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## Book Review: "Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna"

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when one puts epoché aside, one is no longer engaged in the academic study of religion" (p.218).

The study of religion must move into the "post-modern" situation, these lectures say. And so it must, taking account of dialogue and examining, among other things, the relation of the traditional religions to emerging "globalization" – and the concomitant environmental devastation. These lectures say a great deal about that situation. They are wonderfully broad in scope. They reveal an

engaging openness to manifestations of spiritual life. They fail to establish two key distinctions, in the opinion of this reviewer – between religion and spirituality and between dialogue and its interpretation – but in other respects they constitute a stimulating and useful introduction to the contemporary study of religion.

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***Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna.*** Lex Hixon. Boston & London: Shambala Publications Inc., 1992, 314pp., index.

IF THE TITLE leads you to expect a historical account of the meeting of the well-known Bengali mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886) – the "Great Swan" of the title is how Hixon renders *paramahansa* – with various people of his time, you are setting off entirely on the wrong foot. There is nothing really historical in this book at all. In the *Introduction* we are told that "*Great Swan* can be regarded as a contemporary commentary on *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and *The Great Master*, the root texts" of the Ramakrishna tradition. In fact, it is an imaginative interpretation – too imaginative and over-interpreted. Early in the book, towards the end of the *Introduction* in fact, it is asserted that Ramakrishna is "an Einstein of the planetary civilization of the near future". If this description induces sinking feelings in the scholarly reader as to both forthcoming style and content, they are well justified.

No attempt is made to present a critical study of the Master's teachings or meetings (after all commentaries can be "critical" in the positive sense of this term). Thus the book is useless as a source of information or towards any scholarly end. Well, perhaps it scores on "atmospherics", conveying effectively the Master's persona and presence in different moods and situations. Not for me, it didn't. Here's an example of the style: "[Ramakrishna's] body trembles subtly for a few

minutes, particularly the thumbs, as if a powerful electrical current is consciously focusing and adjusting itself through the entire nervous system. Then the human form becomes perfectly still, except for a wonderful smile playing continuously across bearded lips ... The figure appears to increase slightly in size, as if expanding into the boundless space of Divine Presence .... Ramakrishna's God-filled form is seated upright on the sumptuous divan, not leaning against its colourful bolsters and pillows. His beautiful meditative equipoise seems barely to touch the ordinary world of space and time" (p.121). Or how about this: "Ramakrishna is seated in the home of his beloved companion Ishan... Wherever he travels, the Great Swan is englobed by peace – *shanti, shanti, shanti*... A white sheet has been spread on the floor and white pillows place near our Master, who is wearing a white cloth and a white woolen shawl informally covering his honey-coloured body... Since this is a High Holy Day in Hindu tradition, Divine Ecstasy is streaming through the Paramahansa's very pores..." (p.193). If such purple prose does for you, you will happily die of suffocation over 300 unremitting pages.

The cumulative effect for me was to totally obliterate Ramakrishna's humanity, and consequently to render him quite inaccessible, whether as teacher, guide, model or friend. I fear I can recommend this book to no one,

whether scholar, student or devotee.

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**Jules Monchanin, Pioneer in Hindu-Christian Dialogue.** Sten Rodhe, New Delhi: ISPCK, 1993, pp. xvi + 76.

**JULES MONCHANIN** (1895-1957), the founder of the Shantivanam ashram in Tamil Nadu, came to India in 1939 as a French Catholic priest. His life in India was devoted to integrating the Hindu tradition, especially its *sannyasi* contemplative practice, into the life of the Christian Church. Bede Griffiths comments about Monchanin that "His knowledge of Indian culture and philosophy was profound, but at the same time he sought to embody his ideal of a meeting between the Hindu philosophical tradition and the Christian faith in a community which would be rooted in the culture of India." Based upon his lifelong study of Hindu-Christian relations and his many visits to the Shantivanam Ashram, Sten Rodhe has written a concise scholarly assessment of Monchanin's life and legacy. This contribution is welcome since the two previous treatments of Monchanin's life by Henri de Lubac and J.G. Weber are both out of print.

After a Foreword by Bede Griffiths, Rodhe's Introduction sets Monchanin's life in the context of the history of Hindu-Christian interaction in India. This clear and concise history is masterfully written. In it Monchanin is shown to follow in the intellectual and spiritual legacy of the Italian Jesuit Robert de Nobili in attempting to create an Indian Christianity, using Indian customs instead of Western ones. Although for most of this century both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches in India officially rejected this approach, in recent times both have come close to embracing Monchanin's model for Hindu-Christian interaction.

Chapter one recounts Jules Monchanin's childhood, his strong Catholic spiritual formation and the impact made upon him when at 14 years he read a book on the Buddha. He was a voracious reader of philosophy, theology

and mysticism. After studying these subjects at "the grand seminary" near his home in Lyon, he was ordained in 1922. In Christian theology he preferred Augustine the open seeker to Aquinas the systematizer. The next 10 years of his life were engaged first in University study and then in service as a parish priest. While he flourished in the freedom of thought in the University, he found it very hard to get himself to write and never did finish his thesis. This antipathy to writing remained throughout his life - which he explained by saying that he preferred solitude to writing. A lasting friendship during these years was formed with Henri de Lubac. While he identified with the poor of his parishes, even joining them in demonstrations, he was drawn to more academic pursuits. He joined a philosophical society and wrote papers on topics that remained with him for life: "The one and the many", and "Comparative Mysticism". In an essay on "Forms, Life and Thought" he maintained that religious experience needs forms and structures in the same way as other kinds of life. "Without firm structures spiritual life becomes mere dreaming. Christian life, which tells us to love God and our neighbour as ourselves, to abandon our egoism, is possible only within structures." (p.10) In 1932, Monchanin took ill and near death he promised God that if he were spared he would dedicate his life to the salvation of India.

It took seven more years for Monchanin to convince church authorities to send him to India. But the time was not wasted. He gave lectures in Lyon and at Louvain in which he developed the theology that he later lived in India. That theology is clearly documented in its formation in Chapter 4. Monchanin's dream was to Christianize India, but the approach was markedly different than the missionary theology