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Introductory Information and Introduction

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The aim of the *Bulletin* is to create a worldwide forum for the presentation of Hindu-Christian scholarly studies, book reviews, and news of past and upcoming events. Materials selected for publication will be balanced between historical research and contemporary practice and, where possible, will employ analytical and theoretical analysis set within the context of our shared contemporary experience. Contributions are invited and may be addressed to either the Editor or the Co-Editor. Articles of 3000-3500 words are preferred. Send manuscript in paper form as well as on diskette. A style sheet is available on request. The *Bulletin* adopts a policy of non-gender specific language where applicable. All articles are subject to review before acceptance and may receive editorial modification in the course of publication.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE Hindu-Christian encounter takes place in many venues today: in the daily interaction of neighborhood and workplace, in emotionally charged confrontations over mission and social justice, and in the gathering of scholars at learned societies, to name but a few. The main topic of this issue of the *Bulletin* is the role Vedanta has played and continues to play in the theological and spiritual encounter of Hindus and Christians, a theme going back at least as far as the seventeenth century missionary Roberto de Nobili in south India. Although Vedanta has been historically comprised of many schools - at least ten - the essays here by two Hindu and two Christian authors are by and large limited to an examination of the impact of one tradition in particular on Christianity: Advaita (non-dualistic) Vedanta. The articles are therefore limited in scope. They approach the topic both historically and systematically, pointing out both the flaws of the past and the possibilities for the future for this intellectual and spiritual encounter. It is hoped that *Bulletin* articles and book reviews to come will deal with the importance of other expressions of Vedanta for the encounter with Christianity.

Klaus Klostermaier summarizes both the achievement and failings of three twentieth century European Christian sannyasins living in India: Father Jules Monchanin, Dom Henry le Saux, and Dom Bede Griffiths. While he considers them sincere in their attempts to understand Hinduism and embrace as far as possible its sannyasa lifestyle, he points out the difficulty of regarding them as genuine sannyasins, given the fact that they avoided standard Hindu rules and regulations pertaining to the life of the renunciate and because they did not tend to associate with traditional Hindu centers of learning and tradition. Many modern Hindus regard such attempts at inculturating Christian monasticism into Hindu garb as illegitimate and deceptive. Nevertheless the

author notes a real affinity between some Hindu and Christian spiritualities and their common quest to realize the presence of the Eternal in a world in which religion is sometimes subjected to misuse for temporal ends.

T. S. Rukmani turns her attention to the work of Richard De Smet, S.J. (1916-1997), the leading twentieth century Christian interpreter in India of Sankara's (ca. 700 C.E.) Advaita Vedanta. While sympathizing with De Smet's attempt to establish commonalities or parallels between Sankara's ontology and Christian teaching, she concludes that De Smet misunderstands the great *acarya*, primarily because of an inadequate understanding of Sanskrit exegetical method and because of what she sees as a very selective reading of Sankara's texts. She concludes by noting a necessary opposition between two disparate understandings of the Ultimate: Christianity's personal creator God and Advaita's impersonal and non-relational *brahman*.

In the next essay Ted Ulrich traces the development of Henri Le Saux's (Swami Abhishiktananda's) understanding and hermeneutic of the Upanishads and their impact on his understanding of the God of Christianity. Abhishiktananda's discovery of the true challenge posed by Advaita to Christian spirituality and thought is awakened by his encounter with Ramana Maharshi and his disciples; through them Swamiji comes to a greater realization of the radical nature and subtlety of the divine presence. However, in his pursuit of the experience of the Divine Abhishiktananda did not follow the path of scholarly exegesis of Upanishadic texts as laid down by the Advaita tradition. Rather he read the Upanishads repetitively and prayerfully through the lens of the teaching of the Maharshi, and he regularly lived long periods of time among Hindu ascetics. In

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addition Swamiji incorporated the method of reading passages from the Upanishads and Bible side-by-side, a process that deepened his appreciation and understanding of both sacred texts and led to a transforming encounter with the Absolute.

In the final article dealing with Vedanta and Christianity Anantanand Rambachan examines the work of the contemporary Christian biblical scholar, Marcus Borg, and his significance for the Advaita-Christian encounter. Borg proposes as an alternative to Christianity's traditional anthropomorphizing supernatural theism a theology of panentheism that asserts God as an all-pervasive reality, a teaching that bears some resemblance to the Advaita view of *brahman*. In place of sin and guilt as the determining categories to understand human spiritual bondage Borg places "blindness to

the presence of God," an analysis Rambachan sees as akin to the Advaita "ignorance" (*avidya*). And like Advaita, Borg focuses on spiritual liberation as something that must take place in and shape our present life. But Rambachan, who leans toward a realist rather than an illusionist approach to Advaita ontology, not only believes that Christian theology has much to gain by exposure to Advaita spirituality and interiority, he also argues that Christianity offers to Advaita a sense of the reality of the world and a concern for social involvement and alleviation of the world's physical suffering that have been too long ignored by Advaita's followers.

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