses, it isn't she who suckles him but the wet-nurse who, as the story goes, is Moses' real mother (Jochebed), the Church. "This seems to teach us," Gregory says,

that even though we may study extrinsic doctrines during the time of our education, we should never sever ourselves from the Church's milk which makes us gradually grow up. This milk is the practices and customs of the Church by which the soul is nourished and strengthened for its setting out from here to ascend to the height.

To return to the Exodus story, when Moses comes of age, Gregory tells us that he feels ashamed of being taken for the son of a barren woman (which would indeed be cause for wonder and ridicule!). This prompts the following comment from Gregory:

In fact the culture that is extrinsic to the church is barren. It is always in travail but never gives birth to offspring. Philosophy has indeed been in travail for a long time, but has it produced a fruit worthy of so many and great efforts? Are not all its fruits unsubstantial [wind-like] and immature? Before they attain to the light of the knowledge of God, they

are miscarried. They might perhaps have become men, if they had not been enclosed in the bosom of barren wisdom alone.

As the conclusion to this rambling meditation, which is problematic for a number of reasons—its mixed metaphors and its troublesome notion of "extrinsic" cultures, which seems to raise the specter of a *normative* Christian culture—we finally get an unambiguous indication as to why Moses lingers so long in Egypt: "So that it may not seem," says Gregory, "that he has not profited from the values which those people possess." For Gregory, even though the wisdom of Egypt cannot substitute for the milk of the Church, its wisdom can be utilized by the Church when Moses returns to Israel. The conclusion seems to me emblematic of the spirit of *chrêsis* in the early Greek Church. Augustine, to whom we now turn, will drive it home even more pointedly in the Latin Church.

Augustine's interpretation in Book II, chapters 40-41 of *de doctrina Christiana* (ca. 397 a.d.) of the various "Egyptian Gold" passages of Exodus (3.21f., 11.2., 12.35f., etc.), which speak of how the Israelites took items of precious value (gold and silver jewelry, etc.) from the Egyptians before the exodus began, allegorizes the relationship between Christianity and Paganism in much the same way as Gregory's *Life of Moses* (i.e., gold and other precious metals symbolize the pre-Christian philosophies of the Gentile world generically and of Egypt specifically), but with a different twist. Augustine (like Origen and others) was greatly vexed by the matter of ownership: what right (or lawful claim) to the wisdom of Paganism did the Church have? Augustine contends that the Egyptians, who stand for other religious communities generally, were not the lawful owners of the treasures in their possession, which include "some most useful moral precepts." And besides, "concerning the worship of the one true God some true statements are found among them." Such precepts and truths, as it were, are the Egyptians' "gold and silver," which came into their possession providentially.

So far so good, one might think, but Augustine takes back with one hand what he gives with the other by adding that the Egyptians forfeited their ownership when they misused their treasures by dedicating them to the worship of false gods. Accordingly, when pagans become Christians through the sacrament of Baptism, the gold they possess must be given back to the Church, their lawful owner. One wonders, of course, how much sympathy an American court of law (or, for that matter, any court of law) would have for a defense like his—the implications of biblically-sanctioned pillage and plunder are surely

**W**hat models do the early theologians like Gregory and Augustine exemplify that catalyze and galvanize what we're doing today?

troublesome to anyone serious about rethinking the relevance of Christian antiquity to the present situation of the Church in India (or elsewhere)—but that's the position Augustine takes: taking the Egyptians' gold was not a criminal act; to take it was to repossess it and put it to a better, Christian use. And in making this point Augustine's conclusion seems to me both problematic and emblematic of the spirit of *usus* in the early Latin Church.

How, then, does invoking antiquity help us rethink the present? What model do the early theologians like Gregory and Augustine exemplify that might catalyze and galvanize what we're doing today? And how might one reformulate propositionally what they were saying allegorically in a way that would be pertinent to the task at hand, the seeking of India's Christ-bearing word? The following series of summary reflections on the model they exemplify may be of help in bridging the gap between antiquity and the present, allegory and propositional logic.

First, pre-Christian Paganism is richly endowed with knowledge and truth of precious value, which isn't ours yet, but

can be, which means that Christianity hasn't been enriched yet, but can be, if we linger in Egypt and acquire its gold. Second, we linger in Egypt and acquire its gold, not just any gold anywhere and not out of a vaguely generalized openness to pre-Christian Paganism, but rather because the knowledge and truth we search for has contextual specificity and concrete particularity. Third, the real radiance—the Christian radiance—of the knowledge and truth of precious value that we find in pre-Christian Paganism will only be revealed once we've lingered in Egypt and acquired its gold, which is to say, after recontextualization and reparticulation by a transformational process of *chrêsis* and *usus* in the post-Pagan context of the Church. Fourth, once we've lingered in Egypt and acquired its gold, we move on, paying no heed to whether anyone knows, even the Egyptians, that we've been in Egypt or recognizes that the gold we have dedicated to the Church is Egyptian gold, because what's important is affirming the new standard for gold, not the old—anything else would not be to linger but mangle and to leave the raw nuggets of pre-Christian knowledge and truth as they were, unprocessed. That would go against the spirit of what the early theologians like Gregory and Augustine were doing, whose model was that of processing the knowledge and truth of Paganism through the filters and buffers of *chrêsis* and *usus*.

### *Rethinking Hinduism Today*

It is problematic, however, that the rhetoric and idiom of Gregory and Augustine is so very redolent of theirs versus ours, of possession versus repossession, which means that Christian antiquity needs rethinking as much as pre-Christian antiquity, especially in the context of India where relations between Hindus and Christians have become so alarmingly politicized and radicalized over the past few decades. But once we understand that the spiritual purport of lingering in Egypt and acquiring its gold is not that of ransacking but of an intellectually, biblically, and theologically warranted searching and sifting through the treasures of Paganism with the *jijnasa*-like glint in one's eyes and the metanoic change of heart and mind that I talked about

earlier in this presentation, then the *chrêsis/usus* model that Gregory and Augustine (and other early theologians) exemplify has considerable potential for catalyzing and galvanizing our rethinking of Hinduism. And, whether you call it as I do, *seeking India's Christ-bearing word*, or *reading the world in Christ* as Paul J. Griffiths does (following Francis X. Clooney), rethinking serves one overarching purpose (as well as many other underarching purposes), that of relating all religious phenomena, including Hinduism generally and the Vedanta particularly, as Griffiths says (1997: 15), "initially and principally in terms of their relations to Christ."<sup>5</sup> Once we are clear on that, we can roam freely and rove creatively through the Great Traditions and the Little Traditions of India, lingering in Egypt and acquiring Egyptian gold, as it were, for these are *fundamental metaphors* (as Griffiths calls them [2000: 7]), especially "Egyptian Gold," his preferred metaphor that "intimate, provoke, suggest, and stimulate."

Metaphors help, for the reasons mentioned, but lingering sounds too passive for the task of active rethinking, and gold usually doesn't just lie in plain sight on top of the ground, waiting to be picked up. Having been to Alaska recently and having seen, like every first-time visitor, the artifacts of the Gold Rush, the shafts tunneled into the mountains, the ramshackle mills that processed precious ounces of gold from tons of barren rock, I feel that I can pretend to know at least a few things about the mining industry. Most mines yield very little, many run dry, but whatever they produce is so fantastically desirable that prospectors are still out there, looking for what was missed, some of them with primitive methods like panning, others with more modern, sophisticated equipment. That seems to me an apt analogy for what a rethinking forum is all about: looking for the nuggets that were missed. And the good news is, we can linger longer in the goldfields of India, which is precious to the Church worldwide, because there is still a rich vein of ore waiting to be extracted.<sup>6</sup> **IJFM**

### *Interaction between Rethinking Forum Participants*

*Question:* Could you please give some more detailed comments on what you mean by "Christ-bearing word"?

*Richard Fox Young:* I take this phrase from a patristic source, the 4<sup>th</sup> century Greek theologian Gregory Nazianzus, who was trained in the classics of his culture. Gregory was noted in his society for the beauty of his language and the conformity of everything he wrote to the canon of standards for good literature. He was a litterateur who wrote noted works of secular literature as well as being a theologian of the church. In his secular literature he had to refer to the Greek gods and the myths of their exploits; this was necessarily a part of writing good literature at that time. In a letter of his to a disciple by the name of Nemesius, he expressed a weariness with writing about the Greek deities and wrote: "As for me, I will sing of the things Christ the light taught me well, the divine song of Christ-bearing words." I found this very moving. It seemed to express to me very much what any kind of rethinking endeavor should do related to the gospel and the religious material at our disposal from India that we try to use to articulate the gospel and the significance of Christ. I use it also since I have referred to the Vedanta in this discussion in which the word is the Brahman-bearing word, and yet contains a great deal that can also be a Christ-bearing word, so I have tried to use it appositionally (the Brahman-bearing word and the Christ-bearing word). I am looking for a kind of Christo-centric language to convey the Christian faith within the Indian context.

*Question:* So you are seeking to convey the meaning of Christ in Hindu categories?

*Richard Fox Young:* I think those categories are good not only for conveying a Christ-bearing word, but those categories can also somehow enrich us. That is the whole meaning of the Egyptian gold metaphor; that it is something really precious *for us* to have. It may not be fully understood and fully appreciated in all its

preciousness in its original context, but once it is within a Christ-centered context then it can be appreciated and its real value can come out. If I did not really bring that out sufficiently it would be a failing on my part, because I really want it to be understood that the perspective I am conveying is that the Indian materials at our disposal are like Egyptian gold and *can enrich us*. Not just the Indian church, but also the world-wide church, just as we experienced as we sat here and sang the hymn Vande Sacchidananda.

*Comment by Herbert Hoefler:* We have our way, our philosophical tradition, our intellectual pattern for defining how we have come to know God in Christ. But there are many other philosophical traditions besides ours which are rooted in Greek philosophy, and where there are these other traditions there need to be other theologies developed. The other philosophical traditions demand of us an affirmation of the validity of developing other definitions of the way to know God and Christ.

*Richard Fox Young:* I am with you entirely; I don't think that the Western Magisterium needs translation into the languages of India. It is of no concern to me that we reduplicate with Indian terminology what we have done in the West. I do think there has to be a dialogue, there has to be a sense that what India does theologically with its own linguistic and cultural and religious heritage is meaningful in relation to what the West has done. But we are not looking simply for some sort of evidence that India can do this. It can, obviously, and it can do even more in its own way with its own language and heritage, and that too can enrich us. The Greek heritage that we have is one that emphasizes reason and logic. The biblical Hebrew way is much more act oriented; what God has done and not so much what God *is* in the philosophical sense. India has a way that is very much like the Greek way, but India also has ways that are rather like the Hebrew way, but that is not so well known to me so is harder to get into. But you are very right that India needs this freedom to be itself. My

point has been that there is this gold, and it is gold of many kinds and you will find it in many different places, not only in Advaita. If you really got me going I would get away from Advaita entirely, because I am frankly not very philosophically minded and there are other meanings of *sat* that move me much more than the philosophical notion of the ground of being. *Sat* is also a power that comes into a person and transforms a person for the good. That is Little Tradition *sat*; I have just been talking about the highfalutin Great Tradition, but there is much more besides.

*Question:* Who has the right to be mining in the Vedantic tradition? Are we right to be sitting here in the USA discussing this? Is this something the Indian church has a right to talk about? Is this something better left to those from Hindu families who are in Christ?

*Richard Fox Young:* I think we have to be very careful about the idiom that the early theologians used. It is really a difficult idiom to employ, so the question does arise as to our predisposition. This cannot be a kind of ransacking, like knocking on the doors of the houses of the Egyptians and taking their gold and silver and other things. Who does this? I think that I would want to try to avoid any kind of dichotomizing language; that it is an Indian task and not a non-Indian task. I would rather think that it is something we can do together; that this is a religious heritage that any can empathetically study and seek to understand.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For Shankara's discussion of *jijnasa* and other qualifications necessary for the attainment of salvific knowledge, see his commentary on the Vedanta Sutras, the *Brahmsutrabhashya*, 1.1.1 (Thibaut 1890: 9-15).

<sup>2</sup> De Nobili's most systematic remarks on Vedanta generally and Advaita specifically are in sections 3.6.2, 4.2, and 4.4.3 of his *Customs of the Indian Nation* (1613), for which see the annotated translation of Amaladass and Clooney (2000: 87-88, 95-96, 100-02). In the first of these sections, de Nobili writes, "Vedanta theologians explain just about all the divine attributes, stressing their absolute character. For instance, they show that God is a self-subsistent Being, that he is eternal, immaterial, that by his nature he is God, that he exists everywhere and that he is the cause of every being."

<sup>3</sup> For the full Sanskrit and English text of Calmette's *Satyave-dasarasamgraha* and the breviary prayers, see Amaladass and Young (1995: 105-46 and 147-95). Instances of *saccidananda* are found in the morning prayers (174) and the prayers for the sacrament of marriage (182).

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Dr. Daniel Jeyaraj, the Mackay Visiting Professor of World Christianity at Princeton Theological Seminary, I realize that Ziegenbalg was more aware of Vedanta and more impressed by it than I had thought to be the case. In his encyclopedic work of 1711, *Malabarisches Heidenthum* (on South Indian Hinduism), he refers to Vedanta and Vedantins as follows: "Where can you find such correct expressions of god in the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans? When I was reading such things in their books for the first time, I was indeed persuaded to think that these authors must have been Christians, because they not only reject the worship of multiple deities and concentrate on the worship of the one and only God, they also discard all other heathenish things as foolishness."

<sup>5</sup> The fuller context from which I have extracted these few words from Griffiths, is worth noting (*idem*): "All phenomena, human and nonhuman, must be readable in Christ, for Christ is the axis of the cosmos and the means through which all meaning is given."

This is at least part of what it means to have a properly Trinitarian theology. Reading the world in Christ, then, is that part of the Christian account that construes all phenomena initially and principally in terms of their relations to Christ.”

<sup>6</sup> For just a hint of some of the most interesting theological rethinking of Hinduism (among other religions) being done today, see *The Depth of the Riches* of S. Mark Heim, whose perspective on Advaita is suggested by the following passage (2001: 229): “If one seeks to look to the very bottom of every finite being, past everything apparently transient and particular, and to find where its true source of being lies, one can truly discover just one divine life beneath it all, one divine process of immanence. Indeed, if God is known in this way alone, the result is identification. Precisely in looking past bodies, personalities, and individuality, one arrives at a point of contact with the source of our being. ... Thus, I as a Christian do not deny that a Hindu may actually realize identity with the divine, with absolute *Brahman*. I regard this as in fact identity with the underlying immanence of the triune God.” While there is much in this passage that would not seem off the mark to theologians of the second quest for a fundamental rapport with Vedanta (with which I, too, broadly identify), what makes Heim’s approach different, challenging, and problematic is that he is an advocate of absorbing the insights of Advaita (such as the one discussed in this passage) into Christian theology as they are. To understand why Heim insists on retaining the concrete particularities of Advaita (as well as those of other religions) in the structure of the Trinitarian theology he envisions, one must first appreciate the position he took up in an earlier work, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions*, which rightly and persuasively argued, with specifiable contextuality, that different religions seek different salvations. Hence, Heim’s concern for keeping that emphasis in *The Depth of the Riches*. However, to retain the concrete particularities of Advaita as they are, as if they could remain as they are in any other context than the one to which they organically belong, seems to me neither possible nor desirable. While Advaita’s insight into the ground of being is an insight that Christians

should respect, absorb, and transform, the better to fully appreciate aspects of Christian self-understanding that western theologies often neglect, the need for recontextualization and reparticularization seems to me imperative. In fact, without really knowing it, *The Depth of the Riches* does do precisely that.

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