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## Book Review: "'Without Ceasing to Be a Christian': A Catholic and Protestant Assess the Christological Contribution of Raimon Pannikar

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## BOOK REVIEWS

***“Without Ceasing to Be a Christian”: A Catholic and Protestant Assess the Christological Contribution of Raimon Panikkar.* By Erik Ranstrom and Bob Robinson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017, xxv + 249 pages.**

RAIMON Panikkar (1918-2010) was one of the most distinctive and memorable philosophical, theological and spiritual writers of last 50 years. It would be a real gap to think about the field of Hindu-Christian studies – as Christians study Hindu traditions and Hindus study Christian traditions – without discussing his many contributions and challenges to the field, and so this new book is welcome, and appropriate to this journal. *“Without Ceasing to Be A Christian”* is notable for three reasons. First, as the subtitle indicates, the book takes seriously Panikkar the (Catholic) Christian theologian, looking closely into his writings with respect to Christology in particular, rather than taking the “Christian part” for granted or focusing only on his contribution to the pluralist theology of religions.

Second, it takes seriously the early Panikkar, not only the first edition of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, but also key and lesser known essays from the 1950s and 1960s, some of which have yet to appear in English. Erik Ranstrom takes the lead in the early chapters that focus on the early period. Fittingly so, since at Boston College he wrote a dissertation assessing Panikkar as a Christian theologian. Ranstrom writes the first three chapters (“Unknown Jesus or Unknown Christ? The Diversity of Panikkar’s Early Christology,” “The ‘Orthodox’ Creativity of Panikkar’s Early Dialogue with Hinduism,” “A

Critical Reading of Panikkar’s Cosmotheandric Christology”) and leads the reader through strata of Panikkar’s thought on Christ. In Chapter One, Ranstrom moves back beyond the famed *Unknown Christ* to the older “Meditación sobre Melquisedec” (1962), which reflects on the significance of Melchisedek in Genesis as a mysterious Gentile predecessor to Christ. He argues that this essay offers the more solid vision of religions in Christ, whereas the book even in its first edition already prefigures Panikkar’s move toward a grander Christ, beyond Jesus. In Chapter Two, again attending to lesser known works such as *Le Mystère du culture dans l’hindouisme et christianisme* (1970) Ranstrom highlights Panikkar’s attention to sacrifice (*yajna*) and recognition of the importance of ritual action (*karma*) and thus his fruitful turn to the liturgical nature of Christian life and faith. *Le Mystère* turns out to be more useful in understanding the Vedic tradition than the more well-known *The Vedic Experience: Mantra Manjari*. Ranstrom concludes at the chapter’s end, “Panikkar’s efforts to understand more deeply the christological and sacramental tradition alongside Hinduism is a noteworthy contribution” (71). Chapter Three looks toward the later Panikkar. Here Ranstrom is less sympathetic, thinking that Panikkar lost his Christological balance later in his career, prey to a confusing mix of Christian language, insights from Advaita, and

a cosmotheandric mix of things that is notably his personal syncretism than good theology.

A third distinctive feature of the book is that it is also a commendable collaborative venture with a strong ecumenical flavor. Bob Robinson, Ranstrom's co-author, wrote his dissertation and first book on Hindu-Christian relations, *Christians Meeting Hindus: An Analysis and Theological Critique of the Hindu-Christian Encounter in India* (2004). Here he writes the fourth chapter ("A Constructive Protestant Appreciation and Interaction") and the fifth ("The Great Tradition Ruptured? A Constructive Interaction and Critique"). Robinson gently but firmly interrogates Panikkar's Christian identity, not only in terms of how his deep Catholic loyalties meshed with his seeming post-Christian identity, but also in terms of his tendency to neglect Protestant insights into the very issues preoccupying him. Robinson aims at fairness, seeing the good before the critique. Thus he devotes Chapter Four to commonalities that Protestants can appreciate: neither the Church nor theology is ever static, but must always be reformed, even now in light of many religions; sensitivity to context; and recognition, growing among Protestants too, that Christ is present and effective in other religions. Robinson does not think that Panikkar and Evangelicals agree on everything – far from it – but that common ground is real and worth noting.

In the equally valuable Chapter Five, however, he points to Protestant concern over the disappearance of Jesus of Nazareth from Panikkar's later Christology. We find here a sense of regret too, that Panikkar did not seem to engage in ecumenical learning that might have corrected certain tendencies in his thinking. Panikkar's starting points are Catholic, which is fine, but not ecumenical, which means that his work misses important

Christian resources for engaging the Hindu traditions. The ecumenical dimension of interreligious learning is important for all of us. I know that my own work, often placed in the category of Hindu-Christian studies, is really an instance of "(American) Catholic-Hindu studies." I need to remind myself, over and over again, that if I do incorporate a deep ecumenical dimension, I need at least to indicate the limits of my work. To put it positively: no single Christian tradition speaks for all Christians; the Christian contribution to Hindu-Christian Studies must be open to ecumenical correction, beginning to end; and Hindus, too, do not speak with a single voice, and so too must be ecumenical in their portrayal of the Hindu side of Hindu-Christian Studies.

Consequently, Hindu-Christian studies is a field that, as it matures, must continually pay attention to the intellectual history of those contributing to the field, Hindus studying Christianity, and Christians studying Hinduism. Ranstrom and Robinson show how Panikkar's evolving Christian (and possibly post-Christian) identity kept reshaping his study of Hinduism. His insights were not timeless. In the later and more fluid phases of his life (both in India and in the USA), his reflections on Hinduism became more personal and less grounded in fresh study. The later writings are the freer flowing reflections of an older cosmopolitan figure, one who had the freedom to do and speak as he pleased, "for himself," in a manner that is both fruitful and less productive.

The lesson for us in the field of Hindu-Christian studies, whether we are Hindus or Christians, is *not* that we should engage only in serious textual study and avoid generalizations or the reach for mystical wisdom. Rather, we need to remain autobiographically candid at each stage of our

lives, ready to admit what and how we have been accustomed to study, and where and for what reasons we are repeating ourselves. Certainly too, we need always to be ready to welcome younger and fresher contributors to the field as they bring different energies to Hindu-Christian studies. In our era, those of us

who are Christian must also keep rethinking our Christology, so as to keep returning to Jesus himself, if we are to have anything to contribute to Hindu-Christian understanding.

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***A.J. Appasamy and his Reading of Rāmānuja: A Comparative Study in Divine Embodiment.* By Brian Philip Dunn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, xi + 315 pages.**

IT is somewhat surprising that one of the giants of Indian theology from the middle half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has, since his death, been quite quickly forgotten or deemed irrelevant in theological circles and conversations. Such has been the fate of A. J. Appasamy (1891-1975), a prominent theologian and bishop of the Church of South India. The reasons for his neglect will be discussed later, but Brian Dunn's rich and perceptive study of Appasamy, which is capped by the author's own constructive exegetical and theological work, should cause comparative and Christian theologians to reexamine the thought of the intellectual pioneer.

Dunn begins his work with an introduction to the life and thought of Appasamy. He was born into a Tamil Christian family; however, his parents had radically different understandings of the faith. His father, a convert from a Shaiva devotional background, wanted to preserve the ties between his Hindu upbringing and his adopted religion. It was the senior Appasamy who impressed upon his son "the need for a truly Indian Christianity" which required an "immersion in classical Hindu literature" (13). His mother, on the other hand, was quite conservative in her religious views, "and believed implicitly that all those who were not

of the Protestant faith . . . were heading directly for hell" (13).

The son lived with this double inheritance all his life, on the one hand exploring and mining the Hindu tradition to craft a reinterpretation of Christianity for the Indian context, and on the other hand being deeply wedded to his inherited Anglican tradition. Appasamy's multifaceted hybridity proved to be a source of both great creativity and great misunderstanding, as Dunn skillfully argues with the use of Homi Bhabha's theoretical insights. Appasamy was educated at Madras Christian College, Hartford Theological Seminary and Harvard before going to Oxford where, in 1922, he completed a DPhil under the supervision of Canon B. H. Streeter, writing a dissertation entitled "The Mysticism of Hindu Bhakti Literature: Considered Especially with Reference to the Mysticism of the Fourth Gospel." The gospel of St. John was to Appasamy "*the* source text for Christian *bhakti*, 'India's Gospel'" (15). It was also at Oxford that, under the deep influence of Rudolph Otto, he developed his interest in Ramanuja, which "would eventually culminate in 1930's *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted*" (21). When he returned to India in 1923 after a time in Marburg, Appasamy joined other