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Tributes

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TRIBUTES

Richard V. De Smet, S.J. - An Appreciation by Julius Lipner

THOUGH RICHARD DE Smet died outside India on 2 March 1997 where he was being treated for ill health, his passing signals the end of an era in the annals of Indological scholarship in India. For he can be seen to symbolize the foreign missionary scholar who made India a home over many years, loved its peoples and cultures, empathetically studied rich strands of its religious inheritance, and sought in a spirit of enlightened appreciation to enter into a dialogue at depth. In a rare recorded piece of testimony, De Smet summed up his "mission" of over 50 years in India:

I tried to become a hyphen-priest, hyphening between the Catholic Church and our "converging brethren", whether Protestants, Orthodox, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Muslims, atheists and even some Russian and East German communists.¹

This is what being a missionary meant to him – not some narrow program to convert to some narrow perception of "the truth". As circumstances have changed in the interaction between India and the Western world, the centuries-old chain of Western missionaries to the subcontinent has now come to an end. It is the likes of bridge-builders such as De Smet – "hyphening", interconnecting, dialoguing – that stand as a fitting tribute to this historical epoch of a momentous religio-cultural interchange between India and the West.

De Smet was born on 14 April 1916 in Charleroi in Belgium. From early youth, he says, as he went through the educational process, he was surrounded by "excellence", that is, teachers and other personal influences who excelled in commitment, generosity, and learning. De Smet had wanted to be a priest, but was unsure how this calling was to be realized. Then he came

under the spell of an extraordinary man.

Fr Rene Debauche became our teacher ... and, in 1933, he went up with us to class 12. He joined joviality and a sense of humour with a fluid gift of expression – a peerless intelligence, a robust faith illuminated by holistic understanding, a prompt readiness for friendship, and that constant availability for exacting tasks which is the mark of Jesuits ... Subjugated by his excellence, I became a Jesuit (op. cit., p.10).

De Smet joined the Society of Jesus in 1934, but his religious preparation for ordination was interrupted by the war. "During the Nazi invasion of Western Europe, I served in the medical corps of the Belgian army." (p.11) He was captured and spent eight months (1940-41) in German labour camps. There, amid hardship, fear, and uncertainty, he encountered remarkable men among his fellow prisoners as well as on the other side, not least "Hauptmann Notz, the only staff officer who dared openly to practise his Catholic faith and who helped me in my efforts to get some old and sick co-prisoners repatriated" (ibid.). Together with another student preparing for ordination, De Smet organized a "university" for the prisoners, "without books, blackboard, chalk or [any other] help" (ibid.). As we shall see, De Smet's active concern for others was a characteristic feature throughout life.

After the war, De Smet continued his studies for the priesthood, coming in 1946 to St Mary's College, the Jesuit theological Centre in Kurseong at the foothills of the Himalayas. These studies, both in Belgium and India, and the subsequent early years after ordination, were marked by contact with various luminaries in circles of Roman

Catholic scholarship, e.g. Emile Mersch, Joseph Marechal, Pierre Scheuer, Pierre Johanns, Michel Ledrus, Julian Bayart, Jean de Marneffe, Robert Antoine, Pierre Fallon, Klaus Klostermaier. As he was to say, contact with such individuals “forced [him] to aim somehow in the direction indicated by the Ignatian *magis* [‘the further, the more’]”.

It was his studies in Kurseong that set him on the path that was to make his own Indological reputation, viz. a path of life-long commitment to intellectual and spiritual dialogue with the philosophical theology of the great classical advaitin, Śaṅkara. After ordination, De Smet went to the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, where he obtained a doctorate in 1953 for a thesis entitled, “The Theological Method of Śaṅkara”. De Smet returned to India in 1954, and for the rest of his life was based in De Nobili college at the Papal Athenaeum in Poona (now Pune); the name of the Athenaeum was later changed to Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth. There, at various times, De Smet lectured or prepared Notes on Introduction to Logic, Introduction to Philosophy, Metaphysics, Guidelines to Indian Philosophy, Natural Theology (which he also entitled Brahma-Jijñāsā), among other subjects. His tall, strapping figure, cheerful but quiet demeanour, and soft-spoken but expressive learning became a familiar and popular feature of the campus.

De Smet’s doctoral thesis justly came to be acknowledged as a pioneering landmark in Sanskritic studies. It was never formally published, but as his reputation grew, it was widely photocopied and passed around (sometimes with and sometimes without his knowledge), the text becoming more and more faint and illegible with each subsequent copying. I do not know how many of these copies are about or indeed are even fully legible, but each, I have no doubt, is a prized possession of its owner.

The thesis, dedicated “To My Friends in India”, is a scholarly work based on careful exegesis of the Sanskrit texts and on

familiarity with the relevant secondary literature of the day (the Bibliography lists major works in Sanskrit, English, French, and German). De Smet set out to show that Śaṅkara’s method was properly “theological”, or if you will, philosophical-theological, not in the decried sense (especially in India) of being blindly dogmatic, but in the sense of entailing a “rational understanding of Revelation”. And this, averred De Smet, was a common claim among Hindu, Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim theologians. Thus the ruling principle of De Smet’s study was the (phenomenological) parity of the Vedas with other major scriptures, as “revelation”.

The attempt to rehabilitate the role of (philosophical) theology, especially in a land still prejudiced academically against the resonances of the word “theology” and which continues aberrantly to use the term “philosophy” *tout court* to encompass all processes of rational thinking (India has no Departments of Theology in State Universities, and hardly any of “Religion” or “Religious Studies”), is a lasting contribution of the thesis to the reflection of all scholars dealing with Vedantic thought. In this thesis too, for the first time in a sustained manner, De Smet explored what was to become an abiding intellectual concern – the meaning and role of *lakṣanā*, or analogical predication in Śaṅkara’s theology. The thesis is a mine of original insights into Śaṅkara’s Advaita, and it laid the foundation for a recurrent theme in De Smet’s academic career, viz. comparative study of the thought of Thomas Aquinas, whose system provided the original metaphysical framework for De Smet’s worldview, and of Śaṅkara, who became De Smet’s ongoing revered Hindu interlocutor.² De Smet did not, of course, begin the process in India in modern times of a Christian studying the Sanskrit tradition appreciatively. Already famously for 24 years in their monthly *Light of the East* (Oct. 1922-Dec. 1946), G. Dandoy, S.J., and P. Johanns, S.J., had sympathetically opened up Vedantic thought to Christian

study.³ De Smet consolidated, developed, and “objectified”, i.e. gave a theologically non-tendentious ring, to this approach. As such, he was immensely influential for the subsequent methodology of Catholic Indological study and research in India – a tradition that thrives today with a number of first-rate scholars on the world stage. Here, as a former student (and then a longstanding friend) of De Smet’s I would like to acknowledge his continuing influence on my own research on Śaṅkara.⁴

His theological openness as well as his undoubted learning endeared De Smet to members of the other Indian faiths, even though some were hostile to begin with. But as soon as the suspicious got to know him, to hear him speak, and to experience his sympathetic insights, their hostility invariably turned to appreciation and respect, if not friendship. De Smet was regularly invited by Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and others, including non-Catholic Christians, to give various kinds of lectures and presentations, and on occasion spiritual retreats.⁵

De Smet hardly published in book form,⁶ though it is said that he published about 600 (ad hoc) articles and book reviews, on subjects ranging from Hindu thought, through comparative topics, to Christian themes. There seems to have been good reason for De Smet not closeting himself to engage in the sustained and undisturbed period of study required to produce books, viz. a genuine humility and desire to place himself at the immediate disposal of others, in other words to cultivate

that constant availability for exacting tasks which is the mark of Jesuits” as he himself put it (see extract above). “A crucial decision that Fr De Smet made in his early years in Pune called for much self-abnegation: he decided not to pursue his own preferred interest but to be available to any requests made by other Christians and people of other religions – for lectures, courses, articles, contributions to special volumes etc.”⁷

In fact, so keen was he to put himself at the disposal of all that “In the evening after the day’s work, he would walk down to the sprawling village of Ramwadi near De Nobili College and for an hour would delight the children – telling stories, playing games and showing tricks.”⁸

I last met De Smet in November 1996, a few months before he died. I had been invited to a conference in Pune, and I accepted in the hope of seeing him again as well as other members of Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth I knew. But De Smet was not at De Nobili; he had been taken to a hospital on the outskirts of Pune for treatment. When I visited the hospital during my short stay, he was slowly returning to his room after a short walk for exercise. I accompanied him to his room and we spent the next hour or so chatting. He said that he was “a man of steel” with all the iron injections that they had pumped into him! When I saw that he was tired, I got up to leave. In spite of my protestations, he insisted that he rise from bed and accompany me outside the ward so as to point me in the right direction for my return to De Nobili. “It’s confusing out there”, he said, “and I would like to point the way.” My last memory of De Smet is of him walking slowly back to his room. I had insisted that I stand there so that I could watch his safe progress. He didn’t look back. When he had gone, I caught an auto-rickshaw and headed back to De Nobili. I heard a few months later that he had died. Like so many others, I shall always be grateful to this scholar and man of God for so wisely and understandingly pointing out the way.

Notes

1. *Jivan*, December 1990, p.11: “Richard De Smet – Surrounded by Excellence: An Evocation”.
2. In “The Correct Interpretation of the Definitions of the Absolute, according to Śaṅkaracarya and Saint Thomas Aquinas”, in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol.xxvii,

- no. 4, Jan. 1955, he says "Both Śrī Śaṅkara ... and St. Thomas Aquinas ... have relied principally upon a specific element of the theories of the various meanings of words which they inherited from their respective cultures, i.e. *lakṣaṇājñāna* in Indian culture and *knowledge through analogy* in the Greco-Christian culture" (p.187). On p.193, he sees these two methods as convergent.
3. It was De Smet who initiated the publication in 1996 of Johanns' articles on Vedānta originally published in the monthly. The articles were compiled in 2 volumes by Theo de Greeff under the title *The Writings of P. Johanns: To Christ through the Vedānta*, and published by The United Theological College, Bangalore.
 4. See, e.g., my "Śaṅkara on Metaphor with reference to Gītā 13.12-18" in R. W. Perrett (ed.) *Indian Philosophy of Religion*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989; "Śaṅkara on *Satyam Jñānam Anantaṁ Brahma*", in *Relativism, Suffering and Beyond: Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal*, ed. by P. Bilimoria & J. N. Mohanty, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, and "The Self of being and the Being of self: Śaṅkara on 'That you are': (*tat tvam asi*)" in a forthcoming commemoration volume on De Smet, edited by B. Malkovsky.
 5. "He took an active part in the monthly meetings of the Pune University Philosophy Union and other similar associations ... When President Rahakrishnan formed the 'All India Centre for Advance Study' at Shimla, he invited Fr De Smet to the inaugural 10-day seminar.... He was a welcome visitor to the Divine Life Society's Shivananda Ashram at Rishikesh, where he would be invited to address the large crowd of Indian and foreign visitors for the evening Satsanghs. One year he gave an intensive 6-weeks' course on Indian Spirituality to 48 Hindus and 9 foreigners"; "Friend, Scholar and Man of Dialogue: Father Richard de Smet, S.J." by P. Vincent, *Jivan*, May-June 1997.
 6. Though with J. Neumer, S.J., he co-edited *Religious Hinduism: A Presentation and Appraisal*, St. Paul Publications, Allahabad and Bombay, 1964. Several other distinguished Jesuit scholars contributed to this well-known publication which saw several editions, including R. Antoine, C. Bulcke, M. Dhavamony, and G. Soares.
 7. Vincent, op.cit., p.24.
 8. "Father Richard De Smet: A Personal Appreciation", by Joseph A. D'Souza in *Calcutta Jesuit Newsletter*, April 1997.

Faithfulness to the End: A Tribute to M. M. Thomas by S. Wesley Ariarajah

DR KOSUKE KOYAMA described M. M. Thomas, endearingly known to a world-wide circle of ecumenical friends and colleagues as just MM, as "one of the most illuminating Christian leaders of this century" who "inspires and guides us to see where we are in our Christian calling in today's world". Born on 15 May 1916, in the South Indian state of Kerala within a devout, evangelical Marthoma family, MM entered the ecumenical movement through the Student Christian Movement. He soon became the Asia Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation which brought him in touch with the World Council of

Churches in its early years. He served as Chairman of the WCC's Working Group on Church and Society, and was elected, at the Uppsala Assembly, as the Moderator of the Central Committee of the WCC. He was a lay theologian, with no formal theological training. His theology, therefore, was the result of his spiritual struggle with the socio-political and religio-cultural realities of his own context. "Theology is about life, all of life," he said, "and when it ceases to be about life, it loses its credibility."

The "life" that concerned MM, and his mentor P. D. Devanandan, was the life of the newly independent state of India and all

its people. How can the post-colonial India be built up into a nation? What is the role of the church in nation-building in a nation that is predominantly Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and so on? What, if any, is the Christian witness within this process? How can the church, which had so closely identified itself with the colonial power and heritage, gain the confidence of its Hindu and Muslim neighbours as faithful partners in building a new future?

P.D. Devanandan founded in Bangalore the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS). MM joined him, and after Devanandan's death, led the Institute as its Director. The Institute became the pioneering institution in bringing together people of different faiths and ideologies for sustained dialogue on religion and society. While Hindus and Muslims had lingering suspicions about the intentions of the church, they gladly participated in the explorations of the CISRS on central issues that faced the nation. Peoples of all ideological persuasions felt respected and welcomed, and "dialogue" became the cornerstone of the Institute's life.

To the very end MM remained an "evangelical" Christian; he spent his last years retired in his native town writing commentaries on the books of the New Testament. For him, however, the evangelical dimension of the Christian faith lies in the belief that in Christ we are called to a new humanity. This gave him the confidence to join all peoples and movements that struggle to humanize life. Significantly one of his best known books has the title *Salvation and Humanization*. The mission of the church, he believed, is

set in the context of the struggles of humans everywhere for their humanity. And the church would, therefore, betray its calling if it failed to participate with all others, whether Hindu, Muslim, or humanist, in their struggle to make life more humane. It is this common struggle that provides the opportunity for dialogue and for growing together into a nation. At the WCC's fifth assembly at Nairobi, a deeply divisive assembly on several issues like dialogue, human rights, etc. which he ably chaired with his characteristic and disarming smile, MM developed the concept of the "spirituality for combat" – the power to resist the dehumanizing forces and to unite across all barriers in the search for justice and peace.

MM lived a near-ascetic simple life. He was deeply respected for his genuine humility and his capacity to laugh at himself. But above all, peoples of other faiths found in him a Christian who listened to them sincerely, challenged them genuinely, and befriended them dearly. When he passed away on 3 December 1996 in a train while returning to his home town, some of the most moving tributes came from the Hindu leaders of India. Few Christians in India had more friends within the Hindu intellectual community. MM has shown in his life the essential link between living dialogue and faithful friendship.

Justice Krishna Tyer, a prominent Hindu leader, said this in a message on MM's 80th birthday: "Here is a profound thinker who dared to define the essence of the message of Jesus and the role of those who accept the challenge of the cross ..."