Foreword

This book is a remarkable study bringing together the mystical traditions of Christianity and Hinduism. More precisely it explores the tradition of Catholic mysticism, pre-eminently the Carmelite mysticism of Saint Teresa of Jesus (or: of Avila) and Saint John of the Cross, presenting them as the culmination of the mystical tradition of the patristic period, as it was built on in the Latin Middle Ages, especially in the Cistercian of Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry. We are then introduced to the interpretation of the Indian Vedas, associated with the name of the eighth-century scholar and mystic, Śaṅkara: an interpretation known as *Advaita Vedānta*, a rigorously non-dual interpretation of the Absolute. It is the work of a scholar, Ysabel de Andia, a French scholar who abandoned her early success as a philosopher, a student of Husserl and Heidegger (and who had attended Heidegger's last seminars), to make a fresh beginning as a patristic scholar, with a thesis on Irenaeus of Lyon, written in Rome under the supervision of Antonio Orbe. She then returned to Paris, specialising now in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonic tradition, writing her *doctorat d'état* on *henosis*, union with God, in Dionysius, and rising to the very peak of her profession as *directeur* of one of the research teams (*équipes*) devoted to the philosophy of classical and late antiquity in the Centre national de la recherche scientifique.

Ysabel de Andia's research, though rigorously academic, was never merely academic: a devout Catholic, she was one of the first to take vows as a consecrated virgin, a form of the religious life for those living in the world, introduced by the Second Vatican Council. She has always given generously of her learning, regularly giving lecture courses to gatherings of monks and nuns, and this book grew out of one such

gathering, in Benares, to a group of priests belonging to the Missions étrangères de Paris, working in India. This gave her the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the engagement between Christian and Hindu mysticism, in which she returned to two French priests – one a Benedictine monk, Henri le Saux, and the other a French Jesuit, Jules Monchanin – both of whom adopted the life of a *sannyasin*, an ascetic, and lived in an Indian-style monastic community, or ashram. Henri le Saux, under his Indian name, Abhishiktananda, became relatively well known in the English-speaking world, owing to several of his works being translated into English; Jules Monchanin remains less accessible to the English. It is Monchanin whom de Andia takes as her guide, and the English translation of her book will introduce him to the English-speaking world.

Advaita Vedānta is a rigorous application of the principle of non-duality. Anything partaking of the many, even if only the dual or double, cannot be ultimate, for its multiplicity, or even duality, begs explanation in terms of something more ultimate in which duality is transcended. It is common for adherents of *Advaita* to see the Christian confession of God as one and three as evidence of a failure to attain the absolute or ultimate. Given this, it is at first surprising that for Monchanin, as de Andia explains, it is *precisely* the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that provides an adequate response to the Advaitist advocacy of the One – the One-without-Second (see Chapter 7): as de Andia put it, Jules Monchanin's deep intuition 'is that only the Trinitarian revelation of the One-Trinity can provide an answer to the One of the *Advaita*. This conversion of India to Christianity will not take place without "a crucifying dark night of the soul" leading through the Spirit and Christ towards the Father'. De Andia lays the ground for discussing this intuition by a careful exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity as we find it in the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil the Great; his younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa; and his friend, Gregory of Nazianzus. Her exposition is learned and careful, but it seems to me that it misses a small point that is directly relevant to Monchanin's intuition about the Trinity. At one point in the third theological homily, Gregory the Theologian quotes a remark about how God is to be seen as one and three, monad and triad: 'Therefore the monad, from the beginning moved towards the dyad, comes to rest with the triad' (Or. 29, 2). The remark is evidently from some – still unknown – pagan philosopher, for he continues: 'And this is for us [that is, not for 'them'] Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. Elsewhere,

in the third homily on peace, he has a similar passage: 'the monad, moved out of its richness, transcends the dyad – for it surpasses matter and form, the constituents of bodies – and is defined as triad, because of its perfection' (Or. 23, 8). In both cases the dyad is transcended, or bypassed, and we are left with *monad and triad* – an expression that Gregory is not the first to use of the Christian Godhead, nor the last. The 'One-without-Second' – the conviction of *Advaita* – and the 'monad and triad' without the dyad: maybe this underlies Monchanin's deep intuition. Perhaps de Andia was not drawn to this, because in her presentation she is less interested in what one might call the philosophical underpinning, and more with what she draws from Jules Monchanin's Jesuit friend and advocate, Henri de Lubac – namely, de Lubac's conviction that mysticism means 'living the mystery': it is the 'crucifying dark night of the soul', entailed for India, that draws her attention.

So, this is not exactly a study in 'comparative mysticism' – Christian and Hindu – conducted in an 'academic' way from some standpoint removed from commitment to either tradition. It is rather an engagement with Hindu mysticism, by a scholar with a deep knowledge of the philosophy and theology of the patristic period, and an abundant knowledge of later Christian traditions, through the medieval period up to the high point of the Western Catholic mystical tradition, namely the experiential mystical theology of the sixteenth-century Carmelite saints, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross (especially the latter). It is the Hindu tradition of *Advaita Vedānta*, with which she engages: a mystical tradition often regarded, not least by its adherents, as fundamentally opposed to Christianity, with its doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, in which 'one of the Trinity' lives and dies as a human being. It is an honest and serious attempt to engage with the doctrines of *Advaita Vedānta* from the perspective of Catholic mysticism, without fudging the problems involved, but taking seriously Advaitist teaching without compromising a thoroughly Catholic commitment. Furthermore, it is not limited to 'mysticism', for she has a chapter on sacrifice, relating the Christian Eucharistic sacrifice to the place of sacrifice in ancient India, still a feature of Hindu religious practice. Furthermore, this is no simply intellectual enterprise, but takes off from the remarkable attempt to live out the mystery of Christ in recognisably Indian forms, in a Christian ashram, by the French priests already mentioned, Henri le Saux and Jules Monchanin. It is rooted in the Christian experience

of the life of prayer, reaching out to the recognised Indian form of the life of an ascetic, a renunciant, that is, a *sannyasin*.

Towards the end of the book, there appears a note of melancholy, in that the engagement with *Advaita Vedānta* from the point of view of an uncompromising commitment to the Christian life of prayer, grounded in the Trinity and the Incarnation, seems less of a reality than it did fifty or a hundred years ago – as if an opportunity has been let slip, and no longer engages the attention of Christians – and this despite the opening up of Catholic Christianity to other traditions – both other Christian traditions, not least Orthodoxy (which is glimpsed, if not developed, in this book), and non-Christian traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam – as a result of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council. It is, however, no more than a note of melancholy, for Ysabel de Andia retains the hope that the engagement found in the decades leading up to the Vatican Council, in the thought of such as Jacques Maritain and Henri de Lubac, as well as in the lives of such as le Saux and Monchanin, is still there to stimulate thought and prayer in our more jaded times: a seed that may well germinate in the times like ours, when the religions of the East (including Eastern Orthodoxy) are no longer remote, if fascinating, as part of the 'Orient', but impinge more insistently on those who think of themselves as Westerners.

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