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# Retrospective: the Birthing of a Discipline

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IT is not clear whether Hindu-Christian study is a new enterprise or something that has been in progress for some years. My four decade experience has confronted a set of problems clouding any self-identity. First is the problem of naming. My own preference has always been the written text and my training, likewise, has been textual. In fact every course in graduate school was the study of a particular Indian text, whether Hindu or Buddhist. That's what Indology was about in those years. We were wary of comparative religions done in Europe and further saw religionswissenschaft as generalist and even phenomenology as replete with problems. We felt more at ease with history of religions, until Wilfred Cantwell Smith taught more precisely what the study of religion and religious history was about. As a textualist the problem of naming became more complex with interdisciplinary work: anthropology, sociology, psychology. Further, Indologists did not seriously explore the historical, theological and philosophical contexts of a text and its rich interpretative past. Our mantra thus became from the text to context and back again to text. Hindu-Christian study embraces a similar process. A second problem is that of audience diversity: the academy, the greater public, and the church. Although few scholars have either the capacity or versatility to deal with all publics, there is a responsibility of the academy to all publics.

The second renaissance anticipated by Mircea Eliade, namely the European discovery of Asian culture, was a failure because it was taken seriously by Indologists but not by Western philosophers, theologians, or historians.<sup>1</sup> The global concerns of the greater social-political world

or even the specific concerns between town and gown gave focus to the perennial question: Is anyone listening? Likewise, as members of an ecclesial community of belief and worship, we share the crisis of faith confronted in contemporary religious life. Yet in all three cases we are not dealing as much with a crisis of faith as with a crisis of culture. Academic culture is no longer defined by professors but by students, administrators and socio-political forces outside the university.

The third problem facing self-identity is that of postmodernity itself. Those of us teaching in large departments deal with colleagues who are modernists, postmodernists, and even in the greater university with those still fighting the Enlightenment. Although I do not see these platforms as totally discreet and distinct from each other as I modulate and traverse methodological perspectives and audiences, progress in Hindu-Christian study depends upon how one speaks and what one says to various publics. I have found most sobering the insight of Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios who looked upon interreligious dialogue as a means to overcome the Enlightenment and to explore modernity.<sup>2</sup> From text to context does not necessarily lead one back to the text. Interreligious work, however, does direct one back to the text.

## Interfaith Experience

How does one dialogue as an Indologist, a comparativist, a Christian theologian, a Roman Catholic? I have never been able to wear these hats, plus a few others, at one and the same time. My

interfaith experience can testify to a monologue or a dialectic or a dialogue in different situations and times. My work in phenomenology and in fieldwork, both with an emphasis on listening, has been more monologue than dialogue. Likewise, I have experienced academic forums in which I have been preached to and evangelized. Monologue, unfortunately, is embedded in intellectual life. The more one studies the history of or participates in ongoing exchanges, the presence of monologue is invariably occurring. A cluster of reasons gives rise to this: lack of clarity in the agenda; a hidden intentionality; the difference in the quality of discussion and qualification of discussants; and finally, the absence of a hermeneutical sense. Monologues continue in the academic world because we have not been able to manage the plurality of hermeneutical stances. This is evident when we move into a dialectical phase of interreligious encounter.

Thirty years ago I attended a conference in comparative philosophy contrasting three foundational concepts: logos, dharma, and li. Scholarly dialectic took place for several days before the participants concluded that they lacked sufficient knowledge of each concept in its own context prior to their discussion. I have found that contextualization controls the quality of a good dialectic between parties in interreligious discussions. Yet, the greater obstacle to dialectical discourse is again the absence of a conscious hermeneutical stance. The most successful dialectical accomplishments have resulted from a linkage between contextualization and hermeneutical reasoning. In a recent study of a Muslim-Christian dialogue in Spain over a thirty year period, a doctoral student of mine found that monologue existed for half of that period before the parties were sufficiently contextualized in their questions and what they brought to the encounter.<sup>3</sup> The primary factors prohibiting a true dialectical encounter were either the lack of or differentiation in hermeneutical reasoning. The type of dialectical reasoning evidenced in Western thought frequently

resulted in a synthesis of thesis and antithesis. The same is true of some comparativists of religion. The difference between a dialectical encounter and a dialogical encounter is that the former does not take subjectivity as seriously as the latter. Dialectical discourse infrequently recovers the foundational insight or the original experience of the 'other' to the degree that avoids synthesis.<sup>4</sup> In interfaith discourse this means that the original experience, the foundation of religiosity, and its understanding remain unknown. In many theoretical (theological) discussions this has moved the participants to greater misunderstanding and separation. Understanding is essentially relational and this insight informs the more significant moves in interreligious affairs and the possibility of dialogue.

#### Understanding Through Dialogue

More than any other writer Raimundo Panikkar has been an important guide over the years in my understanding of dialogue that creates a change of vision. I have found as he has that dialogue belongs to the very constitution of the human person as a relational being. Dialogue is so embedded in human intersubjectivity that the project of human consciousness is to overcome the polarity of subject and object. Rabindranath Tagore, along with other modern figures, has a rich concept of the 'surplus' in the human person, pointing to an incompleteness in the person but always on the way of becoming more relational. For Tagore the human person transcends limitations as personal relationships to the world and within its multiplicity are extended. He speaks of the 'Angel of Surplus' and a 'Second Birth' as one enters a greater world of intersubjectivity.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Panikkar's most provocative insight is that of intra-religious dialogue, the intra-personal soliloquy, the dialogue taking place within oneself. We have already seen that to perceive the 'other' through our own cultural lens is distancing ourselves from understanding. In some way we enter into

another's world of experience. John S. Dunne spoke about "crossing over" to another world of culture and experience. This is possible if we enter into another's text and context and, at the same time, are aware of the major theoretical presuppositions of that person. I have been reading the *Bhagavad Gita*, at a minimum, twice a year for the past forty years and have taught from it at least twenty-five times, along with some of its commentaries. I know that it has resonated within my Christian experience and my Catholic imagination. The *Gita* has been a text in dialogue within my personal religious world. The intra-religious dialogue of which Panikkar speaks becomes a context for religious experience itself. Such intra-religious dialogue precedes any substantial dialogue with others.

Panikkar uses the term 'dialogical dialogue' in order to distinguish it from a 'dialectical dialogue.' In a 'dialogical dialogue' both intra-religious and interreligious conversations take place as parallel processes.<sup>6</sup> The 'dialogical dialogue' is the personal relationship which discloses in a mutual way the metaphors and myths both parties live by. Such dialogue anticipates not only a capacity to welcome, listen, and understand another's testimony but also to welcome the possibility of new experience as well as new understanding. Friendship emerges from such dialogue. It brings to visibility, what I call, the sacramentality of dialogue.

The sacramentality of dialogue was especially focused in the life of Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940), an Anglican priest who spent almost forty years in India as an intimate friend and collaborator of both Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Andrews was called Deenabandhu, a friend of the poor, by Indians as he frequently joined Gandhi but followed his own social agenda in India, South Africa, and Fiji; he lived and worked, however, more intimately with Tagore in the poet's literary, educational, social, and international projects. It was in his friendship, a dialogical relationship, with

Tagore and Gandhi that Andrews achieved new experiences and understandings of Christianity and, more specifically, of Christ. One study concludes that Andrews' theology was a lifelong rearticulation of christology, trying to thematize the meaning of the personal Christ.<sup>7</sup> Andrews experienced Christ sacramentally in Hindu life: sacramentally by those in human bondage and suffering, sacramentally in a unique way through his interpersonal relationships with Tagore and Gandhi. He found in Gandhi and Tagore, in Hindus and Muslims in India, along with his Christian friends, living images or sacraments of Christ who lived for others. In India Christ was revealed to Andrews, not for the first time but in a new way as universally human and as interpersonal love. His encounters in India, both intra-personal and interreligious, came about through the development of human relationships.<sup>8</sup> The sacramentality of dialogue is based upon friendship. This was the experience of C. F. Andrews and it explains why the arduous process from monologue through dialectic and finally to the mutuality of dialogue is one way of charting a change of vision in Hindu-Christian studies. At the end of his life, Andrews wrote: "I have been blessed with wonderful friendships. More than in any other way, my course has been directed by these. They have sprung out of, and have been molded by, the love which has been ever deepening in my heart for Christ."<sup>9</sup> Andrews became a hyphen between Gandhi and Tagore. Despite their radical differences in practice and theory on both public issues and in the spiritual life, Andrews initially brought them into and kept them in loving relationship. Speaking of such friendship shortly before his death, he wrote: "This dynamic quality I found in the two friends who gradually became the formative influence in my thinking.... These two have brought me quite unconsciously, but very intimately, a fuller interpretation of what the message of Christ actually means in the modern world."<sup>10</sup> Although the notion of the sacramentality of dialogue may have greater intelligibility to a Roman Catholic, it

is simply based on an understanding that the human person is a primary religious symbol.

### Comparative Studies

Those of us working in Hindu-Christian studies are aware that interculturality is an existential and experiential category. To do our work from an intercultural perspective, that is, thinking within two traditions or viewing one position through the lens of another, is not just an intellectual position but a profoundly existential one. It is theoretically unsound to work within a closed cultural system as if it were inherently exclusive and alone contained an essential grasp of reality or truth. Ram Adhar Mall, an Indian philosopher now teaching in Germany, identifies a generic similarity between cultural understandings and misunderstandings: namely, the extreme of an exclusive essentialism on the one hand and a radical relativism on the other, both of which need deconstruction.<sup>11</sup> Some of us found as we first began working with textual materials that either a totally translatable or a totally untranslatable text is untenable. Likewise, according to Ram Adhar Mall, the commensurability or incommensurability between cultures and conceptual systems are both false and require a theory of overlapping structures. Since no one culture can embrace the whole of humanity at any point in history, the work of comparative studies is to discover and make plausible such overlapping. It thus embraces pluralism, diversity and difference as values at the core of comparative work and not as a privation of unity. We have also found in comparative work that there can be no privileged position of cultural values and understandings since all are historically mediated. Just as in interreligious dialogue so too in comparative studies the question of a feasible exchange will depend upon the resolution of the subject-object polarity.

What are the necessary conditions for a fruitful exchange between comparativists of different religious traditions and cultural systems? Gerald Larson suggests an interpretative grid that provides a framework

in which conversation may be initiated between competing religious groups and scholars.<sup>12</sup> The grid offers criteria calling for accountability regarding communication, authority, reaction to criticism and self-identity. The most viable religious groups, in Larson's scheme, will be those that maximise communication, minimise coercion, maximise self-criticism, and minimise communalism' or separatist efforts. I have found such criteria helpful in dealing with the conversion controversy in India today and the teaching of the magisterium of my own Roman Catholic tradition. The grid also confirms my experience of dialogue and comparative work as more successful within the academic community and the greater society than as a spokesperson for my church.

Just as dialogue among cultures has been seen as a European monologue, so too comparative religious studies is frequently looked upon as another Euro-American enterprise. The Western scholar may well view the project as based in sound historical and scientific research, as democratic and multinational, but strands of Western hegemony, cultural vandalism and imperialism strain the effort. We need to recall the effects of historical criticism on Hindu scriptural texts. The future of comparative studies needs to draw upon the depth and breath of the creative imagination, both Hindu and Christian. The imagination is the link between life and culture, the confluence between faith and culture. The comparative aspect of Hindu-Christian studies will have a vibrant future if it draws upon the religious imagination of these traditions. For the past seven years I have taught courses in comparative theology (an effort I would not have had the audacity to do thirty years ago), drawing upon both theoretical and more imaginative texts. The latter not only captured the interest of but also opened students to greater intelligibility. Within the world of the imagination, analogy as a hermeneutic becomes more operative.

One of the major tenets of postmodernity is its protest against one

exclusive worldview because it rejects what Ram Adhar Mall calls a methodological monism. He maintains that an analogical hermeneutic does not take seriously either a radical identity or a radical difference. According to him, no two religious traditions, philosophies or cultures are totally commensurable or incommensurable.<sup>13</sup> Analogy suffers tension between equivocation and unification because it stands for an awareness of non-identity and difference. As such it reveals intelligibility in the overlapping of structures and centers, avoiding both syncretism and indifference, and discovering similarities and differences. Such discovery meets my goals. This also requires a hermeneutic that is non-reductive, heuristic and still comprehensive enough to elicit new understanding. An analogical hermeneutic discovers in Hindu-Christian studies the rich resources of the religious imagination. The religious imagination in these two traditions has had a greater expression than in most other comparable traditions.

Lytard has remarked that we think more analogically and metaphorically than logically.<sup>14</sup> Since our conceptual system is largely metaphorically structured, we understand our world, think and function generally in metaphorical terms. According to Mark Johnson, metaphor is a tool to comprehend partially what we cannot comprehend totally: our feelings, our aesthetic experience, our moral and ritual practices, and especially our spiritual awareness. Metaphor, for Johnson, is a matter of imaginative rationality.<sup>15</sup> If metaphors are the natural structure of our experience, they provide a way of communicating to some degree unshared experiences. In the words of I. A. Richards, metaphor is "fundamentally a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts."<sup>16</sup> Metaphors proceed by comparison and derive from comparison. Comparative theory is a prevalent view of how metaphors work, with the meaning of the metaphor revealing a set of relevant similarities and differences. I

support the more recent works within this horizon in comparative theology and philosophy.

### A Discipline as Birthing

A retrospective in either personal life or the history of a discipline reveals a process of birthing, a growth and hopefully an integral development of both. This birthing displays the stark limitations in our work and the discipline itself. Although one would hope for a greater coherence in Hindu-Christian studies and one's work within it, I agree with Ninian Smart who once observed that the desire for unity produces a greater diversity. Close to five decades ago in my study of Thomas Aquinas, I discovered and I am still sustained by one of his foundational insights:

For God brought things into being in order that God's goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because divine goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, God produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting in one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever. (*Summa Theologica*, 1.47.1)

Following months of arduous research, a student recently asked: What difference does it all make? I was confident in responding that as long as it advances tolerance, understanding and respect, embrace the limitations of the work.

### Notes

1. This is repeated several times by Ram

- Adhar Mall, *Intercultural Philosophy* (Oxford & Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000).
2. Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Enlightenment East and West* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1989). This was brought to my attention by M. Darrol Bryant, "Beyond the Enlightenment: An Unfinished Exploration of Modernity," in *The Future of Religion: Postmodern Perspectives*, Editors, Christopher Lamb & Dan Cohn-Sherbok (London: Middlesex University Press, 1999), p. 34.
  3. See, Milko Yourokov, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Encuentro Islamo Christiano and the Later Publications of Darek Nyumba: An Analysis and Evaluation," Unpub. Ph.D. Diss., The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 2000.
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 232. This work has been influenced by the thought of Raimundo Pannikar.
  5. Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 43-44, *Personality* (London: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 80-81.
  6. Raimundo Panikkar, *Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).
  7. See, Ronald A. Pachence, "Charles Freer Andrews: An Instance of Sacramental Encounter among Religions," Unpub. Ph.D. Diss., The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1978.
  8. William Cenkner, "Christians and the Hindu Experience of Prayer," in *Prayer: The Global Experience*, Edit., Francis A. Eigo (Philadelphia: Villanova University, 1997), pp. 60-63.
  9. Charles Freer Andrews, *What I Owe to Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), p. 19.
  10. Charles Freer Andrews, "A Pilgrim's Progress," in *Religion in Transition*, Edit., Virgilius Ferm (London: Allen and Unwin, 1937), p. 81.
  11. See Mall, *Intercultural Philosophy*, pp. 13ff.
  12. Gerald J. Larson, "Terrorists, Mystics and Evangelists: Assessing the Competing Claims of Religion," in *The Future of Religion: Postmodern Perspectives*, pp. 41-51.
  13. Mall, *Intercultural Philosophy*, pp. 14-19.
  14. J. F. Lyotard, "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?" Discourse 11, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1988-89), pp. 78-88.
  15. George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 193. Also, *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, Edit., Mark Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).
  16. I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 94.
  17. Ninian Smart, *The Religious History of Mankind* (London: Fontana Library, 1971), p. 683.