

Book Review by Harry Oldmeadow***Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism***

A Monk of the West

Trans. Alvin Moore, Jr. & Marie M. Hansen

Sophia Perennis, 2004;136pp, \$19.95.

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The comparison of religious forms from different traditions is a perilous enterprise. There are those who will find parallels and similarities, even identity, through facile comparisons which pay too little attention to the place of the forms in question in the larger spiritual economies to which they belong, not to mention other considerations of cultural and historical context. Myths, doctrines, rituals, codes, symbols and the like can never be understood *in vacuo*. On the other hand there are those so wedded to the conviction that their own tradition is in exclusive possession of the truth or, less immodestly, that the forms of their own faith are intrinsically superior, that they see only “opposition and mutual exclusion everywhere”, quite unable to countenance the idea that, for all the manifold diversity and variegation of religious forms, there is a necessary and Providential congruity between the metaphysical doctrines of the integral traditions. Such partisans cannot understand that the formal diversity of religions *complements* an inner unity which can only be discerned by the “eye of the heart”. None of these reproaches can be levelled at *Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism*, a work which was first published in French in 1982 but now makes a most welcome appearance in English translation.

The author’s purpose is to consider whether the Vedantic understanding of non-dualism, primarily as expounded by Sankara, is compatible with Christian doctrine, particularly as we have it in Aquinas; further, whether an enhanced appreciation of the Advaita Vedanta might allow a fuller apprehension of the Christian perspective on the fundamental questions with which all sapiential traditions must necessarily contend, especially those pertaining to the nature of Ultimate Reality. Both questions are answered in the affirmative, though not without the appropriate qualifications. Behind the arresting juxta-positioning of doctrinal exegeses by masters of both traditions, and behind the careful theological and metaphysical argumentation, lies a more general theme, signalled by the title of a later work by the same author, *Theologica Sine Metaphysica Nihil* (1991).

It is not without significance that our author should choose to remain anonymous. He has taken to heart Attar’s directive in *The Conference of the Birds* to “put on the mantle of nothingness” and to “drink of the cup of nothingness”. Doubtless this anonymity also serves to highlight several traditional principles: that “Truth is not and cannot be a personal affair” (Frithjof Schuon); that an idea belongs to all those capable of understanding it; that Tradition infinitely surpasses the subjective resources of any particular individual; that anyone who cleaves to Tradition can have no interest in dreaming up so-called “new ideas” but only in the explication and *application* of doctrines and principles which are valid once and for all. Readers determined to discover the individual identity of our author will find some biographical information

furnished in the translators' Preface. Suffice it here to say that he was a French lay brother of the austere Cistercian Order, that his intellectual and spiritual trajectory was decisively influenced by René Guénon, and that he developed an abiding interest in the Vedanta but remained unequivocally committed to the Christian path. Early in the piece the author permits himself the following remarks:

We are not of the East, nor are we qualified to offer ourself as a representative thereof. We believe, however, that on the whole the following account [of Advaita Vedanta] remains substantially faithful to its spirit and adequately reflects its intellectual and spiritual position, two things which appear closely related if not actually synonymous as regards non-dualist doctrine. Perhaps this account will also better enable some to grasp more clearly the profound reasons for its intransigence and its "inconvertibility" (p. 38).

— to which one can only say, quite so!

The work at hand is the fruit of four decades of rigorous study of both Vedanta and Latin Christianity, whilst it also demonstrates a familiarity with the other great religions of both East and West, as well as particular mystical and gnostic streams within them. But this is no sterile academic study. Its many commanding insights derive from spiritual *practice* — not that our author in any way draws attention to himself, but one immediately senses an existential engagement with the material which goes far beyond the idle speculations of academic theorizers and armchair experts. Furthermore, the razor-sharp intelligence at work here has been tempered by faith as Sankara himself affirmed it:

By a deliberate act of understanding to adhere to Truth as expounded in the Scriptures and in the teaching of the spiritual Master—this is what the Sages designate by the term faith, and by faith one understands the Real (quoted on p. 76).

We may surmise that such a book is the consummation of a lifetime of prayer, of contemplation, of submission to the dictates of an orthodox spiritual method, as well as study; it is stamped with a spiritual maturity which can be attained in no other way. (We can leave aside those exceptional and "isolated miracles" which only prove the rule.)

In the book's closing pages, referring to the Vedantic non-dualism, we find the following words:

...we will say unequivocally that after more than forty years of intellectual reflection on this doctrine, having allowed it to impregnate us more and more profoundly, we have found nothing that has seemed incompatible with our full and complete faith in the Christian Revelation (p. 136).

It is worth noting the author's careful formulation of his claim; it is not that Christian and Vedantic doctrines are *identical* — a declaration which would be manifestly absurd as one form (a doctrine no less than any other) cannot be what it is without excluding other possibilities — but that the doctrine of non-dualism is *not incompatible* with Christian faith, or, to put it more positively, that the two can be metaphysically harmonised. Or, to make the same point from yet another angle, the Truth to which these doctrines give access is One. This is the pivotal theme. Let us illustrate the book's central motif with one example adduced from many possibilities. It is often asserted that Christian creationism and Vedantic emanationism and the accompanying doctrine of "cosmic illusion" are radically at odds, and that there can be no doctrinal *rapprochement* between the two. It is widely thought that "every doctrine endeavouring to go beyond metaphysical dualism but lacking the concept of creation can only end in

pantheism” (p. 20). Our author makes short work of this misconception and, with the support of Aquinas, shows how creationism can be reconciled with emanationism. Without gainsaying the differences arising out of these two perspectives, he demonstrates their compatibility through their mutual repudiation of all dualities whatsoever. In a nutshell: in both traditions “the Supreme Mystery infinitely transcends Its aspect as ‘The Creator’.” (p.60) The two doctrines, in their most recondite aspects and in their vital functions in the traditions in question, are actually analogous.

It is beyond the compass of this modest review to rehearse in detail the argument developed in this short, lucid and profound treatise: the point here is to urge readers to turn directly to the book for themselves. However, it will perhaps not be out of place to offer a few reflections prompted by *Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism*. In the measured unfolding of his argument the author performs two immensely important services. Firstly, he clears the Vedanta of many Western confusions and misunderstandings, and thereby throws out of court the spurious charges which have been brought against it both by Christian theologians and by modernistic scholars. One need only refer to a battery of pejorative adjectives which have been discharged against the Vedanta: “subjectivist”, “idealist”, “monistic”, “quietist”, “pantheistic”, “world-denying”. Our author well understands that the *scientia sacra* of Advaita Vedanta absolutely escapes the grip of these kinds of categories. It is, above all, a metaphysic, which is to say a doctrine, or better, a *theoria* concerning Reality, derived from the Intellections of the sages, supported by both Revelation (which takes the place of Intellection for the exoteric majority) and Reason, but not a theology as such, even less a profane philosophical system in the limited and modern sense of “philosophy” as a rational inquiry. As Ananda Coomaraswamy observed,

The Vedanta is not a "philosophy" in the current sense of the word, but only as the word is used in the phrase *Philosophia Perennis*... Modern philosophies are closed systems, employing the method of dialectics, and taking for granted that opposites are mutually exclusive. In modern philosophy things are either so or not so; in eternal philosophy this depends upon our point of view. Metaphysics is not a system, but a consistent doctrine; it is not merely concerned with conditioned and quantitative experience but with universal possibility. ("Vedanta and Western Tradition", in *Selected Papers, Vol 2: Metaphysics*, Princeton, 1977, p.6)

Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, the book rescues Latin Christianity from a kind of sentimental piety and “passional blindness” which, in post-medieval times, has obscured genuine Christian intellectuality — which is to say, the pursuit of metaphysics within a Christian context. (One cannot properly speak of “Christian metaphysics” as opposed to “Hindu metaphysics” — one might, perhaps, speak loosely of “metaphysics with a Christian coloration”. On the other hand, we cannot speak of theology without qualification: there is *only* Christian theology, Hindu theology, Islamic theology and so on. A clearer understanding of this distinction would dispel all manner of confusions!) If we are to remedy what the translator rightly refers to as “the present sapiential desiccation of Christianity” (p. 3), there is no more imperative task than the resuscitation of metaphysics in the West. Moreover, it must be said, this is unlikely to be achieved without the help of the East. Seyyed Hossein Nasr stated the case over thirty years ago:

Oriental doctrines can fulfil the most fundamental and urgent task of reminding the West of truths that have existed in its own tradition but which have been completely forgotten... Today it is nearly impossible for Western man to rediscover the whole of his own tradition without the aid of Oriental metaphysics. This is because the sapiential doctrines and the appropriate spiritual techniques... are hardly accessible in the West, and “philosophy” has

become totally divorced from the nature of the spiritual experience. (“Conditions for a Meaningful Comparative Philosophy”, *Philosophy East and West*, 22:1, 1972, p.59)

A book such as this could not have been written before a long and arduous scholarly and spiritual apprenticeship. The author’s learning, never showy or self-conscious, is evident in the many references and allusions to the texts and authors to whom he repeatedly turns; in the Indian tradition, Sankara (especially the *Vivekachudamani*), Guadapada, Ramakrishna, Swami Ramdas, Ramana Maharshi; in the Western tradition, not only the Angelic Doctor but such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, Benedict, Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, as well the Pentateuch, the Gospels and Pauline works in which he has thoroughly immersed himself. Add deftly chosen excerpts from the *Koran*, Ibn Arabi, Milarepa. A veritable treasure-trove of metaphysics and mystical theology! (By way of an aside, one is a little puzzled by the comparatively meagre references to the *Upanishads*, Sankara’s exposition being but an elaboration of what is to be found in these most noble of Hindu Scriptures.) In garnishing his themes by reference to modern writers, our author also shows a discriminating eye, making judicious use of the likes of Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Louis Massignon, Vladimir Lossky, Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain and Jean Daniélou as well as several less well-known Catholic theologians. It might also be observed that the work of “a monk of the West” exhibits that limpid clarity which is one of the hallmarks of Gallic intellectuality, as well as evoking the particular Franco-Catholic ambience in which he worked.

The book does not descend into contemporary theological controversies, nor concern itself with polemic. Nor does it evince the slightest interest in the impertinent and corrosive reductionisms — historicism and psychologism to name but two — which many academics bring to the comparative study of religious doctrines. One recalls Guénon’s claim that

Those who are qualified to speak in the name of traditional doctrine are not required to enter into discussion with the “profane” or to engage in polemics; it is for them simply to expound the doctrine such as it is, for the sake of those capable of understanding it, and at the same time to denounce error wherever it arises... (*The Crisis of the Modern World*, London, 1975, p. 65)

The tone of the book is quiet, sober and undisturbed by those sentimentalities and fervours which sometimes arise when one is “thinking piously”; indeed, our author exhibits the same “habitual calm” which he finds in Aquinas. His adamant purpose is the elucidation of truths which, in the light of tradition, are axiomatic. It is in the nature of the subject that a work of this kind should make some demands on the reader: without a certain concentration of the intelligence some readers will find themselves floundering amidst the argumentation which, necessarily, is often complex, abstruse and subtle — but never sophistical. Moreover, as Frithjof Schuon has remarked, metaphysics cannot be taught to anyone and everyone! Then too, there is the fact that the book’s fearless confrontation of several awkward questions, especially in the wake of centuries of Christian triumphalism and exclusivism, will no doubt scandalize some readers. All that said, for those with eyes to see, this is a ravishing work; indeed, its clarity, profundity and sincerity make it both beautiful and exhilarating. Its precision, poise and elegance might well conjure musical comparisons. These days it is not often that one comes across a work of real metaphysical discernment by an author adequately equipped to make the cardinal doctrines of two different traditions mutually illuminating. (The only works with which this reviewer is familiar which cover much

the same ground, written from a vantage point of Christian orthodoxy but also grounded in the deepest understanding of the Vedanta, are by another French monk, Father Henri Le Saux, a Benedictine who spent the last decades of his life in India: *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* and *The Further Shore* — both published under Le Saux's adopted Indian name, Swami Abhishiktananda.)

It would be negligent to close this brief review without acknowledging the painstaking work of the translators, Alvin Moore, Jr. and Marie M. Hansen, in bringing this hidden jewel into the purview of the English-language world. They deserve our heartfelt thanks. The translation is crystalline, and the footnotes discreetly inserted by the translators are always helpful. The Preface expounds various aspects of Christian doctrine and spirituality which are often little understood in the modern world, and thereby provides the reader with an avenue into material which might otherwise be quite perplexing. The publishers, Sophia Perennis, are likewise to be commended on another fine addition to their catalogue of works which do indeed bring the liberating light of the ages to wayfarers lost in the darkness of the modern world. This book cannot be extolled too warmly. I hope it will find a place not only on the shelves of all readers of this journal, but in their hearts and minds!