



Modernity and its Discontents: Western Catholic Pioneers of the Hindu-Christian Dialogue¹

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Abstract

This article presents a reassessment of the Hindu-Christian dialogue in its relationship with modernity. The focus is on a group of Western Catholic clergymen who relocated to India, specifically during 1940-70, and became involved in the Hindu-Christian dialogue. The article traces the reasons for these Catholics' relocations to their dissatisfaction with modernity and the predominance of rationality in the West, as well as their aversion to modern scientific thought. It emphasises the dual character of the interfaith dialogue, and the struggles of this group of clergymen to overcome modernity, whereby a modern *Weltanschauung* was the obstacle along the path to reshaping Catholic theology and establishing a fruitful interfaith dialogue with Hinduism.² Although they did not pursue a common agenda and had different goals, these pioneers of interfaith dialogue came to consider such a dialogue with Hinduism as regenerative, as a means of revitalising Western thought, of balancing the modern excesses of a Western civilisation increasingly dominated by technology, and of transcending the rationalised culture of the modern West to achieve higher consciousness.³

Keywords: religion, India, Catholicism, intercultural encounters

“Amor Intrat Ubi Intellectus Stat ad Ostium”

(Love enters where the intellect remains at the door)

Jules Monchanin⁴

Catholic Clergymen in India

In the decades before, during and immediately after the Vatican Council, Christian theologians who were taking up non-Christian religions in the Catholic Church were hard to find. Hinduism, in particular, was not seriously considered as a meaningful area of theological enquiry. Even rarer was to meet clergymen so seriously preoccupied with Hinduism that they engaged personally and intellectually with its living tradition. Four outstanding exceptions to the norm were Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths, and Raimon Panikkar.⁵ They were Catholic priests and monks who moved from Europe to India over a period of two decades, from 1939 to 1955, and subsequently spent several decades immersed in Indian culture and society. They hoped to follow the path of two pioneers in Hindu-Christian dialogue, namely, the Italian Jesuit Roberto de Nobili, a Christian missionary to India who decided to overcome the cultural barriers by following the methods of pacific penetration and cultural adaptation; and Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, an Indian Brahmin who converted to Catholicism and identified the Saccidananda with the Christian Holy Trinity (a connection initially proposed by Keshab Chandra Sen, an Indian Bengali religious preacher).⁶ They also believed that Christian theology might continue its development in dialogue with Hindu thought rather than its Semitic and Greek roots. In sum, the integration of the Hindu tradition in the Church was at the same time a missionary strategy to activate a new self-understanding of India in a Christian form, and a source of hermeneutical frameworks for enlarging and deepening the self-understanding of Christianity in a Hindu way.

A multitude of studies about these men exists, but only a small proportion of the available literature examines them comparatively.⁷ This is ironic given that their lives and experiences share some common elements, despite the fact that they had never constituted themselves as any kind of group, did not espouse any common system and, perhaps most significantly, they pursued different agendas. Speaking about Monchanin, Le Saux, Griffiths and Panikkar requires some care, since the significance of their theological work subsists not primarily in the value of their individual contributions, but in the broader trend observable across the work they collectively produced. The first and probably more important common element in their lives and experiences is how a missionary enterprise and a profound interreligious encounter happened to them. Eventually, they came upon the realisation that such “dialogue” was actually a monologue, since there

are “few Hindus who are interested in (contemporary) Christian theology, and there are fewer still who have a desire to enter into dialogue with their Christian counterparts.”⁸ How can it be possible that interfaith dialogue, more specifically Hindu-Christian dialogue, seems to be one of the major concerns of these Catholic clergymen in India despite this lack of interest on the Hindu side? The fact is, for these Catholic clergymen, the dialogue soon became a personal attempt to appeal to the ancient wisdom of the East as a gateway to escape from the West, especially from the intellectual influence of modernity.

For the sake of this article, modernity is defined as a superior, reason-based civilisation, which produces what Max Weber famously called the “disenchantment of the world”, and makes modern rationality universal as well as the improvement of the most barbaric, primitive, coarse people, a moral obligation.⁹ In other words, modernity represents the severance of the classical, theistic synthesis, the severance of faith from reason. Hans Urs von Balthazar would add the severance of the true, the beautiful, and the good from one other. Alasdair MacIntyre would include also the severance of the economics and politics from ethics, and so on.¹⁰ From the Catholic perspective, the process of severance of faith from reason caused the disintegration of the unified vision – the cosmology, theology, and anthropology – of the Middle Age. Now, we live in a modern culture that is not only autonomous from faith, but also fractured, as it lacks internal coherence, in which each element of modernity can be considered independently from the others. Catholicism has been developing a controversial, agonising and, at times, a confused relationship with *this* modernity; at times facing it in a fiery opposition, never accepting to accommodate, and yet assimilating elements of it. Catholicism opposed the fractured culture of modernity, never tried to heal it (until Vatican Council II), and eventually (and partially) absorbed it (despite otherwise declared).

Some of these Catholic priests and monks entered into an entente cordiale with Hinduism, others rejected it, and all achieved a deep understanding of Indian religious traditions.¹¹ Of course, these pioneers did not act in a vacuum. Indian theology had been taking shape since the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century it continued to evolve as a reaction to both the theology it had been receiving from the West and the emergence of Indian national and cultural identities.¹² What they found in India was an intellectual environment in transition from the colonial to the post-independent period. Slowly, what has been called “modern Hinduism”, which was a precipitate of this pluralistic tradition, was taking shape thanks to the efforts and works of Ram Roy, Tagore,

K.S. Sen, Vivekananda, Auribondo, Gandhiji and Radhkrishnan. Once again, the assimilative nature of Hinduism was at work, absorbing new traditions and insights without forgetting the old ones.¹³ Not coincidentally, in the same period, a convert from Hinduism, Pandipeddi Chenchiah, was involved in an ambitious project: building a bridge between Hinduism and Christianity. He operated through a group of perhaps unorthodox thinkers who came to be known as “the Rethinking Group” taken from the title of their well-known publication *Rethinking Christianity in India* (1938). Succinctly, he envisioned Christianity without an institutional Church, as Christianity is the direct experience of Christ, and doctrine is a matter of personal experience. Another convert, Vengal Chakkarai Chetti, did not attempt to interpret Christianity in terms of a particular Indian intellectual tradition, as Chenchiah did, and was adamantly critical of the “Jesus of History”, while his Christology was primarily based on direct contact with the immanence of God. If Chenchiah and Chakkarai were heterodox in their thought, then P.D. Devanandan was impeccably orthodox. He did not try to accommodate Hinduism, but rather adapted Christianity as a connecting tool between traditional Hinduism and modernity.¹⁴ Apart from these remarkable exceptions, Chenchiah, Chakkarai and Devanandan, the specific encounter between Hinduism and Christianity was still marked at that time by criticism and even rejection on the Christian side, and indifference and lack of interest on the Hindu side. In general, the ordinary understanding of Hinduism, especially in the Roman Catholic Church in India, was poor and vague. The local Church was European in character and Latin in liturgy. A more friendly approach was coming from outsiders like Monchanin and Le Saux, who were open to learn from locals and less vulnerable to painful memories of past colonial conflicts.

The post-colonial resurgence of national and cultural identities leads Catholicism to rethink its engagement with local cultures and non-Christian religions. However, this post-colonial resurgence, and the consequential post-colonial literature, played a very limited role in these pioneers’ intellectual journey. There is no doubt that colonialism and Orientalism might have unconsciously influenced how these pioneers of the interreligious dialogue interpreted Hinduism. It is also probably fair to assume that they (or at least some of them, specifically Monchanin) did exactly what Edward Said famously condemned – exoticising the “mystic East”. However, they were much more influenced by the internal sub-movements of their Church and its cultural environment and their main concern was establishing a dialogue with another tradition in order to escape from their own tradition and specially modernity.¹⁵ Monchanin and the other priests considered in

this article thought of themselves as an avant-garde of a meeting between “East” and “West”, and their involvement and interest in Eastern spirituality as a premature stage of a much more epochal shift in religious consciousness would, or so they thought, profoundly alter the West.¹⁶ At the very core of their engagement with Hinduism was their profound dissatisfaction with the predominance of rationality – logos or ratio – in modern Western thought, and their aversion to scientific thought as an epistemology of reductionist materialism, which collapsed reality into its merely physical elements. These pioneers of the interfaith dialogue came to consider the dialogue with Hinduism as a source of regeneration, a means of revitalising Western culture (Monchanin), transcending the rationalised culture of the modern West (Le Saux and Panikkar) to achieve higher consciousness, and balancing the modern excesses of a Western civilisation that was increasingly dominated by technology (Griffiths).

Analysing all the reasons for this appeal of Hinduism is outside of the scope of the paper, but it does seem evident that these pioneers lacked sympathy for the dominant values of the West. They simply did not conform to the values of the Western Church; that is, Christianity is Western in its language, forms of thought and behaviour. They held the same regard for the modern intellectualism of neo-Thomism, remote as it was from contemporary *Zeitgeist* and arguably distant from the original spirit of Thomas himself.¹⁷ Eventually, they sought to escape the colonial attitude of Western philosophy and its claims of universality, which had imposed its value system – progress, technology, science, democracy and capitalism – as a prerequisite for dialogue with other cultures and religious traditions. Furthermore, these men expressed strong reservations against modern science as the only acceptable way of knowing. However, no institution was rejected, especially the Catholic Church, and particularly the authority that came with it. They preferred to escape from the surrounding dominant Western intellectual structures, paternalistic values and technological culture, attracted as they were by the direct religious experiences offered by Hinduism, and they experimented with alternative forms of thoughts in India. Though not a cohesive intellectual movement, they expressed their desire to adapt to communal or nomadic lifestyles by renouncing institutional influence, consumerism and materialism, and embracing aspects of Eastern philosophy in the prospective of a full reintegration of nature and the supernatural.

Jules Monchanin and the Resacralisation of the European Consciousness

When Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker wrote the line, “Western culture is determined more by reflection, Asiatic cultures by meditation. The meeting of the two is *the* important historical event of the present century”, in 1973, the “present century” was the twentieth century, and the relationship between rational thinking and meditative experience was a chasm.¹⁸ In retrospect, however, Jules Monchanin bridged the gap between the two cultures. A Catholic priest who left France for India in 1939, at this early stage he was already aware that the two major themes of his spiritual life were thought and meditation; or, it could be said, “the act of knowing” and “the Love within”, also referred to as the “intellectual level” and “the vital level.”¹⁹ While waiting for entry to India, Monchanin wrote a letter to his mother and mentioned a dream where he “learnt to think and to meditate.”²⁰ In the same period, he asked himself the following crucial question:

Is it better in some way to force God [...] or is it better to wait (making myself as transparent as possible)? I had always thought that one must not force God, that it is a satanic sin. But suppose God wants to be taken by violence [...] by a love which sacrifices everything which is not Him? I have perhaps been lacking in violence in my hunger for God! [...] I am facing a great self questioning [...] In India, in any case, I intend to belong only to God – and through nothing – to him and in him.²¹

Monchanin was in this terrible turmoil, whether he should actively force his God in Love – an “act of knowing,” or he should wait passively – a move towards “the Love within.” He eagerly sought its resolution. Christian apophatic mysticism – that is, a kind of mysticism that often goes along with negative theology and assumes to be based on experiences of emptiness and silence – tells us that actively seeking and passively waiting for the love of God were not two different things.²² Monchanin was a dedicated student of the Patristic literature – the theological achievements of Early Christian writers, and the Church Fathers (I-V century AD). He acknowledged that the seeming paradox was not really so, as the passive act of waiting was actually the way to take God by force. As Monchanin’s life would show: to become empty of self in order to be filled with God, and in order to simply be a presence.²³

As became increasingly evident during the following decades, this goal – the “Quest of the Absolute” – would become a source of excruciating pain

for Father Monchanin, as meditation leads beyond thought. Monchanin was first and ultimately a great intellectual. For him, the hardest thing to empty was his self and his own thoughts. Before Monchanin entered the seminary he wrote:

My moral and religious life matters less to me than my intellectual life [...] the fundamental trait of my character is individualism [...] the rules that govern my thinking are my own [...] I need to be myself, to develop my own thinking as far as possible.²⁴

Despite his intellectual distinction, he did not complete his doctoral studies, but instead asked to be sent to a miners' parish in a poor suburb of Lyons. Nevertheless, during the years between his ordination (1922) and his arrival in India, he continued to move in an academic milieu and applied himself to a range of studies. At that time, Lyons (or better, Fourvière, the Jesuit theologate outside of Lyons) had, together with the Paris province of the Dominican house of studies, a faculty that had been exiled to a place called Le Saulchoir by the French anticlerical legislation of 1903. The area thrived as a vibrant intellectual centre. Despite adversities, Lyons Jesuits Gaston Fessard, Pierre Chaillet, Yves de Montcheuil, and in particular the theologian and writer Henri de Lubac, belonged to a rising and controversial generation of theologians in the Catholic Church whose work in the 1930s and 1940s laid the foundations for what became known as the *Resourcement* approach.²⁵ These brilliant early twentieth-century Catholic theologians aimed to build a third way between neo-Thomism and the Catholic theology that was written and taught during the period between Pope Leo XIII's late nineteenth-century promotion of neo-scholasticism and Vatican II. They came of age as opponents of modernism, their origins traced at the turn of the century:

The "modernists" had accused the Catholic theology of their time, represented by the neo-scholastic system of the standard seminary textbooks, of being rigidly rationalistic, out of touch both with the philosophical and scientific movements of contemporary culture and with the religious desires and sensibilities of ordinary Christians [...] The Catholic neo-scholastic response, in the first decades of the twentieth century, had been to withdraw even more decisively than before from intellectual contact with contemporary culture, and to restrict the activity of theology to the confines of an Aristotelian ontology and dialectic that ended in being its own brand of self-defining literalism, and which looked with suspicion on the historical study of both the Bible and the development of doctrine.²⁶

Already in their earliest efforts, this group of theologians that in the 1940s would have been called the *Resourcement* movement, was responding to the fossilisation of Catholic theology due to the doctrinal tradition of neo-scholasticism. They reacted to “the desacramentalized universe of modernity”, and the increasing disappearance of the sense of the sacred in European consciousness due to a secularising post-Enlightenment culture.²⁷ They also shared an interest in the past of Christian theology, and proposed a return to the Christian revelation’s sources – the Church Fathers. Added to this, they envisioned a way in which the past related to present issues, in particular the revitalisation of the Christian faith and the Church’s self-understanding, which they believed inspired and provoked theological imagination to bring new insight.²⁸ Consequently, the retrieval and renewal of Catholic theology could be articulated – and Christian faith can be understood – in the context of its own history. However, Monchanin and his great friend de Lubac envisioned a second option, brought about by the circumstances of a religious encounter.

Monchanin was equipped with a sharp mind, a sophisticated culture and a deep sensitivity. Had he wished, he might have had a brilliant academic or ecclesiastical career.²⁹ Instead, he was told by de Lubac to go to India whereupon he faced a most unlikely discourse. This clash would force Monchanin to remake Christian theology, where “remaking” is understood to mean rethinking everything in the light of theology and then theology in the light of mysticism, thus freeing theology “from all accessory elements and rediscovering the entire essential.”³⁰ That seems a two-way movement; that is, to “Christianise” India – i.e. to fulfill the unexpressed desire of India for unity beyond all forms and names, such as correcting the latent temptation of the Indian spirituality to pluralism – as well as to “Indianise” Christianity – i.e. the Church will absorb and exalt the “uncommon gift” that “India has received from the Almighty [...] an unquenchable thirst for whatever is spiritual.”³¹ This vision, “to rethink Christianity in an Indian way and to rethink India in a Christian way”, which Monchanin elaborated during his years at the seminary, is summarised in the second chapter of *An Indian Benedictine Ashram*. In fact,

India has a message of her own to deliver, within the Church and to the world at large [...] a special testimony [...] [that is] the essentially spiritual value of the Church, ultimately [to] the divine Transcendancy, [to] the Absolute.³²

To pursue this option – the retrieval and renewal of Catholic theology brought about by the circumstances of the prevailing religious encounter

– Father Monchanin left France for India in 1939 to pursue what his great friend de Lubac summarised as “to rethink everything in the light of theology, and to rethink theology through mysticism.”³³ For Monchanin as well as de Lubac, Catholic theology was exhausted and in need of a return to its mystical sources to rediscover its original connection with God. Hinduism was instrumental for this goal. Monchanin’s theological enterprise naturally emerged from de Lubac’s rejection of a “modern, non-sacramental world,” and the rediscovery of the mystical and contemplative dimension of the Christian theology, in order to infuse into the consciousness of humanity the forgotten Christian truth that the sacred – the presence of God’s saving activity – is not an otherworldly reality detached and separate from the mundane, secular world.³⁴ Therefore, the ultimate goal of Monchanin and de Lubac was the resacramentalisation of the European consciousness.

Monchanin’s goal in India was actually two-sided. Since the “essence of Indian culture was mysticism, the challenge for Christianity in India was to focus on the inner Holy Spirit in its Indian forms, and allow the visible form of the church to express itself in a truly Indian way” (“Christianise” India).³⁵ However, the encounter with the traditional wisdom of India might also aid in fathoming the depths of Christianity and promoting the recovering of the mystical and contemplative dimension of the Christian theology (“Indianise” Christianity). In different fashions and with different degrees of involvement, this double commitment would become a standard project for the Catholic clergymen that followed.

After a decade of pastoral work in India, in 1950, together with French Benedictine monk Henri Le Saux (1910-1973), he was able to establish Shantivanam, a Christian ashram (also called Saccidananda Ashram) in Tamil Nadu.³⁶ Monchanin identified himself as a missionary and envisioned the Christian ashram in India as a vehicle of Christianisation in India.³⁷ Le Saux joined him. In their view, the role of the missionaries was not to proselytise, but to immerse themselves in India and live the hidden life of work and contemplation of the *swamis* and *sadhus* (renunciates), to attract the attention and respect of Hindus, serve their spiritual needs and eventually to convert them.³⁸ They adopted the ochre robes of the Indian *sannyasis* rather than the white soutane worn by Catholic priests in India, and wished to enlarge and enrich the Catholic tradition through its reformulation in Hindu categories of interpretation. In an attempt to reformulate Christianity in such categories and symbols, Monchanin passed through the adoption of external symbols, architecture, clothing and ritual elements, and engaged himself with Hinduism on an intellectual level, through philological, historical, and theological study. Monchanin

adopted an Irenean strategy, and considered the Patristic synthesis as a Christological basis for interreligious dialogue. “What St. Justin, the Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria, the Philosopher, have said about Greece, may be applied to India”.³⁹ He also realised that without such practices as prayer and meditation, the theoretical journey might lack depth. When he finally tried the radical reformulation of Christian theology according to the worldview and philosophical categories of Hinduism, a question appeared. The question was whether a Christian theologian can sever Upanishad concepts and categories from the Vedanta tradition and way of life, and whether he/she can conceive of Christian faith without the Greek categories and Semitic worldview that form the basis of its creed. Monchanin’s answer was in the negative.⁴⁰ In a letter to Abbè Edouard Duperray in 1955, referring to Abhishiktānanda, Monchanin confided: “Never have I felt myself intellectually more *Christian* and also, I must say, more *Greek*.”⁴¹ Abhishiktānanda mirrored those thoughts when he wrote, in 1954, that Monchanin “is too Greek to go to the depths.”⁴² The more Monchanin immersed himself in the study of the sacred texts of Hinduism, the more he identified himself with Christianity and its intellectual Greek (Patristic) heritages. In other words, the more he tried to investigate the depths of the Hindu mindset, the more he rediscovered his own Western Catholic roots. In his case, probably his identity choice was determined by the religious composition of his network of ecclesiastical connections and friends, mostly Catholics. Another factor was his personal experience as a Catholic within the Indian context.

We have no evidence of Monchanin’s negative experiences with Hinduism, but we have no evidence of positive experiences either; that is, Hindu people treating Monchanin as part of their religious group, an important source of a person’s social identity. Despite the *sannyāsa* dress and the Indian name (Swami Paramarubyananda), he was not accepted in a predominately Hindu religious community, and he never tried to be part of it. His familial and ecclesiastical socialisation was Catholic and European, and this fact considerably affected his religious identity choices and his propensity to modify his Western mindset. More importantly, his Catholic and European identity was never really in discussion. Monchanin never considered Hinduism a legitimate identity option.

Monchanin’s theological project was aligned with the main purpose of the *nouvelle théologie*, the rediscovery of Patristic theology, and its reinterpretation in light of the present times. He explored Catholic theology through a creative engagement with mysticism and contemplation. This engagement – according to Monchanin – was an opportunity for ecclesial renewal and his way to remake (French/European) Christian theology. His

adaptation to the Indian context and his immersion in the holy texts of Hinduism, however, were never conceived as a way to provide validation to the Christian theology, rather as an instrumental path to renew it. In the end, he came to “[...] confess, the more I deal with Hindus, the less I see my way.”⁴³ Eventually, he retraced his steps, rearticulating his task as “[...] the same as that of the Greek fathers: to accept that which is compatible, to reject that which is incompatible with Christianity.”⁴⁴

This priest, equipped with an “uncommon quality of humility, gentleness, peace, and poverty of spirit”, this man of saintly qualities recognised and attested to by Christians, as well as Hindus, was unable to find his way out of his quandary.⁴⁵ Monchanin supposed that if he moved out of his comfort zone and immersed himself in a Hindu context, these texts would enable him to remake Catholic theology. His tragedy in India was that when he discovered that Hinduism was not what he thought it was, i.e. a religion that is spiritually inferior and easy to convert, he had to find out what Christianity was. As his very identity of European Catholicism was built on the notion of Christian superiority, when he discovered that “Hindus are not spiritually uneasy” because “they believe they possess supreme wisdom” and that “Christianizing Hinduism” was “no doubt improper”. He preferred the retreat, concluding that “Indian wisdom is tainted with erroneous tendencies”, rather than bring into question his self-conception as a Catholic priest.⁴⁶

Monchanin went to India to pursue the same project of the *nouvelle théologie*, but adopting a different path. Rather than looking back to the Christian roots, he thought that the Hindu-Christian dialogue might be instrumental in escaping modernity and the resacramentalisation of the universe of modernity, increasingly at risk due to secularising post-Enlightenment culture. However, when the time came to dismiss the influence of Western rationality and the sense of superiority that comes with Western Catholicism, he stepped back. Consequently, his conclusion was adamant: Hinduism was wrong. It must reject its “fundamental error and its essential divergence in terms of Christianity” if it is to enter into Christ.⁴⁷ The dialogue was over.

Henri Le Saux and the Relativity of Truth

Dom Henry Le Saux, also known as Swami Abhishiktānanda (1910-1973), was born at St. Briac in Brittany. He became a monk at the age of nineteen but, like Monchanin, was always haunted by the thought of moving “beyond”.

He was a monk in search of God. He felt increasingly dissatisfied with a God who was totally other than him, the God who stood outside of him and confronted him.⁴⁸ He arrived in India in 1948 to seek a more intimate relation with the Absolute, and he wrote of an overwhelming mystical experience while in retreat at the holy place of Arunachala.⁴⁹ By 1950, Abhishiktānanda gradually loosened his connections with the Christian ashram at Shantivanam, which he was able to establish on the banks of the Kavery River with his fellow priest and compatriot, Monchanin, and spent much of his time as a wandering *sannyasi*. After the premature death of Monchanin, Le Saux (Abhishiktānanda) spent another decade between his Shantivanam Ashram and a small hermitage on the Himalayas. When English Benedictine Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) assumed responsibility for the ashram in 1968, Abhishiktānanda moved to his hermitage in the north near Uttarkashi, along the Ganges, from where he would continue to travel throughout India until the end of his life.

Abhishiktānanda engaged in an interior journey in which he entered deeply into the experience of Hinduism and was transformed in the process. The path he took was different from Monchanin's because Abhishiktānanda's very identity as a European Catholic was not built on the notion of Christian superiority, but on his monastic vocation.⁵⁰ He moved to India to christianise the people but soon discovered to have a more natural affinity for the practices of Hindu spirituality and found himself increasingly attracted by Hinduism as a way of realising the mystery of the divine nature of God. He considered himself a Christian but experienced the world as a Hindu. He encountered Hinduism at a certain depth and found its scriptures and spiritual practices inspiring and attractive, so he sought to experience them from within. However, he struggled to come to terms with them as a Christian. Despite the normal tendency to try to integrate them into his Catholic tradition through a process of reinterpretation and/or adaptation, he was unable to do so until a short time before his death.

Abhishiktānanda's main goal was not intellectual but spiritual. He did not go to India to achieve a theological strategy, but rather a higher consciousness. He realised that India might be a better place to pursue his courageous, audacious search of God. Although he was not an intellectual, a brief account of his accomplishments in this space is needed, as propaedeutic to the investigation of the important intellectual achievements of his great friend, Raimond Panikkar.⁵¹ Abhishiktānanda did not contest modernity and did not engage a dialogue with the modern *Weltanschauung*; however, perhaps unintentionally, he came to challenge the main claims of modernity, especially the claim by the modern principles and canons to have universal

application and to be true for everyone. While he was very serious about practising his faith (he never denied or repudiated the doctrines or practices of Christianity, nor did he cease to observe the Christian forms of worship and to celebrate the Sacraments), he came to understand their limitations as religious forms and formulations. He pointed out that he learned from Monchanin about the relativity of all conceptual and philosophical articulation of any religious and philosophical experience.⁵² However, rather than implying the possibility to rethink the fundamental experiences of Christianity in Hindu terms, and grasp the heart of Christianity apart from the philosophical tradition in which Christianity had emerged and taken form, he asserted that the core insights and experiences of the two religions are themselves pre-linguistic, since they lie beyond the religious (theological) formulations, and are not reducible to their verbal formulations and expressions. Religious formulations (doctrines, rituals, laws, techniques, etc.) have value but limited value.⁵³ They are signposts to the Absolute but could not be invested with any absolute value themselves.⁵⁴ Accordingly, he pointed out that one who belongs to several religious traditions and who knows several mental (or religious or spiritual) languages is incapable of absolutising any formulation whatever; of the gospel, of the Upanishad, of Buddhism, etc.⁵⁵ The various “languages” that Abhishiktānanda learnt were not merely words. He meant religious traditions and spiritual paths. He was unable to “absolutise” any of these languages, or any doctrinal formulations, even that of Christianity. The multiple “languages” he spoke, the multiple experiences and the variety of spiritual practices he lived all caused him to understand the relativity of religious experience.⁵⁶

There is no common denominator at the level of theory and formulations, but only an emerging self-understanding, out of the dialogue among religious traditions, of the intrinsic relativity of their beliefs.⁵⁷ In fact, Abhishiktānanda concluded that multiple religious belonging brings to “witness to an experience about which he can only stammer.”⁵⁸ The primacy of the religious experience over theory clarifies why the common ground between the two religious traditions was not based on any doctrinal or theological formulations; the meeting point of Christianity and Hinduism could take place but only in a life of renunciation, which was not just a life of prayer and contemplation, material poverty and humility. It implies, as he wrote in *The Further Shore*, “complete renunciation [that] cuts across all *dharmas* and disregards all frontiers [...] it is anterior to every religious formulation.”⁵⁹

Most of Abhishiktānanda’s fundamental ideas, notably the difference between linguistic and pre-linguistic experiences, as well as the relativity

of any theological or philosophical formulation, would become crucial in Panikkar's scholarship work. Through the years, for Abhishiktānanda, Christian practice became a way of embodying the ineffable, intangible, infinite mystery of God that was revealed to him in Hindu terms. As he pointed out:

Whatever [sic] I want it or not, I am deeply attached to Christ Jesus and therefore to the *koinonia* of the Church. It is in him that the "mystery" has been revealed to me ever since my awakening to myself and to the world. It is in his image, his symbol, that I know God and I know myself and the world of human beings.⁶⁰

In other words, Christian teachings and practices are reducible to their historical embodiments, yet they transcend their historical embodiments. They are a way of personalising the awakening.

Raimond Panikkar and the Demythicalisation of the Universality of Reason

Raimond Panikkar (1918-2011), also known as Raimundo Pannikar, was born the son of a Spanish Roman Catholic mother and a Hindu Indian father. He became a Roman Catholic priest and conformed to the most traditionalist wing of Spanish Catholicism. In late 1954, when he was already 36, he visited India for the first time. This was the land of his father. It proved to be a watershed, a decisive reorientation of his interests and of his theology, which moved decisively away from the religious exclusivism he had previously embraced.⁶¹ In India, he met and became close friends with Monchanin and Le Saux. For many years thereafter, he arranged his life in order to teach in the spring in Europe or Northern America, and then spend the rest of the year doing research in India. He was a world-renowned pioneer of interfaith dialogue, and one of the greatest scholars of the twentieth century in the areas of comparative religion and theology.⁶² In Hinduism (and Buddhism) Panikkar found other languages, in addition to Biblical Hebrew, Greek philosophy, and Latin Christianity, to express the core convictions (the *kerygma*) of the Christian tradition. Quite naturally, in his attempt at reinterpreting the figure of Christ through Hindu or Buddhist categories, he ran into the problem of the belief in the uniqueness of Jesus. In fact, as much as this belief still belongs to the heart of the Christian faith, it would seem

that one cannot belong to Christianity in its symbolical form and Hindu and/or Buddhism in its hermeneutical form all at once.⁶³ He challenged this point in numerous articles and books, and summed up his position this way: “I left Europe [for India] as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be a Christian.”⁶⁴ When confronted with fundamental and often conflicting beliefs that one’s primary religious commitment and belonging manifests itself, Panikkar confirmed that it is certainly worth for most Christian participants in dialogue to “go over” to other religions while keeping and even deepening their Christian identity.⁶⁵

During a series of retreats in Rome, in the Sixties and Seventies, Panikkar articulated his view on the relationship between faith and modernity.⁶⁶ He pointed out that modernity pretends to carry universal values, and in particular it assumes both the universality of reason and the mythical nature of faith. Here, “mythical” means imaginary; fictitious, lacking factual basis or historical validity, like the centaurs or the unicorn. According to Panikkar, modernity claims that faith belongs to the realm of myths and implicitly contains a strong irrational core that can be cured through a “way out” – a project of emancipation from a state of immaturity. Effectively, the whole project of the Enlightenment consists of bringing the light of reason where there is only the darkness of irrationality. In a surprising move, Panikkar maintained otherwise; namely, that the universality of reason is itself a myth.⁶⁷ He located his analysis in the context of the interfaith dialogue, making clear the emerging dissatisfaction with the option of reason as meeting point. The mythical universality of reason must be demythicised (transmythicised) in order to create room for a more engaging, useful, dialogical interfaith dialogue.

How does this happen? Panikkar developed a very sophisticated intellectual strategy.⁶⁸ First, he reshaped our understanding of myth and introduced a neologism: *mythos*. *Mythos*, to plunge right in, is the horizon against which all hermeneutics is possible; it is present at the root, before any interpretation. It is the invisible light by which we see, and in relation to all fundamental human behaviours (ideology, morality and so on). The *mythos* is transparent like the light; it is water for fish, oxygen for humans. *Mythos* is that which we take for granted, that which we do not question; and it is unquestioned because, de facto, it is not considered as questionable. What Panikkar stressed here is the point that the very power of *mythos* is founded in its unquestionableness.⁶⁹ Every culture and religion has a mythological foundation, a set of taken-for granted truths about the essential realities, which constitutes that tradition’s horizon.

When a dialogue occurs, not a clash of traditions, rather a clash of *mythos*, happens. And this clash is inevitable as well as desirable. In fact, the meeting of religions and cultures is often an unsatisfactory experience precisely because there is a clash of *mythos*, each with its own universalist claims. However, at least in a more general perspective, an interfaith dialogue is possible only when no part pretends to claim universality for itself. This is the first output, the recognition of the incompatibility between dialogue and universal claims. In other words, interfaith dialogue is possible only when the relativity of all conceptual and philosophical articulation of any religious and philosophical experience (see Abhishiktānanda) is recognised. The second output is that all universal claims are mythical. There is a narrow space between the Scylla of the dialogue and the Charybdis of the set of taken-for-granted truths the dialoguers believe in. This narrow space is called “acknowledgment.” A serious dialogue helps the parts to acknowledge that they are inside a *mythos* and see through a *mythos*; in other words, through a dialogue the parts become aware of the *mythos* they belong to.⁷⁰

We can see how this sophisticated strategy works in the case of “pluralism.” Here is how Panikkar explained his point:

[...] pluralism, by definition, does not admit of a pluralistic system [...] We speak of pluralism not when we discover a plurality of possible answers to a problem but when, while recognizing that these answers may be mutually incompatible, we find we cannot deny their legitimacy given a certain standpoint, albeit one which we cannot accept intellectually. Pluralism is a fact which challenges rational analysis.⁷¹

In other words, any intellectual forms, even “pluralism”, that claim the attribute of universality, create an inevitable clash of systems and a disgraced experience of dialogue. Panikkar reminds us that pluralism cannot be logically deduced from pure reasoning since, in the meeting of religions and cultures, we often find ourselves confronted with “mutually exclusive and respectively contradictory ultimate systems.” As long as we maintain the dialogue at a rational level, we crash into the principle of non-contradiction. That is why Panikkar spoke of the “myth of pluralism” and locates pluralism within this mythic realm and not in the *logos*. “Pluralism belongs to the order of the *mythos* and not of the *logos*.”⁷² He added: “Pluralism is indeed a myth in the most rigorous sense: an ever-elusive horizon in which we situate things in order to be conscious of them without ever converting the horizon into an object.”⁷³ Pluralism is an unthought, and it is irreducible to thinking. The same can be said of modernity. Modernity is a *mythos*, the

unthought; it is irreducible to thinking and presupposes the superiority and universality of reason.

The specific problem posed by modernity to interfaith dialogue, assumed Panikkar, lies in the counter-circuit between abstract availability to dialogue and concrete pre-assumption of intellectual hegemony derived from the universal character of reason. Western intellectual hegemony carries a sense of superiority that inevitably leads to considering the “other” – the non-Western – as uncivilised, non-rational, and sub-human. Worse, if embraced, the modern project assumes the presumption of the rational emancipatory character of modernity and confines non-modernity to a primitive stage (which once again justifies modernity’s superiority over its “others” and, by this token, transforms them into irrational beings). Hopefully, according to Panikkar, a serious interfaith dialogue induces the parts to recognise that the emancipatory character of reason, its project of universal enlightenment, and the hegemonic process of modernisation, are mythical dimensions. This is one point. The second point has to do with the subsumption of the universal character of reason, and its unintended consequences to deny alterity (the other of modernity). For this reason, if one aims at an honest interfaith dialogue, it becomes imperative to deny the denial of the alterity that comes with the myth of universality of reason, which is so embodied in modernity. A serious interfaith dialogue acknowledges the mythical character of the universality of reason, and ultimately makes modernity – as previously defined – implausible.⁷⁴

Panikkar also addressed modernity from another perspective: the hegemony of the *logos* on the *mythos*. Can *logos* be the meeting point of the dialogue? Is it not the ultimate scope of the Enlightenment that “humanity will solve its problems by becoming more reasonable?”⁷⁵ Here the *logos* is the rational speech and the discursive thinking, the reasonable and the objectifying, and it is an equally inevitable horizon whereby we attempt an interpretation of our own experience of life, and what makes it possible.⁷⁶ Not coincidentally, Panikkar places the *logos* as whatever comes after the *mythos*. Now, can we actually *interpret* the *mythos*? Is an interpretation, a hermeneutical strategy that transforms *mythos* into any kind of *logos*? Yes, Panikkar responded, but at a high cost. In fact, “The hermeneutic of a myth is no longer the myth, but its *logos*. Myth is precisely the horizon over against which any hermeneutic is possible.”⁷⁷

In other words, any demythicisation – any attempt to subject *mythos* to a hermeneutic – would result in a dead *mythos*. A dead *mythos* happens when the obscurity of *mythos* has been suppressed by the Enlightenment, when the unthought has been substituted by the thought. A dead *mythos*

occurs when, for example, a religion is reduced to a set of doctrinal beliefs, or when a language becomes, as we say, a “dead language” without a living relationship with a community of speakers. It can also occur when the power of the word is reduced to a mathematical formula or a technical term, which is precise in meaning but unable to express a more primordial truth.

The opposite is a living *mythos*: “A living myth does not allow for interpretation because it needs no intermediary.”⁷⁸ A living *mythos* is a *mythos* that acts as a source of thought. Accordingly, Panikkar assumed that when we are seriously involved in an interfaith dialogue, because we are dealing with such radically different horizons, languages and worldviews, ordinary interpretative procedures of historical hermeneutics and dialectics are not equal to the task. Panikkar maintained that interfaith-dialogue “is possible on the basis of myth, whereas the *logos* only leads to dialectics.”⁷⁹ By extension, Panikkar also pointed out that modernity is not a “good platform” for the interfaith dialogue, “The foundation of dialogue cannot be the Western modern myth.”⁸⁰ Here, Panikkar came short of establishing a sort of incompatibility between modernity and interfaith dialogue.

How can we demythicise the mythical universality of reason to create room for more engaging, useful, dialogical interfaith dialogue? Without entering into the details of the complex processes of demythicisation, remythicisation and transmythicisation as proposed by Panikkar, we have to mention that this first step – demythicisation – emerges from some sort of dissatisfaction with the present *mythos*. The temptation would be to replace the *mythos* with *logos*, but we were already advised that this choice will achieve a result that kills the *mythos* rather than revitalises it. Panikkar was very aware of the perils and suggested the symbol, and not the concept, as a suitable vehicle to move from *mythos* to *logos*. In his own definition of hermeneutics, Panikkar focused on the communicative and redemptive power of symbols. The task of hermeneutics is one of “restoring symbols to life and eventually of letting new symbols emerge.”⁸¹

Panikkar sustained that, rather than a simple remythicisation, *mythos* passes through a process of “transmythicisation.” This is how he explained the process:

Demythification is necessary once one is unhappy with his “myth” because the *logos* has already replaced it; but each demythification brings with its remythification. We destroy one myth [...] but somehow a new myth always simultaneously. Man cannot live without myths.⁸²

Panikkar mentioned the inexhaustible nature of *mythos*. Then, he continues, "It should be stressed here that myths do not need to be overcome [...]. The process of demythicization so popular nowadays is really a dynamic of trans-mythicization,"⁸³ that is a kind of metamorphosis from one obsolete *mythos* to a revived one. Somehow, an old *mythos* does not resonate anymore with the conscience of the certain community, and a new *mythos* appears, which substitutes the old one.

Bede Griffith and the Recovery of the Christian Sapiential Tradition

After deciding to seek Holy Orders in the Church of England, on November 1931, Alan Richard Griffith had an emotional breakdown and, despite the strong anti-Roman Catholic sentiments of his mother, decided to join the Benedictine monastery of Prinknash Abbey. He was received into the Roman Catholic Church, took the name Bede, and made his First Communion at Christmas Eve Mass at the abbey. Judson B. Trapnell in *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue* describes Bede's conversion as a young man and how, in its aftermath, he developed his ideas on faith and religious experience in part by reading Jacques and Raissa Maritain on knowledge of connaturality; that is, of a kind of knowledge that is produced in the intellect but not by virtue of conceptual connections and by way of demonstration.⁸⁴ This notion of knowledge through connaturality is classical in the Thomist school.

After twenty-five years of Roman Catholicism and monastic life (1931-1955), Father Bede took a ship to Bombay with Father Benedict Alapott, an Indian priest born in Europe, greatly desirous of starting a foundation in India. After pilgrimages to Elaphanta and Mysore, he settled in Kengeri, Bangalore. In 1958, Father Bede joined Father Francis Acharya in Kurisumala and by 1968 arrived at Shantivanam with two other monks, where he immersed himself once again in the study of Indian thought, attempting to relate it to Christian theology. He went on pilgrimage and studied Hinduism with Raimundo Panikkar. Under Father Bede's guidance, Shantivanam became a centre of contemplative life, of enculturation, and of interreligious dialogue. For twenty-five years, he lived there promoting interreligious understanding and harmony between Christianity and Hinduism. Bede Griffiths had a series of strokes in January 1993 and finally passed away on May 13, in his hut at Shantivanam, surrounded with much tender loving care.

Unlike Monchanin and Panikkar, Bede did not go to India to achieve an intellectual (remake Catholic theology) or an anthropological target

(look back to one's roots), but – similarly to Abhishiktānanda – rather for a spiritual one (search of God); more precisely “to discover the other half of my soul.”⁸⁵ Like many other Western spiritual seekers in the Fifties and Sixties, he moved to the East for the sake of a more complete life. Ever since his first encounter with India, especially during his visit to the cave of Elephanta outside Bombay, he had “been trying to relate my Christian faith to this mystery, which is present in India, in all the religions of India.”⁸⁶

While Father Bede's primary commitment was to the person of Jesus Christ, and the sense of belonging was grounded in Christianity, he believed that a Christian can be nourished by the deepest truths of Christianity and at the same time be open to some of the deepest insights of Hinduism. While he enjoyed theoretical forms of dialogue, he was more attracted by practical experiences of interfaith dialogue, although still remaining within the sphere of compatible or complementary beliefs and practices. Less audacious than Abhishiktānanda, he nevertheless agreed that Hindu-Christian dialogue must go beyond the theological exchange of concepts and beyond the efforts at inculturating the Christian faith in the Hindu philosophical categories and religious traditions.⁸⁷ He identified with some aspects of the Hindu rituals and patterns but without fundamentally challenging his own commitment to Christianity; he became a Christian influenced by Hinduism even though he had not embraced the entirety of Hinduism. He considered Hindu hermeneutical frameworks as salutary patterns, useful intellectual tools for enlarging the understanding of Christianity, and indeed for allowing it to develop its true universality.⁸⁸ However, Christianity provided him the norm or criterion through which elements from Hinduism may be recognised as true or valuable. He devoted the last part of his life to facilitating a dialogue between these two religious traditions.

In 1955, he wrote to a friend that in India he was drawn by the need to discover the dimension in his life that he felt was lacking in the Western world and in the Western Church. Here is how Bruno Barnhart, OSB Cam, distilled the most essential points of Bede's intellectual journey:

Bede Griffiths found the modern West totally dominated by a “scientific” way of knowing, having forgotten – or traded off – “wisdom”, the sapiential way of knowing. He understood “science” as an objective, impersonal, rational, dualistic, non-participative, analytical way of knowing: “knowing from outside.” [...] Wisdom, in contrast, he knew as an intuitive, participative (thus both objective and subjective), personal, holistic awareness and knowledge, a “knowing from inside.” [...] In his profound revulsion at this abandonment of wisdom for science began what would become the quest of

his life. This aversion to the science of the modern West, however, was part of a wider sense of disillusionment with western civilization that he and his companions shared with their generation – a generation that had come of age immediately after the First World War.⁸⁹

In his view, Asia held out the hope of balancing a “rational” West by the “intuitive” East. He believed that the Asian religions could help Christians. “I wanted to experience in my life,” he said, “the marriage of these two dimensions of human existence, the rational and intuitive, the conscious and unconscious, the masculine and feminine.” Bede was a seeker of unity. His life’s work was that of calling us to see the necessity of the marriage of East and West.⁹⁰

Bede articulated a complex intellectual strategy to recover and preserve the Christian wisdom tradition – the Alexandrian synthesis of the wisdom of the Old and New Testaments with Greek philosophy, secular literature, and science, in the early Christian centuries, which he came to appreciate from his readings of the Bible and through the Neo-Thomist movement.⁹¹ Not surprisingly, at Shantivanam, Father Bede gave daily teachings on the Vedas, homilies at Eucharist and Vespers, throwing shafts of penetrating light into the Christian mystery. He pointed out that “We seek to express our Christian faith in the language of the Vedanta as the Greek Fathers expressed it in the language of Plato and Aristotle.”⁹²

Bede assumed a vision of reality that transcends the cultural limitations of the great religions that he saw had become “fossilised” and found wisdom, a philosophy that can reconcile differences and reveal the unity underlying all their diversities. The need is to reclaim the “perennial philosophy”, the eternal wisdom in each religion. In his Introduction to *Essential Writings*, Thomas Matus addresses how Bede, through his spiritual pilgrimage, came to a cosmic vision: a universal community capable of embodying universal wisdom and uniting all humanity in one body, one living whole in which “Fullness”, the whole of the Godhead dwells. At the centre of all religion is the holy place where encounter with the divine takes place.⁹³ Not coincidentally, the last book that Bede wrote was published under the title *Universal Wisdom*, a selection of texts from the world’s religions. In this book, Bede asserts that one of the urgent needs of human life today is “to transcend the cultural limitations of the great religions and find wisdom, a philosophy which can reconcile their differences and reveal the unity which underlies their diversity.”⁹⁴

While Bede was hostile to modern science in adolescence, he later reconciled a holistic and ecological vision of science. He originally adopted

a conception of science that is related to the mechanistic conception of Newton and Descartes. Descartes assumed the separation between mind and reason-driven mental processes, on one side, and matter and mechanical laws-driven physical processes, on the other. While the material world was governed by Newton's laws of motion of matter, mind was operated through its own internal laws of reason. Separate from the world, mind transcends the material world and rules it from outside. Here is how Bede summed up the situation:

The concept of the world as a machine obeying mathematical laws to be controlled by human beings, which we owe to Descartes and Newton, is modelled on the understanding of the creator God who controls the world from above.⁹⁵

As a result of the separation of reason and the material world, Western scientific thought is largely responsible for the loss of the sense of the sacred. Bede pointed out that we have desacralised nature and lost the sense of the supernatural.⁹⁶ However, Bede later reconciled with science in the Seventies, when he was influenced by the work of a new generation of theoretical scientists – Rupert Sheldrake (who wrote much of his first book, *A New Science of Life*, while living at Shantivanam), Fritjof Capra (*The Tao of Physics, The Turning Point*), David Bohm and Ken Wilber – who proposed a vision of nature as an organic system. Working off the outputs of these thinkers, Bede elaborated *A New Vision of Reality*, a great synthesis on the boundary of “new science” and ancient wisdom in which he emphasised the interconnectedness of all parts (rather than a mechanical assembly of individual elements).

Conclusion

Whatever their agenda, the members of this group of Catholic clergymen we have considered in this article found it impossible to accomplish it in the West. In different ways and with different sensibilities, they felt uneasy in the Western context and saw relocation in India as a practical way to revitalise their spiritual and intellectual dimensions. Although Monchanin was contiguous – also geographically – to the *nouvelle theologie* and its leaders, he preferred to rethink Catholic theology from the East. Le Saux was already a monk and pursuing a life of prayer and silence but needed to move to India to experience a more intimate connection with the divine.

Panikkar went to India to reconnect with his roots. He experienced a sense of liberation from traditionalism and religious exclusivism, he broke with the past, and he embraced pluralism as a form of life. Finally, Griffith was struggling with a sense of wanting and was looking for the other half of his soul, and so he relocated to India to find unity.

In the practical life and intellectual experience of the members of this group of Catholic clergymen, it is possible to recognise a double movement. On one hand, the role of the missionary is not to proselytise but to immerse oneself in India in order to help Hindu tradition rethink itself in a Christian way. Rather than carrying with it European forms, the Church had to take on new forms in other cultures (“inculturation”). The challenge of the Church in India, therefore, was to allow pure Indian Christian forms where they were found and to recognise their existence. This form of interfaith dialogue produced remarkable, though limited, results, notably the establishment of Shantivanam (Monchanin, Le Saux, and Griffith), and the stellar intellectual achievements (Panikkar). He was the only pioneer in this group who produced breakthrough contributions in the Hindu-Christian dialogue that are recognised not only on the Christian side but also on the Hindu one.

Much more fruitful was the other movement, the encounter between “what is deepest in Christianity” and “what is deepest in India”, which might help Christian tradition to be enlarged and enriched through its reformulation of Hindu categories of interpretation (“interreligious dialogue”).⁹⁷ In other words, the dialogue operated as a feedback loop, and became instrumental to rethinking Catholic consciousness. This was the case with Griffith, who was able to enlarge his consciousness to embrace Eastern wisdom. Le Saux relativised the truths he had learnt in the West while Panikkar moved even further, and relativised the assumptions of any system of thought, in order to promote practical interfaith dialogue. Also, Monchanin engaged in the project to rethink Catholic consciousness, but stepped back when it became a matter of (intellectual) life or death.

They moved to India because they felt uneasy in the Western Church, but also to escape from modernity. As missionaries, they established an interfaith dialogue with Hinduism in India, simultaneously rethinking Christian consciousness from India, with the latter mostly as a personal attempt to appeal to the East as a gateway and as an escape from the influence of modernity. In the process, they realised that whatever they were into, they could not really escape the influence of modernity. In fact, modernity was not only the main obstacle in their project to establish a fruitful and deep interfaith dialogue with Hinduism (Panikkar) but also to reshape Catholic theology (Monchanin). The latter failed as he was unable to move

out of his Western intellectual comfort zone; the former – who stands in a category on his own, thanks to the enormous contribution to the theology or religions, interfaith dialogue, Christian theology, and so on – was much more successful, and able to overcome the more complex intellectual constraints. The aim of Panikkar was ambitious, merely to open new paths in Asia to the Western Church, a Church still rooted in her Western roots. In this regard, Panikkar came to reverse the pillar of modernity, referring to reason as the ultimate foundation of reality, eventually suggesting that it is a myth instead. Griffith pursued a different strategy, that is, to balance the effect and legacy of modernity, especially the scientific epistemology and worldview. With an Eastern flavour, he particularly embraced an intuitive, participative awareness. Finally, Le Saux adopted a practical approach, relativised his background, and left the intellectual issues behind.

In conclusion, although they did not pursue the same agenda, these clergymen's lives intersected in a way that makes considering them individually impossible. The experience of one is inexplicable if disconnected from that of the others. They moved to India in different periods and had different experiences, and yet they found common ground in a simple project on which they all agreed: reversing the Enlightenment. They thought that the time had come in the West for a derationalisation of the worldviews and its re-enchantment; although they realised that they might escape from modernity they would still have to deal with modernity. In fact, the interfaith dialogue they embraced was a continuation of “the conversation of the West,” and ultimately a byproduct of modernity. Continuing the conversation of the West, therefore, is continuing the conversation of modernity itself.⁹⁸

Notes

1. The author thanks the editorial staff of *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* for providing help and guidelines, and two anonymous reviewers for their gracious and precious comments.
2. This article is about a Western Catholic academic interpreting fellow Western Catholics who, in turn, interpret Indian traditions for the sake of their own salvation. It is an article written from the author's perspective and from the standpoint of the present time, rather than from the perspective of those who were direct participants in the event, as it was perceived at the time of its occurrence. This distinction is particularly important in the case of this article, in which not one, but two hermeneutical strategies are at work. The first one is about a Western Catholic academic interpreting the life and intellectual contribution of a group of Western Catholic intellectuals and practitioners in India in the light of a Western interpretation of modernity. The second hermeneutical strategy is about this group using

Western Christian intellectual tools to interpret Hindu sacred texts and traditions. It is possible that the author's interpretation of this group may or may not be based on his presuppositions. In order to reduce the risk, this article does *not* assume that the author of the article may have a fuller knowledge than the practitioners; more specifically, that they were unaware of their own dissatisfaction with modernity.

3. By "consciousness" I mean "self-awareness".
4. Jules Monchanin, *La Quête de l'Absolu, Indian Culture and the Fullness of Christ* (Madras: The Catholic Center, 1956), quoted in Henri de Lubac, *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 573.
5. Other Christian pioneers of double religious belonging are individuals such as: German-Japanese Jesuit, Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle (1898-1990), and American Cistercian, Thomas Merton (1915-1968) – Zen Buddhism; and Sri Lankan Oblate, Michael Rodrigo (1927-1987), Spanish-Indian priest, Raimond Panikkar (1918-2011), and Sri Lankan Jesuit, Aloysius Pieris (1934-) – Theravada Buddhism. Double religious belonging is the term that is used when people find that they can be genuinely nourished by more than one religious tradition, by more than their home tradition or their native tradition. Usually it implies "the crossing-over of traditions in a manner that does not abandon one's primal tradition, but deepens and extends it" (Quoted in: Gerard Hall SM (Society of Mary), "Multi-Faith Dialogue in Conversation with Raimon Panikkar," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 2 (2004): 1-12, 2). I addressed the topic in "New Models of Being Between Two Religions. Double Religious Belonging From the Story of a Few European Catholic Clergymen in India," a paper prepared for the 4th International Symposium: Otherness, Agency and Belonging, International Network for Alternative Academia, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, November 2012.
6. A useful introduction to the history of Christians in India is Leonard Fernando SJ, and George Gispert-Sauch SJ, *Christianity in India: Two Thousand Years of Faith* (New Delhi: Viking, 2004).
7. A seminal exception is Edward T. Ulrich, "Convergences and Divergences: The Lives of Swami Abhishiktānanda and Raimundo Panikkar," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 24 (2011): 36-45.
8. Klaus Klostermaier, "The Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue", in *Hindu Christian Dialogue*, ed. Harold Coward (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 265.
9. Enrique Dussel, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism," in *Nepantla. Views from South*, transl. Javier Krauel and Virginia C. Tuma, 1 (2000): 465-478.
10. Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith. The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 106.
11. Monchanin studied Hinduism and learnt Sanskrit when he was in France, in the 1930s. Le Saux and Griffith clearly became well versed with some Hindu traditions, especially Sankara, an Indian philosopher from Kaladi who elaborated the doctrine of *advaita*. Panikkar not only published extensively in interfaith dialogue and comparative religion, but was also the editor of *The Vedic Experience: Mantramañjari: An Anthology Of The Vedas For Modern Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).
12. For a history of Christian theology in India, the best introduction is probably Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, second edition, 1975, reprinted 2009). A short introduction to the present state of Indian Christian theology is Michael Amaladoss SJ, "New Trends in India Theology," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 76 (2012): 7-21.
13. George Gispert-Sauch SJ, "The Hindu-Christian Dialogue. A Historical Perspective," in *Windows on Dialogue*, ed. Ambrogio Bongiovanni, Leonard Fernando SJ et al. (Delhi: ISPCK, 2012), 66-82, 70.
14. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 144-6, 165-6, 186-7.

15. This is as far as the conscious engagement of these pioneers with colonial and post-colonial ideas is concerned. The unconscious engagement is a matter that is open for discussion. The eventual perceived superiority of Christianity (again, Monchanin) over Hinduism was based on their infallible faith in the Greek-Hebrew junction of the early Church, although the traditional notion of modernity cast as a superior, reason-based civilisation, which produces what Max Weber famously called the "disenchantment of the world", and makes modern rationality universal as well as the improvement of the most barbaric, primitive, coarse people, a moral obligation, might have played a minor role. See Dussel, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism," 465-478.
16. Although I am well aware of the misuse of "West" and "East," I have nevertheless chosen to use them as cultural/geographical signposts.
17. A.N. Williams, "The Future of the Past: The Contemporary Significance of the Nouvelle Théologie," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005): 347-361.
18. C.F. von Weizsacker, *Der Garten des Menschlichen. Beiträge zur geschichtlichen Anthropologie* (Hanser: Munich, 1977) 434, as quoted in Michael von Bruck, *The Unity of Reality. God, God-Experience, and Meditation in the Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle, 1986) 1.
19. Monchanin pointed out that "If you look at the development of a vocation, you find its roots in the earliest years of childhood [...] so there was always within me this attraction towards India [...] At first it was primarily intellectual [...] The working of a person's destiny is always a great mystery [...] There are incarnate graces which make you go from the intellectual level to the vital level." Quoted in Carrie Lock, "The Good Friday of the Intellect," a condensed version of talk delivered at Shantivanam in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Jules Monchanin, Shantivanam Ashram, India, 10 October 2007, 4.
20. Ibidem.
21. Ibidem.
22. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 24.
23. Quoted in Carrie Lock, "The Good Friday of the Intellect," 4
24. Quoted in Carrie Lock, "The Good Friday of the Intellect," 5.
25. Brian Daley, "The Nouvelle Théologie and the Patristic Revival: Sources, Symbols and the Science of Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005): 362-382.
26. Ibidem.
27. Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 145.
28. Williams, "The Future of the Past", 351.
29. His closest associate, Henri Le Saux, said of him: "He was one of the most brilliant intellects among the French clergy, a remarkable conversationalist, at home on every subject, a brilliant lecturer and a theologian who opened before his hearers marvellous and ever new horizons.", quoted in Emmanuel Vattakuzhy, *Indian Christian Sannyasa and Swami Abhishiktānanda* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 1981), 67.
30. Monchanin described his farewell meeting with de Lubac, just before his leaving to India (April-May 1939) in a letter to Duperray: "J'ai revu le P. de L [...] , seul, longuement. Il m'a redit toute son amitié, étant celui qu'il cherchait, réalisant l'intuition qu'il avait eue, dès séminaire: repenser tout à la lumière de la théologie et celle-ci par la mystique, la dégageant de tout l'accessoire et retrouvant, par la seule spiritualité, tout l'essentiel [...] Il a surtout aimé mes notes sur l'amour et celles sur l'Inde. Il pense que c'est en me heurtant à l'Inde que je pourrai refaire la théologie, beaucoup mieux qu'en creusant les problèmes théologiques pour eux-mêmes."

- Jules Monchanin, *Ecrits Spirituels*, ed. Edouard Duperray (Paris: Editions Le Centurion, 1965), 21-2. Translation is my own.
31. Jules Monchanin and Henri le Saux, *A Benedictine Ashram* (Douglas: Times Press Limited, 1964) 15.
 32. For the quotation “to rethink” etc. see, for example, the letter to his mother, 8 January 1940: “il faut repenser l’Inde en fonction du christianisme et le christianisme en fonction de l’Inde” and then added “comme jadis cela fut fait en Grèce.” Jules Monchanin, *Lettres à Ma Mère, 1913-1957* (Paris: Cerf, 1989) 329. Also, the letter to his mother, 13 August 1949: “repenser l’Inde en chrétien et le christianisme en Indien” adding “tel est notre désir ardent – telle, notre vocation.” Ibidem, 413. See also note 69. For the quotation from *An Indian Benedictine Ashram*, see Jules Monchanin and Henri le Saux, *An Indian Benedictine Ashram* (Saccidanda Ashram: Tiruchirapalli, India, 1951) 24-5.
 33. Joseph G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute: The Life and Work of Jules Monchanin* (Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo, 1977) 25.
 34. Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology*, 114.
 35. Harold Coward, review of Jules Monchanin, *Pioneer in Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, by Sten Rodhe, *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 7 (1994): 1-3, 2.
 36. Here is how Le Saux articulated the Christian ashram’s agenda: “Our goal: to form the first nucleus of a monastery (or rather a laura, a grouping of neighboring anchorites like the ancient laura of Saint Sabas in Palestine) which buttresses the Rule of Saint Benedict – a primitive, sober, discrete rule. Only one purpose: to seek God. And the monastery will be Indian style. We would like to crystallize and transubstantiate the search of the Hindu *sannyasi*. Advaita and the praise of the Trinity are our only aim. This means we must grasp the authentic Hindu search for God in order to Christianize it, starting with ourselves first of all, from within.” Quoted in Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 73.
 37. “Why we are missionaries? For Christ, to complete Christ, so that his Incarnation may be total, so that Christ may one day deliver himself in his totality to the Father.” Quoted in: Jules Monchanin, *Mystique de l’Inde, Mystère Chrétien: Ecrits et Inédits*, ed. Suzanne Siauve (Paris: Fayard, 1974) 170. Translation is my own.
 38. In general, the missionary enterprise of Monchanin and the other Catholic priests marked the shift from so-called religious “exclusivism” – a missionary work that focuses on converting and teaching others – to “inclusivism” – a missionary work that rather respects integrity and focuses on dialogue and example – in the theology of religions.
 39. Monchanin and le Saux, *A Benedictine Ashram*, 16. As for the “Irenean strategy” I mean an adamant defence of the core doctrine of the Church that is combined with a will for mediation when it comes to differences in external factors.
 40. In a letter to Abbé Edouard Duperray in 1955, Monchanin confessed that “Never I felt myself intellectually more *Christian* and also, I must say, more *Greek*.” He also pointed out that “Our task [...] is the same of the Greek fathers: to accept that which is compatible, to reject that which is incompatible with Christianity. And the rest is vertigo and betrayal.” Quoted in Sten Rodhe, *Jules Monchanin, Pioneer in Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1993) 47.
 41. Quoted in Rodhe, *Jules Monchanin*, 47.
 42. *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life Told through His Letters*, 2nd edition, ed. James Stuart (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989), 17.6.54.
 43. Rodhe, *Jules Monchanin*, 71.
 44. Rodhe, *Jules Monchanin*, 43.
 45. Bede Griffiths described Monchanin as “dearly loved the people, and he was a man of immense humility. He was one of the most holy men I’d ever met, actually.” Source: Unknown producer, “Exploring the Christian-Hindu Dialogue: A Visit with Bede Griffiths”,

- video filmed Sept. 1992, www.innerexplorations.com/catew/5.htm, accessed October 24, 2012.
46. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 97 and 77-8.
 47. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 126.
 48. He was only eighteen years old when he wrote to the Novice Master of the Abbey of Saint Anne de Kergonan that "I have a very ambitious spirit [...] when it is a matter of seeking God [...] I feel an irresistible call." Quotation in James Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His Life Told through His Letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989) 4.12.1928, 2-3.
 49. Swami Abhishiktānanda spent several weeks and months in the caves of Arunachala between 1950 and 1955 in deep meditation. Swami Abhishiktānanda, *Souvenirs d'Arunachala: Recit d'un Ermite Chretien en Terre Hindoue* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1980), English translation: *The Secret of Arunachala: A Christian Hermit on Shiva's Holy Mountain* (ISPCK, Delhi, India. 1979).
 50. As Fr Vattakuzhy points out: "The center of Abhishiktānanda's life was his monastic consecration which he was experientially and existentially committed." See: Emmanuel Vattakuzhy, *Indian Christian Samnyāsa and Swami Abhishiktānanda* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981) 201.
 51. Abhishiktānanda's great friend, Raimond Panikkar, pointed out that Abhishiktānanda did not articulate theories. Raimundo Panikkar, "Letter to Abhishiktānanda on Eastern-Western Monasticism," *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 3 (1982): 427-51.
 52. Abhishiktānanda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktānanda (Dom H. Le Saux)*, ed. Raimond Panikkar, transl. David Fleming and James Stuart (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998 [orig.: *La montée au fond du coeur* (Paris: OEIL, 1986)]), 12.1.56, 138.
 53. From his journal: "Once you have recognised the fundamental truth of the religious myth and of the multiple forms it has taken, you accept the symbolic truth of every formulation, every rite, etc., but you obstinately refuse to give them an absolute value." Abhishiktānanda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, 2.2.73, 369.
 54. Abhishiktānanda, *The Secret of Arunachala* (ISPCK, New Delhi, 1978), 47.
 55. Abhishiktānanda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, 30.4.1973, 205.
 56. This sentence is based on Judson B. Trapnell, "Panikkar, Abhishiktānanda, and the Distinction between Relativism and Relativity in Interreligious Discourse," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41, (2004), 431-453.
 57. James Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His Life Told through His Letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989), 318.
 58. Abhishiktānanda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, 30.4.1973, 205.
 59. Abhishiktānanda, *The Further Shore* (ISPCK: New Delhi, 1975), 27.
 60. Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktānanda*, 318 and letter 23.7.71, 331.
 61. Sonia Calza, *La Contemplazione. Via Privilegiata al Dialogo Cristiano-induista* (Milano: Paoline, 2001), 184.
 62. At least, according to Joseph Prabhu, who is a professor of philosophy and comparative religion at California State University, Los Angeles, and who has published extensively on Panikkar.
 63. Catherine Cornille, "Double Religious Belonging: Aspects and Questions," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003): 43-49, 47.
 64. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1978) 2.
 65. Peter C. Phan, "Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 506.
 66. Raimond Panikkar, *Mito, Fede ed Ermeneutica. Il Triplice Velo della Realtà* (Jaca Book: Milano, 2000), 12.

67. Raimond Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) 12.
68. Here we follow the interpretation of Panikkar's strategy as suggested by Bettina Baumer, "Panikkar's Hermeneutic of Myth," in *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*, ed. Joseph Prabhu (Orbis Books, New York, 1996) 165-176.
69. Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, 4.
70. Baumer, "Panikkar's Hermeneutic of Myth," 165.
71. Raimon Panikkar, "On Christian Identity. Who is a Christian," in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), 121-144, 122.
72. Panikkar, "On Christian Identity. Who is a Christian," 122. Religious pluralism is often used as a synonym for interfaith dialogue.
73. Raimon Panikkar, "The Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory of Religion of a Cosmic Confidence in Reality?" in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. L. Swidler (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987) 125.
74. The expression "to deny the denial" comes from: Dussel, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism," 473.
75. Baumer, "Panikkar's Hermeneutic of Myth," 166.
76. Raimundo Panikkar, "Viewpoints: The Ongoing Dialogue," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 2 (1999): 10-11.
77. Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, 4-5.
78. Ibidem.
79. Baumer, "Panikkar's Hermeneutic of Myth," 173.
80. Raimundo Panikkar, "Foreword: The Ongoing Dialogue," in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. Harold Cowar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), ix-xviii, xiii.
81. Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, 345.
82. Ibidem.
83. Ibidem.
84. Judson B. Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 223.
85. At the time, he wrote to a friend: "I am going to discover the other half of my soul." in *The Other Half of my Soul. Bede Griffiths and the Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, ed. B. Bruteau (Wheaton (IL): Quest Book, 1996) 245.
86. Bede Griffiths OSB, "Christianity in the Light of the East. The Hibbert Lecture," *The Bulletin of the North American MID* 36 (1989), <http://monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=83>, accessed October 24, 2012.
87. The dialogue between Christianity and local culture is usually called "inculturation." Historically, the process of inculturation – that is, a particular form of Christianity encounters a particular group of people, assumes their language and culture as its modes of self-realisation and expression, transforming, and when necessary, correcting them, with Christian beliefs and values, and at the same time is, in turn, enriched by them – has been taking place in different ways ever since Christianity moved out of its Jewish matrix and into the Hellenistic, Roman, and Germanic worlds. Today, this process of inculturation is extended to African and Asian worlds. In this sense, one may and must be both Christian and Italian or whatever cultural group one belongs to. In other words, a person need not and must not renounce his or her cultural identity and traditions upon becoming a Christian. The neologism "inculturation" dates from the early Sixties and became prominent in missiological thinking some ten years after the Vatican Council. For a brief overview of the development of the term, see Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York:

- Paulist, 1990). For a better understanding of what is beyond inculturation, see Michael Amaladoss SJ, *Beyond Inculturation. Can the Many be One* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998).
88. According to Catherine Cornille, “a rough-and-ready axiom” in matters of religious belonging can be formulated as follows: “[T]he more encompassing a religion’s claim to efficacy and truth, the more problematic the possibility of multiple religious belonging. Conversely, it thus seems that the idea of belonging to more than one religion can be tolerated only when and where a religion has accepted the complementarity of religions.” Catherine Cornille, “Introduction: The Dynamics of Multiple Belonging,” in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), 2.
89. Bruno Barnhart OSB Cam, *Bede Griffiths and the Future of Wisdom*, www.bede.griffiths.com/wisdom-christianity/bede-griffiths-and-the-future-of-wisdom.html, accessed October 24, 2012.
90. Sr. Maurus Allen OSB, review of *Bede Griffiths: Essential Writings*, by Thomas Matus, OSB Cam, *Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique | Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin* 74 (2005), <http://monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=466>, accessed October 24, 2012.
91. “The most potent influence in the revival of the Christian wisdom tradition [in the early XX century], however, was the Neo-Thomist movement”. Gerard McCool, “The Christian Wisdom Tradition and Enlightenment Reason,” in *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Issues and Perspectives*, ed. Anthony J. Cernera and Oliver J. Morgan (Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2000), 75-102.
92. He pointed out “And then after our meditation in the morning we go for prayer and the Mass every day, and the prayer is a very Indian prayer. We use Sanskrit chanting, we read different Scriptures, the Veda, Upanishad, the Buddha, and so on, and then we read the Bible and the Psalms, and we have what we call *bajan*, very popular chants which you repeat, you know, and the people all pick it up, so it’s a very Indian prayer, but it’s basically a Christian prayer, and then we celebrate the Mass in what we call the Indian rite.” See “Exploring the Christian-Hindu Dialogue”.
93. Bede Griffiths, *Essential Writings*, Thomas Matus OSB Cam (New York: Orbis, 2004), chapters 4 and 5.
94. Br. Harold Thibodeau, the Abbey of Gethsemani, “Four Days in Saccidananda. The Christian Ashram of Fr. Bede Griffiths (1906-1993),” *Monastic Dialogue* 67 (2001), www.monasticdialog.com/bulletins/67/saccidananda.htm, accessed October 24, 2012.
95. Bede Griffiths OSB, “*Christianity in the Light of the East*”.
96. *Ibidem*.
97. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 2. According to the Catholic Magisterium, the interreligious dialogue requires a fourfold dialogue of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience. A member of a religion engages not only in theological discussion with the followers of other religions but also in sharing life with them in an open and neighbourly spirit, collaborating with them in works for integral development and liberation, and participating in religious experiences of prayer and contemplation. See: “The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples,” *Dialogue and Proclamation* 42 (1991), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html, accessed October 24, 2012. The English text is available in *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation*, ed. William Burrows (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).
98. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 394.

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Campsites as Utopias?

*A Socio-Spatial Reading of the Post-War Holiday Camp in Belgium,
1950s to 1970s*

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Abstract

This paper contrasts the objectives that underlie the development of government-funded holiday camps for family vacations in Belgium with the socio-spatial practices of their initial users. Drawing on oral history, archival material, photographs and site plans, we argue that holidaymakers did not just experience the holiday camp as an environment where they could reconnect with their family and pursue authentic experiences in close contact with nature – as their initiators had intended – but that they also embraced these sites as places where they could recreate a romanticised version of “traditional” community life and experiment with facets of a middle-class, modern suburban ideal. To substantiate our narrative, we focus on two holiday camps in the Campine Region: *Zilvermeer* and *Hengelhof*.

Keywords: leisure, holiday, Belgium, experience, heterotopia, middle class

Introduction

“It is unacceptable that the people of our class, the largest class in the country, toil their entire lives without being entitled to even one day of holiday.”¹ With these memorable words Edouard De Vlaemynek, representative of the Belgian socialist labour union, voiced the demand for paid holiday in 1936. The 1930s were a period of “deep and profound political crisis throughout the Western democracies”.² Shortly after, France became immersed in strikes in May 1936, Belgium followed. The demands were simple: increased wages,