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**Religions**  
and **Discourse**

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Sean Doyle

**Synthesizing the Vedanta**

The Theology of  
Pierre Johannes S. J.

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Peter Lang

# Synthesizing the Vedanta

# Religions and Discourse

Edited by James M. M. Francis

Volume 32



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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The Theology of  
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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my parents, Jim and Lorraine Doyle, who have been a source of continual encouragement and love through the years.



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# Introduction

## Research topic

*Synthesizing the Vedānta: the theology of Pierre Johannis S.J.*

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was an intriguing development that took place within the Roman Catholic Church in regard to a Christian rapprochement with Hinduism.<sup>1</sup> A leading Bengali intellectual and patriot Brahmacāndhab Upādhyāy (1861–1907), a convert to Catholicism, began to formulate an Indian Christian theology that conveyed a positive appreciation of aspects of Hindu *advaitic* philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Upon his early tragic death, a group of Belgian Jesuits in Calcutta sought to develop the project initiated by Upādhyāy. In 1922 the Jesuits Pierre Johannis (1882–1955) and

- 1 'Hinduism' to indicate a family of religions is contentious. See Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, New York: Routledge, pp. 5–21 for discussion on this issue.
- 2 See Chapter Two for more information on Brahmacāndhab Upādhyāy. Francis X. Clooney has argued persuasively that the *Vedānta* contains both philosophical and theological dimensions. See Clooney, 'Binding the Text: *Vedānta* as Philosophy and Commentary', *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*, ed. J. Timm, Albany: State University of New York, 1991, pp. 47–68. The *Vedāntins* are exegetes of sacred scriptures as much as they are theoretical philosophers. One cannot ignore either facet of their identity without misrepresenting the character of the *Vedānta*. Thomism similarly contains both philosophical and theological components, since it wrestles with biblical texts as well as Aristotelian metaphysics. However, since Johannis usually focused on the philosophical dimensions when explaining the *Vedāntic* systems, they will be referred to as philosophies in this book. And since Johannis as a neo-Thomist engages in a theological evaluation of these materials, Thomism will be referred to as a theology. These distinctions cannot be imposed in a rigorous way, and while they may be analytically helpful, they are admittedly artificial.

Georges Dandoy (1882–1962), both Oxford-educated Orientalists in Calcutta, released the first issue of a monthly periodical entitled *Light of the East* in India. The purpose of the periodical was to facilitate the encounter between Christian theology and Indian philosophy. The journal ran for twenty-four years and is regarded as one of the more innovative periodicals in Indian church history.

Nothing so characterized the objectives of the journal as the monthly submissions of Fr. Pierre Johanns, the most articulate figure of these Belgian Jesuits. Johanns submitted well over one hundred articles which carefully scrutinized the prominent schools of the *Vedānta* from his Thomist perspective. In these he engaged in a thorough explication and analysis of the thinking of the Hindu religious leaders Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha, pointing out what he believed to be the strengths and the weaknesses of each position. He attempted to fashion a creative synthesis of their views, constructing a new metaphysic from the raw materials of their respective philosophies. He was convinced that when the metaphysical strengths of the key Hindu thinkers are synthesized, the result is something akin to classic Thomist theology.

Such an endeavour may not initially strike a modern reader as particularly bold or innovative. In order to appreciate why Johanns is often described as a ‘pioneer’, it is necessary to situate him within the theological climate of his time.<sup>3</sup> Only twenty years had passed since Upādhyāy’s writings were banned by his Catholic superiors. Upādhyāy died ‘disowned and discouraged by his Church authorities’.<sup>4</sup> Dr J.A. Cuttat has described the prevalent attitude of the worldwide Church towards other faiths in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a *Wertblindheit*, indicating a blindness to the significance and importance of other religions and cultures.<sup>5</sup> Many missionaries

3 Joseph Mattam, *The Land of the Trinity: A Study of Modern Christian Approaches to Hinduism*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1975, p. 34.

4 Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, p. 91.

5 Dr Jacques Albert Cuttat was a Swiss diplomat who had a personal interest in furthering the interaction of Christianity in dialogue with Indian religions.

had adopted a rather literal interpretation of the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* declaration.<sup>6</sup> Excluded from the Church, ‘infidels’ were seen as ‘dwelling in the shadow of death’ and ‘hurrying to destruction’, to cite the *Maximum Illud* of Benedict XV, published in 1919.<sup>7</sup> The notion that Asian or African religions were something that missionaries should attempt to understand sensitively, and to engage respectfully, was not the typical Christian position at this time. The approach was rather more negative, and the other systems of thought were viewed as unwelcome competitors.

Within this milieu, the writings and ideals of Catholics such as Upādhyāy, William Wallace, Georges Dandoy, and Pierre Johanns were daring and progressive.<sup>8</sup> They initiated a new attitude towards Hinduism, enabling later missionary-scholars to appreciate openly many facets of Indian thought and spirituality. These forward-thinking men based in Bengal, later dubbed the ‘Calcutta school’, were pioneers in the true sense of the word. As Joseph Mattam remarks, ‘They considered Hinduism not merely as something to be tolerated but as containing positive values for Christ and His Church’.<sup>9</sup> This willingness to learn from Hindu philosophy and to

During his stay as ambassador in India, he initiated a series of meetings for Christians interested in finding points of religious contact with Hindus. Cuttat wrote *The Encounter of Religions: A Dialogue Between the West and the Orient*, New York: Desclee, 1960.

- 6 The *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (‘outside the Church, no salvation’) maxim was first formulated by Cyprian (*Epistles*, 73.21) and Origen (*In Iesu Nave Homiliae*) to indicate that those who broke away from the authority and guidance of the Church were in grave spiritual danger. It was later cited by Pope Innocent III in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and in the bull of Boniface VIII entitled *Unam Sanctam* in 1302. The Council of Florence (1438–1445) discussed its implications for unbaptized infants. The declaration was originally used in reference to heretics of the Church, but it was later applied to the adherents of other religious traditions. See M. Emnyan, ‘*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*’, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, New York: McGraw Hill, 1967, p. 768.
- 7 Joseph Mattam, ‘Interpreting Christ to India Today: The Calcutta School’, *Indian Journal of Theology*, 23 (July 1974), p. 191.
- 8 The lives and thought of these men are discussed in Chapter Two.
- 9 Joseph Mattam, ‘Interpreting Christ to India: A Pioneer, Pierre Johanns, S.J.’.

acknowledge its profundity had not been prominent since the time of the ‘first Catholic quest’ conducted by such towering figures as Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656) and Jean Calmette (1693–1740), who sought a ‘fundamental rapport between Christianity and the *Vedānta*’. Much of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missionary literature, especially of the Protestant variety, was confrontational in its tone. It was Brahmabāndhab Upādhyāy who initiated the ‘second Catholic quest’, which marked the transition to a more positive appraisal of Indian religiosity.<sup>10</sup> The later Catholic approaches to Hinduism developed after the time of Johanns and Dandoy would move away from their particular ‘fulfillment’ approach,<sup>11</sup> but without the shift toward a more receptive appreciation of Indian spirituality sparked by the Calcutta school, the modern approaches would simply not be palatable within Catholic circles.

Scholars who study the history of Christian, and especially Catholic, engagement with Indian religiosity are in agreement that the body of written work produced by Johanns constitutes a significant contribution in the area of Hindu–Christian intellectual discourse. In 1973 Joseph Mattam published the following assessment: ‘The work of Johanns is so far the only systematic and serious attempt to study the whole of the *Vedānta* in the light of Thomist philosophy and theology’.<sup>12</sup> There has not been any significant theological development in the last thirty years to change the state of affairs recounted by Mattam. This assessment of Mattam is vital in understanding Johanns’ importance in the history of Hindu–Christian interaction, because Thomism has been the theological point of

*The Clergy Monthly*, 37 (February 1973), p. 47.

- 10 Richard Fox Young, ‘Seeking India’s Christ-Bearing Word’, *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 19, 3 (Fall, 2002), pp. 22–4. See Chapter Two for a discussion of the earlier missionary-scholars such as De Nobili and Calmette who interacted with Indian religions.
- 11 See footnote 18 for an initial description of Catholic fulfillment theology. Chapter One contains an extended treatment of Catholic and Protestant versions of fulfillment theology.
- 12 Joseph Mattam, ‘Interpreting Christ to India: A Pioneer, Pierre Johanns, S.J.’, *The Clergy Monthly*, 37 (February 1973), p. 55.

departure for some of the most important Catholic missionary-scholars in India.<sup>13</sup> Johanns was a ‘pioneer’ in the sense that he was a seminal thinker who sought to initiate a detailed exploration of Catholic and *Vedāntic* spiritualities from a Thomist perspective within a context that did not encourage this sort of theological project. Despite his importance, it has been claimed that ‘Johanns has not received the attention he deserves neither in his life time nor posthumously, probably because he wrote most of his articles in a small magazine with limited circulation’.<sup>14</sup> This book seeks to make an original contribution to the study of Hindu–Christian relations by drawing attention to, and examining the theological explorations of Fr. Johanns, showing his significance in the historical encounter of Hinduism and Christianity.

## Justification of topic

There are several reasons why a detailed study of the writings of Johanns is justifiable:

1. Classical Indian philosophy implicitly undergirds and informs the religious expression of millions of Hindus in India. The dominant form of indigenous philosophy is the *Vedānta*, a complex body of thought that is comprised of the subtle intellectual positions of certain key thinkers. In the last two centuries, Christian theologians and philosophers in India, whether missionaries or indigenous leaders, have recognized the need for a correct understanding and an adequate response to the *Ve-*

13 Boyd cites De Nobili, Upādhyāy, Monchanin, le Saux, and Panikkar as examples of Catholic theologians operating from a Thomist framework in *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, p. 261.

14 Joseph Mattam, *The Land of the Trinity: A Study of Modern Christian Approaches to Hinduism*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1975, p. 34.



*dānta*. Johanns carried the intellectual exploration of the *Vedānta* further than most Christian theologians, both before his time and after; he conducted one of the most detailed analyses of the *Vedānta* from a Christian perspective available.

2. Historically, Johanns was a leader of the ‘Calcutta school’, which was a circle of Jesuit intellectuals who were heavily influenced by Upādhyāy’s desire to engage creatively with the *Vedānta*. They sought to perfect the project initiated by earlier pioneer Catholic thinkers, exploring the value of indigenous philosophy in Indian Christian theology. Thus, Johanns is a key figure representing an important movement in Catholic history for Hindu–Christian encounter.
3. Many Indian Christian theologians have focused upon one primary figure or movement in Indian religious history, making that particular philosophy the hermeneutical key for constructing their own indigenous theologies. Examples would include Upādhyāy, who relied upon Śaṅkara’s *advaitism*, A.J. Appasamy, who interacted primarily with Rāmānuja’s *viśiṣṭādvaita*, and P. Chenchiah, who utilized the thought of Aurobindo Ghose.<sup>15</sup> Johanns, on the other hand, interacted with various traditions and movements within the wider parameters of *Vedāntism* (Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Vallabha). His theological explorations of the *Vedānta* were wider ranging and more comprehensive than those of his predecessors or contemporaries.
4. Johanns is a premier example of a Western Orientalist who used Indological scholarship for mission. He similarly provides an illustration of the legacy of Jesuit scholarship and educational work in India. Jesuits before and after Johanns have immersed themselves in the serious study of Indian religious texts and rituals; an examination of Johanns’

15 For more on these theologians, see Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.

concerns sheds light on some motivations and assumptions which fueled Jesuit scholarship.

## Research questions

This book is limited to an analysis of Johanns' interaction with three principal *Vedāntic ācāryas*: Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha.<sup>16</sup> The scope is restricted to examining his theological writings which have been published and his lectures which have been preserved in manuscript form. While Johanns addressed other topics in Indian religiosity, such as Buddhism, Yoga, and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, his central scholarly focus was upon the *Vedānta*, and especially the systems of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha. And although Johanns wrote expositions of the thought of other *Vedāntic* philosophers such as Madhva, Nimbārka, Caitanya, and especially Jīva Goswāmi, he did not engage in any lengthy or systematic theological critique of their positions.<sup>17</sup> This book is therefore delimited to Johanns' treatment of the three philosophers that he considered most important to Indian intellectual history, and it sets out to answer the following research questions:

16 An *ācārya* is a spiritual leader who founded a school of Hindu philosophy.

17 In *Light of the East*, Johanns explicated the philosophies of Madhva and Nimbārka in articles that are not part of the 'To Christ through the *Vedānta*' series. The discussion of the thought of Caitanya and Jīva Goswāmi is included, however, in the 'To Christ through the *Vedānta*' series, but there is no systematic theological evaluation which is provided, rather only pure exposition. Since Johanns provided no comparable theological evaluation for Caitanya as he did for Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha, it cannot be affirmed that Caitanya plays a vital role in Johanns' synthesis. Johanns considered Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha as the creators of the 'three greatest systems' of Indian philosophy. *Light of the East*, June, 1930.

1. How did Johanns interpret and exposit the three *Vedāntic* systems of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha?
2. How did he seek to synthesize three prominent *Vedāntic* systems into what was, in his view, a holistic metaphysic? How did Johanns allow the *advaita* of Śaṅkara, the *viśiṣṭādvaita* of Rāmānuja, and the *śuddhādvaita* of Vallabha to cross-fertilize into a fresh synthetic perspective by bringing them into conversation with each other and with the Thomist conception of *creatio ex nihilo*?
3. How did Johanns, motivated by neo-Thomist presuppositions, attempt to remain faithful to the spirit and individual emphases of each *Vedāntic* school, while at the same time seeking to discover a ‘perennial philosophy’ which can be derived from the *Vedānta*?
4. What did Johanns mean by expressing the relationship between Christ and the *Vedānta* in terms of fulfillment? How does his model of fulfillment theology compare with other Catholic and Protestant models that were contemporaneous with his period?

The book assesses the degree to which Johanns was successful in his project of expounding three key *Vedāntic* systems and synthesizing them into a coherent perennial philosophy which could function as an Indian natural theology that would be ‘fulfilled’ by the supernatural aspects of Christian faith.<sup>18</sup> Several components of the

- 18 An explanation of the most important terms will be beneficial. Johanns used the word ‘synthesis’ in the sense of drawing together various metaphysical and practical components of diverse philosophical and theological systems in order to construct a perspective that is holistic and which does not denigrate important aspects of reality by over-emphasising certain features over against other vital ones. His understanding of synthesis is derived from neo-Thomism. ‘Perennial philosophy’ refers to this developing holistic perspective, first introduced by the Greeks, extended by medieval scholastics such as Aquinas, and fine-tuned by neo-Thomists, which most adequately depicts the stable

project are examined in order to determine its degree of success or failure. A number of lines of inquiry are pursued. Was Johanns accurate in his interpretation and exposition of the *Vedāntic* systems of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Vallabha? Did he provide a convincing synthesis which does not damage or misconstrue the original emphases and thrust of each *Vedāntic* school? Was Johanns' neo-Thomist desire to search for a perennial philosophy based upon *Vedāntic* metaphysics an unnatural imposition upon, or a natural outgrowth of, *Vedāntic* concerns? How credible or superficial was his particular version of fulfillment theology in terms of its specificity and range when compared with the other fulfillment models?

## Research methodology

This research is primarily a close textual study of the theological writings of one Jesuit educator in Bengal, particularly with respect to his neo-Thomist approach to *Vedāntic* philosophy. Johanns was a lecturer in philosophy during his service in Calcutta as a Jesuit missionary. His writings overwhelmingly reflect his interest in making a theological evaluation of various Indian philosophical perspectives. If this justifies a mode of analysis of Johanns' writings which takes into account the theological/philosophical components of his project, it is also important to set Johanns within the wider intellectual context of the Catholic and the Orientalist responses to Indian religiosity. To illuminate the historical factors which would have influenced Johanns' thinking adds clarity and depth to the the-

metaphysical structure of the universe. 'Natural theology' refers to truths which can be ascertained by the unaided human intellect and conscience. Johanns believed that the *Vedāntic* 'natural' truths would be 'fulfilled' and brought to completion when the seeker went on to accept the higher Christian supernatural truths, such as the Trinitarian doctrine, which were accessible only through divine revelation. See Chapter One for more discussion on these important technical terms.

ological analysis. Understanding the intellectual background which informed Johanns' reflections is a necessary prerequisite to appreciating his project of synthesizing the *Vedānta*. Thus, textual study which is sensitive to historical context is the main method of appraising Johanns' theological contributions. The nature of the book topic allows for the scrutiny of issues which arise from the intersection of philosophy and theology.

## Primary sources

### *Johanns' writings*

Johanns is best known for his articles on the *Vedāntins* which comprised the 'To Christ through the *Vedānta*' series. He also published over seventy articles in *Light of the East* which were not part of this series. After completing the lengthy 'To Christ through the *Vedānta*' project, Johanns began another installment of articles entitled 'Short Outlines of Hinduism', which provided a chronological sketch of the major trends and developments in Indian religious thought from its beginnings.<sup>19</sup> He also surveyed and critiqued 'The Great Theologies' of the major Hindu *ācāryas* who founded *Vedāntic* schools. Other topics addressed by Johanns in *Light of the East* articles included 'The Quest for God' in various Hindu Scriptures, 'Outlines of a Philosophy of the Ideal', and 'Pure Actuality and World Possibility'. He continued to explore the boundaries of *Vedāntic* and Scholastic metaphysics upon his return to Belgium in such articles as '*La Divinisation dans le Vedanta*', '*Pierres d'Attente du Christianisme dans la Philosophie Indienne*', and '*Théologie Catholique et Sagesse des Indes*'. His major book, *La Pensée Religieuse de l'Inde*, was published by the University of

19 For the full references of these articles, see the list of published works by Fr. Johanns provided in the Bibliography.

Namur.<sup>20</sup> In addition to his scholarly works, Johanns also composed a series of mystery plays (Mother of Apostles; Veronica; Refuge of Sinner; Annunciation) meant for the edification of those under his care. He had a particular fascination for the childlike spirituality of St. Theresa of Lisieux, who provided inspiration for his devotional work entitled *The Little Way*; this work was a compilation of thirty-seven meditations on the life of simple devotion to Christ exemplified by Theresa.<sup>21</sup> Thus, one can detect from the writing output of Johanns that the *Vedāntic* commentaries, along with the Scriptures that the *ācāryas* accepted as authoritative, were the focus of his scholarly inquiry, but he was also interested in general matters of Christian spirituality and piety.

### *Archives/libraries*

The written works of Fr. Johanns have been published in a select number of periodicals, mainly Catholic journals. *Light of the East* had a life-span of twenty-four years (1922–1946), but copies of it are hard to find. Through a combination of conducting archival research and accessing published sources in certain libraries, a corpus of extant texts written by Johanns can be clearly identified. These primary textual sources, mainly contained in Jesuit institutions in Calcutta and in Belgium, are the bulk of the information that is preserved regarding Pierre Johanns.

20 P. Johanns, *La Pensée Religieuse de l'Inde*, Namur: Secrétariat des publications, 1952.

21 These mystery plays and meditations on St. Theresa's spirituality will be excluded in the analysis of the book, since they contain no discussion of the *Vedānta* or the synthesis.

### *i) Calcutta*

The Goethals Indian Library of St. Xavier's College, University of Calcutta has the complete set of *Light of the East*, as well as many other articles of Johanns that are relatively inaccessible. The Goethals Library is a treasure trove of precious materials dealing with Jesuit mission in Bengal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Goethals is open for consultation by students and academics, and the Librarians are helpful and will photocopy any requested materials. The Library is well organized, and the Librarians are concerned to ensure the preservation of their unique holdings. Many rare manuscripts and articles of Upādhyāy, Animananda, and William Wallace are kept here. There are collections of unpublished material, letters, and other personal items by Upādhyāy and Wallace listed as *Varia* in the Goethals catalogue that can be found nowhere else.

### *ii) Belgium*

The Centre de Documentation et de Recherche Religieuses of the Facultés Universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix in Namur is the other major library that has many writings of Johanns. There is a good collection of Catholic periodicals and monthlies that pertain to mission in India at the Centre, such as *Clergy Monthly* and *India Missionary Bulletin*. As a University library, the Centre is in a good state of upkeep and organisation, and xeroxing is permitted. Two Jesuit Archives in Belgium contain several publications of Fr. Johanns, along with other writings of the prominent Jesuits of the Calcutta School. Special permission by the head archivist is required for consultation in the case of both Archives. Photocopying is done by the archivists, and scanning of documents is permitted. The Archives of the North-Belgian Province of the Society of Jesus in Heverlee, near Leuven, have many articles and books on Jesuit mission in the collections. The Archives of the South-Belgian Province of the Society of Jesus in Brussels have a large selection of primary sources in the holdings regarding mission to Bengal and the Congo. Many of the Jesuit missionaries have personal files con-

taining letters, unpublished writings, and obituaries. Over twenty unpublished manuscripts of Johanns have been preserved by the Archives of the South-Belgian Province in Brussels. These manuscripts are all type-written and are undated. Many are unedited and contain hand-written corrections by Johanns over the typed print. They were donated to the Archives by the Facultés Universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix of Namur. It is possible that many were lecture-briefs of Johanns.<sup>22</sup>

### *iii) Other libraries*

The United Theological College of Bangalore has published the *Light of the East* 'To Christ through the *Vedānta*' articles, although other writings of Johanns in *Light of the East* and elsewhere are not included in this publication.<sup>23</sup> The library of the United Theological College does not contain much primary material that is relevant for researching the Calcutta school. The Indian Institute of the University of Oxford has an incomplete set of *Light of the East*, making it an important library in the United Kingdom for researching Johanns.

22 Many of these type-written manuscripts are unedited and quite unpolished, and they contain much information which merely repeats what Johanns has already conveyed in the *Light of the East* articles. Therefore, the main text of the book contains exposition and analysis of information derived from the *Light of the East* articles, which Johanns carefully edited and scrutinized. Supplementary information, derived from the unedited manuscripts, which is helpful for clarifying the arguments provided in the main text is included in footnotes. Primacy of place in the analysis should belong to the material which Johanns published and which he had thoroughly edited.

23 *To Christ through the Vedānta*, 2 vol., ed. T. de Greeff, Bangalore: United Theological College, 1996.



## Secondary literature on Johanns

There is a dearth of secondary material concerning Johanns. While several scholars note his historic importance in terms of Christian engagement with Indian philosophy, none provide a detailed study of his writings.<sup>24</sup> There are no extended biographical treatments of his life. No publications have analyzed Johanns' thought in a comprehensive way. The most extensive description of his theology is contained in three articles by Fr. Joseph Mattam which address the basic features of his methodology and his project of synthesis.<sup>25</sup> Mattam only discusses Johanns' interaction with the theoretical philosophy of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. He does not deal with Johanns' engagement with their practical philosophies. Nor does Vallabha appear in his articles, despite the fact that Johanns' lengthiest treatment of a *Vedāntic* system is his discussion of Vallabha's *śuddhādvaita*. K.P. Aleaz has provided a portrait of the theological methodology of Johanns and his interaction with *advaita*.<sup>26</sup> Aleaz focuses upon Johanns' interaction with Śaṅkara's theoretical doctrine of God. He also compares Śaṅkara's model of causality with *creatio ex nihilo*. No articles or writings which have

24 A few brief treatments of Fr. Johanns can be found in the following works: A. Mookenthottam, *Indian Theological Tendencies*, Bern: Peter Lang, 1978, pp. 48–9; P.T. Thomas and M.M. Thomas, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology: Life and Thought of Some Pioneers*, Tiruvalla: New Day Publications in India, 1992, pp. 134–7; R. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, p. 91; M. Amaladoss, 'Pierre Johanns', *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. G. Anderson, New York: MacMillan Reference, 1998, p. 333.

25 Joseph Mattam, 'Interpreting Christ to India Today: The Calcutta School', *Indian Journal of Theology*, 23 (July 1974); Joseph Mattam, 'Interpreting Christ to India: A Pioneer, Pierre Johanns, S.J.', *The Clergy Monthly*, 37 (February, 1973); Joseph Mattam, *The Land of the Trinity: A Study of Modern Christian Approaches to Hinduism*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1975.

26 K. P. Aleaz, *Christian Thought through Advaita Vedānta*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, pp. 113–23.

discussed Johanns have ever included his unpublished manuscripts. Insofar as this book is based upon materials that have not been previously analyzed and addresses features of Johanns' theology that have not been adequately explored, it has a genuine claim to originality, both in terms of depth of discussion and breadth of documents consulted. There are a few works which briefly survey the most important members of the Jesuits of the Calcutta School. Namboodiry published a work on the history of St. Xavier's College and has included a chapter on the Intellectual Apostolate of the Calcutta School.<sup>27</sup> The Jesuit historian Steenhault produced a volume on the work of the Society of Jesus in West Bengal; he included a chapter on Upādhyāy, Animananda, Wallace, Dandoy, and Johanns.<sup>28</sup> Upādhyāy has been the subject of most of the in-depth scholarly research, with important publications by Lipner and Tennent analyzing the life and writings of this pivotal figure.<sup>29</sup>

- 27 Udayan Namboodiry, *St. Xavier's: The Making of a Calcutta Institution*, New Delhi: Viking/Penguin Books India, 1995, pp. 115–30.
- 28 Y. Steenhault, *History of the Jesuits in West Bengal*, Ranchi: Catholic Press, n.d., pp. 82–95.
- 29 Julius Lipner, *Brahmabāndhab Upādhyāy: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*, Oxford: University Press, 1999; Timothy Tennent, *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations: the Legacy of Brahmabāndhab Upādhyāy*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.

## Educational and priestly biography of Pierre Johanns S.J.

Pierre Johanns was born in Heinerscheid, Luxemburg, on 1 April 1882, the tenth child in a family of eighteen.<sup>30</sup> At the Atheneum of Luxemburg, he was already displaying academic potential in Greek and Latin, but his lively nature was getting him into mischief. His father removed him from the Atheneum and had him sent to a Jesuit boarding school in Belgium at the College Saint-Servais, Liège, for the last year of his Humanities. He completed brilliant classical studies in Liège. He then served a few years as an apprentice at a German firm in Mainz. During his apprenticeship, Johanns began to sense an inner compulsion to pursue a missionary vocation, and so he entered the novitiate at Tronchiennes of the Society of Jesus of the South Belgian Province on 8 March 1903 at the age of 21. He then studied metaphysics at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, from 1906–1909, where he found immense stimulation in the teaching of his mentor, Fr. Pierre Scheuer.<sup>31</sup> This developed his predilection for speculative thought, and Scheuer quickly noticed his pupil's philosophical acumen, remarking to others that Johanns was the most intelligent, promising student that he had ever taught. From 1909–1911, Johanns took up a post of Regency at his old school in Liège, where he instructed younger students in philosophy. During this time, he read widely in Continental and Russian philosophy, and

30 The biographical information on Fr. Johanns was gathered from the following obituaries/tributes collected by the Archives of the South Belgian Jesuit Province: P. Turmes, 'Father Peter Johanns S.J.', *The Herald*, 20 February 1955; Joseph Masson, 'Un Pionnier: Le Pere Pierre Johanns S.J'. n.d.; P. Piron, 'In Memoriam: Le R.P. Pierre Johanns', *Belge*, 11 February 1955; *Echos*, (August 1955), pp. 23–8.

31 Pierre Scheuer (1872–1957) taught metaphysics at the University of Namur from 1904–1907 and then at the University of Louvain from 1907–1918. He was an important member of the Louvain school of neo-Thomists. See D. Shine, *An Interior Metaphysics: the Philosophical Synthesis of Pierre Scheuer*, Weston: Weston College Press, 1966.

he took a keen interest in Scholastic theology. He also immersed himself in modern languages, reading lyric poetry and dramas. From 1911–1915, he studied theology for his priestly training at Louvain, furthering his interest in the relation between Christian doctrine and metaphysics. On 1 August 1914 he was ordained a Jesuit priest.

Another Jesuit, Fr. William Wallace (1863–1922), stationed in Calcutta, had been pleading to the Society that men were needed for the Bengal Mission.<sup>32</sup> Wallace had left for India in 1889 as a C.M.S missionary, but his work amongst Bengali peasants led him to adopt Catholicism, with its sacraments, images, and offerings of flowers, as the form of Christianity that was, in his judgment, the most compatible with the Indian ethos. He converted to Catholicism in 1898 and became an important figure for Jesuit mission in India. Recognizing the importance of Wallace's request, the Superiors of the Society commissioned Johanns to begin training for mission work in Bengal. Johanns was given permission to complete three further years of philosophical study at Louvain beginning in 1916, where he explored Kantian philosophy and German idealism, immersing himself in Fichte and Hegel. He took his last vows on 2 February 1917. He was then granted two more years of Indological training at Oxford (1919–1920) in preparation for his future ministry. Johanns studied Sanskrit at Campion Hall, under the supervision of Professor A.A. MacDonell. He took a particular interest in the philosophical thought of Śaṅkara, but he also exposed himself to the divergent systems of the other great *Vedāntic* teachers. Johanns acquired a profound respect for the intellectual heritage of the Indian civilization and for the spiritual search embodied in its literature. His thesis was entitled 'The *Intellectus Agens* in Western and Eastern Philosophy'.<sup>33</sup> After an oral examination that lasted a mere ten minutes, Johanns was awarded the Bachelor of Literature degree. His external examiner from Cambridge commented that 'only once in a century can you find an intelligence of this type'. Oxford thereupon offered him a lectureship in European Philosophy for a couple of years at the

32 For more on Wallace, Dandoy, Upādhyāy and Animananda, see Chapter Two.

33 This thesis has not been preserved by Oxford.

University, with the promise of a continuing position in Indian philosophy. Fr. C. Plater of the South Belgian Province replied to Oxford that Johanns would not be allowed to take up an academic post, because 'he is destined for the Bengal Mission and cannot be spared'. Johanns had by this time attained control over the ancient languages of Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Sanskrit, as well as over the modern languages of German, French, English, Flemish, Italian, and Russian.

Johanns arrived in Calcutta in November of 1921 and was appointed as a lecturer in philosophy at St. Xavier's College, University of Calcutta, a position he was to hold for the next eighteen years. As an essential aspect of his academic duties, he systematically studied the sacred Hindu scriptures and the major *Vedāntic* commentaries in the Sanskrit language. In 1922, Fr. George Dandoy (1882–1962) of St. Xavier's founded a monthly entitled *Light of the East*, serving as the general editor. Dandoy was a specialist in *advaitic* spirituality and published two scholarly treatments on this subject.<sup>34</sup> He had been a teacher at St. Mary's Theological College, Kurseong (Himalayas) before receiving an appointment at Calcutta as chaplain of the Christian Hostel of St. Xavier's. Working closely with Dandoy, Johanns began to submit articles for *Light of the East* under the title of 'To Christ through the Vedānta'.

In their submissions to the monthly, Dandoy and Johanns argued that Christianity should not destroy the finest aspirations of India, but complete them. They worked in close cooperation with Brahmachari Animananda, the disciple and convert of Brahmabāndab Upādhyāy, and their journal sought to continue the work begun by Upādhyāy. The intellectual method of Dandoy and Johanns was influenced by a professor of theology at Louvain, Fr. Pierre Charles, who, as a leading figure in Catholic missiology, advocated an adaptation theory of approach to other cultures.<sup>35</sup> Fr. William Wallace took a similar

34 Dandoy, *An Essay on the Doctrine of the Unreality of the World in the Advaita*, Calcutta: Catholic Orphan Press, 1919; Dandoy, *L'Ontologie du Vedānta: Essai sur L'Acosmisme de L'Advaita*, Paris: Descleé de Brouwer, 1932.

35 Pierre Charles (1883–1954) was professor of theology at Louvain from 1914–1954. He had a special interest in missiology, ethnology, and history of

approach: not to denigrate the truths that Hinduism had discovered in the *sanātana dharma*, such as the importance of union with God and self-denial. Johanns and Dandoy were deeply impacted by this sort of thinking, and Johanns quickly began to acquire a reputation among Hindus in Bengal for his sensitive grasp of the *Vedānta*. Monks and *saṁnyāsins* would pay Johanns a visit in order to discuss religious matters with him. Johanns received invitations from the Gaudya Math, where followers of Caitanya would ask for his spiritual guidance.<sup>36</sup> He was also a friend of the *āśram* of Bagbayat, where he was treated as a sort of *guru*; he had extended conversations with these *Vaiṣṇava* monks, and they often would make a written record of his statements.

When a position for a lecturership in Indian philosophy opened up at the University of Calcutta, Johanns was requested to submit an application. Professor MacDonell of Oxford wrote his recommendation, stating that since Oxford had considered Johanns' aptitude high enough to offer him a post in philosophy, Calcutta would be privileged to acquire him. Prof. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the Chair of the philosophy faculty at Presidency College, University of Calcutta, finally vetoed Johanns, because he thought the Jesuit might use the position as an opportunity to proselytize. Later, Johanns was offered a lectureship in formalistic logic, but he himself declined the opportunity, since he felt that this venture would not further his scholarly exploration of Indian philosophy.

religions. Joseph Masson summarizes the thrust of Charles' thinking: 'the value of non-Christian cultures and religions; the spiritual competence of non-Christians; the need to have communities and local churches living in their own cultures and entrusted to local pastors'. See Joseph Masson, 'Pierre Charles, S.J.', *Mission Legacies*, ed. G. Anderson, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994, pp. 410–15. Charles' approach most closely resembles the 'adaptation' model described by R. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, New York: Orbis, 1985, where the local culture is taken very seriously by the missionary, who works closely with local leaders to discern the categories and concerns important to that local culture, respecting the integrity of the apostolic tradition and the indigenous traditions.

36 See Chapter One for more information on Caitanya.

Aside from his lecturing duties at St. Xavier's, Johanns would also offer a special course every May on Indian Philosophy at the Jesuit Theologate, Kurseong. He later published the material that constituted the course in the form of four booklets which sought to provide a simplified explanation of the philosophies of Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja, Vallabha, and Caitanya.<sup>37</sup> Catholics working in India began to recognize the importance of the work of Dandoy and Johanns. However, there were others who were uneasy with the explorations of *Light of the East*. In 1925, Cardinal Lepicier, the Apostolic Visitor to the Indies, who was sent to inspect the project, assured Johanns that he was a true pioneer, asserting, 'I approve without any reservation your method of apostolate. It is in line with the Fathers of the Church and the Doctors and the Society of Jesus itself [...]. What Justinus was for Rome, Irenaeus for Gaul, Augustine for Africa, that you are, dear Father Johanns, for India'.

Johanns also served as curate of the St. John's Parish of Calcutta while carrying out his academic responsibilities. He was involved in the direction of the nuns of Calcutta and in the instruction of catechumens and the young. Johanns was a frequent speaker at spiritual retreats for the Jesuits. Unfortunately, he had to return to Belgium in 1939 for health reasons. After his recovery, he published the series of articles and books written in the French language. In 1940, he began to teach young men set apart by the Society for service in India. Johanns served as both their instructor and spiritual director. His program for preparing the future missionaries included a study of Sanskrit, Hinduism, and Indian History. A serious study of English was also required. The curriculum was administered in the Institut des Lettres Indiennes at the Facultés Universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix of Namur, approved by Superiors in Bengal and Bihar. After two years of study, the prospective missionaries would receive a Baccalauréat-ès-Lettres Indiennes. He taught at Namur until 1947, keeping photos of his students and corresponding with them when they began their ministries in India. His longest scholarly treatment

37 *A Synopsis of 'To Christ Through the Vedānta'*, 4 vols., Ranchi: Catholic Press, 1930–1932.

of Hinduism, *La Pensée Religieuse de l'Inde*, is essentially a summary of the lectures delivered in Namur.<sup>38</sup> In his academic career in India and Belgium, he lectured on a wide spectrum of topics in the field of comparative religion and philosophy, drafting a series of typed manuscripts that were never published or edited.<sup>39</sup> In January of 1948, he suffered a stroke and was partially paralyzed, unable to speak. He was transferred to the novitiate in Arlon, where he was cared for by the Jesuit community. His last seven years were filled with physical suffering and patient endurance. He died in Arlon on 8 February 1955 at the age of 73.

## Outline of chapters

The book is divided into three major sections. Section One provides the historical context and intellectual background to Johann's project. Section Two details the application of Johann's theological methodology to three representatives of *Vedāntic* philosophy. Section Three assesses the significance and the degree of success of Johann's project.

The first section is comprised of Chapters One and Two. The first chapter introduces the material with which Johanns was dealing (*Vedāntic* philosophy) and the intellectual sources which influenced his theological presuppositions (Thomist approaches to non-Christian thought; fulfillment approaches toward Hinduism). This preliminary chapter sketches the theological methodology which informed his project of synthesizing the *Vedānta*. The second chapter focuses on aspects of the historical context which shaped the attitude of Johanns

38 Johanns, *La Pensée Religieuse de l'Inde*, Namur: Secrétariat des publications, 1952.

39 See the list of twenty-four unpublished, typed manuscripts in the Bibliography. Most of the manuscripts are less than twenty pages, but the manuscript of '*Le Mysticism de l'Advaita*' is 226 pages.



toward the *Vedāntic* writings. The phenomenon of nascent Western Orientalism as it approached Sanskrit texts is discussed. The Jesuit philosophy of education is surveyed, which valued the study of classical texts and humane literature for moral and intellectual formation. A summary of the thought of key Catholics who impacted the nature of the Jesuit apostolate in Bengal, such as Brahmābandhab Upādhyāy, Animananda, William Wallace, and Georges Dandoy, is also included.

Section Two is comprised of Chapters Three, Four and Five. The third chapter focuses on Johanns' treatment of the philosophy of Śāṅkara. Fr. Johanns used the theoretical philosophy of Śāṅkara to highlight the complete self-sufficiency and independence of God. In terms of practical philosophy, he was impressed with Śāṅkara's stress on valuing God for Himself. The fourth chapter details how Johanns interacted with the system of Rāmānuja. Johanns balanced Śāṅkara's monism by synthesizing *advaita* with Rāmānuja's understanding of God's very personal relation to the contingent, but real world. He found Rāmānuja's emphasis on *bhakti* and meditation upon God inspiring. The fifth chapter analyzes how Johanns engaged with the Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* of Vallabha. Johanns found Vallabha's understanding of the world as the result of divine self-analysis a helpful addition to Rāmānuja's philosophy. He approves of Vallabha's doctrines that promote the importance of emotive-intuitive experience of God and appreciation of the divine joy.

The third section is comprised of the sixth chapter, which will be a conclusion that assesses the degree to which Johanns was successful in carrying out his defined objectives which informed his project of synthesizing the *Vedānta*. The methodological strengths and weaknesses of Johanns' project are examined, particularly with reference to his explication of the *Vedāntins*, his notion of neo-Thomist synthesis, and his exposition of fulfillment theology.

By way of conclusion, some personal information about the reasons for selecting this book topic would be in order. This researcher noticed that there was a major gap in the historiography of Catholic-Hindu encounter. There has been much attention devoted to Upādhyāy, Monchanin, Le Saux, and Panikkar when discussing the most important Catholic missionaries/theologians who grappled with

Hindu philosophy and spirituality in the previous century. Well over forty years passed after the death of Upādhyāy in 1907 until the writings of Monchanin, Le Saux, and Panikkar were published. The most important development that took place in this intervening period was the emergence of the ‘Calcutta School’, which was led by P. Johanns, G. Dandoy, and W. Wallace; yet there has been comparatively little research documenting their contributions to Catholic approaches to Indian religions. Upādhyāy is such an important figure in the history of this encounter that it seems odd that the ‘Calcutta School’, which sought to develop his vision of engagement with the *Vedānta*, should be neglected in telling the story of Catholic–Hindu relations.

I am neither a Catholic in terms of tradition nor an Indian in terms of ethnic or national background. I have never served as a missionary in India. I am a Protestant student of theology who has lived in the United States and the United Kingdom. I have been educated in both evangelical and mainline theological schools which emphasize Protestant theology. Yet, I have been struck by the quality of Catholic engagement with Hinduism, particularly in terms of both intellectual and mystical encounter. I have benefitted greatly in my theological and personal formation by reading and reflecting upon the writings of these wise individuals. It is my hope that this book makes a contribution to the study of the history of theological engagement by Catholics in India, because I feel personally indebted to this rich tradition for the intellectual and spiritual impact it has had upon me.



## Section One