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Totally Commitment to God and Fellow Human Beings: The Life and Message of Prof John Vattanky SJ

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Abstract: This article is an overview of the contribution of Prof John Vattanky, SJ, a pioneer in Indian philosophy. A logician and grammarian, Prof Vattanky has been rooted in his faith and tradition. He was a world authority on Navya-nyaya philosophy of Gangesa. The author also looks into his three fold passions in terms of Indian philosophy, logic and love and oriental traditions.

Keywords: Prof John Vattanky, Navya-nyaya, Gangesa, Logic and Love

With the passing away of Prof Dr John Vattanky, SJ, on Feb 22, 2012, the Church and the nation has lost an erudite scholar, a passionate lover and a visionary thinker. His critical or logical mind, coupled with his passionate heart, contributed significantly to a

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better understanding of the classical Nyaya and Navya-Nyaya schools making them relevant for our times! As a committed and devoted Catholic, he was open to the rich philosophical traditions of India. He interpreted this tradition, deepened it and made it available to contemporary scholars, both Indian and non-Indian, Hindu and non-Hindu.

Brief Biographical Sketch

Fr. John Vattanky was born on 03 July 1931 at Palackattumala in the Kottayam district of Kerala. His parents were Ulahannan and Mariam, and his siblings were Rose, Mariam, Anna, Joseph, Kuriakose and Thomas, none of whom are alive today. After his preliminary studies at Papal Seminary, Kandy, John joined the Jesuit Novitiate at Kozhikode on 27 November 1950 and took his first vows on 03 December 1952. He did his Jesuit Juniorate also in Christ Hall, Kozhikode, before proceeding for his philosophy studies at Sacred Heart College, Shembaganur (1954-1957). After completing his graduate studies at the University College, Trivandrum (1957-1959), he completed his theology at St Mary's College, Kurseong (1960-1964). He was ordained a priest on March 19, 1963 at Kurseong, West Bengal. After a period of teaching at Sacred Heart College, Shembaganur, he pronounced his final vows in 1968 at Campion Hall, Oxford (UK).

Initial Academic Life

After his priestly ordination, he taught philosophy at S.H. College, Shembaganur, Tamil Nadu, from 1965 to 66 and 1969 to 70. He took his M.A. in Oriental Studies at Oxford University from 1966 to 1969. He obtained his PhD in Indology from Vienna in 1974. Back in Kerala, he established the *Indology Institute* at St Xavier's College, Trivandrum, and as its Director, got immersed in research and writing. Later, in 1982, he shifted the Institute to De Nobili College, Pune rechristening it as *Centre for Advanced Indian Studies*. He also served as

Professor of Indian Philosophy at Jnana Deepa, Institute of Philosophy and Theology, Pune. He spent his sabbatical year pursuing his interest in Syriac Theology at Kottayam. In 2012 Fr John shifted his Institute to Kanjirapally in Kerala and continued his research in Indian Philosophy and Syriac Theology. In 2015, he suffered a stroke and became paralyzed. He was brought to Christ Hall, Kozhikode for better medical care and rest.

An Erudite Scholar, Writer and Teacher

The contribution of Fr John Vattanky to studies in Indian Philosophy has been recognized globally. His monumental work is *Gangesa's Philosophy of God* published in 1984. His other writings include *Development of Nyaya Theism* (1993), *Nyaya Philosophy of Language* (1995), and *A System of Indian Logic* (2003). There are many more academic articles through which he shared his intellectual height and affective depth with his colleagues.

Many of his colleagues and students would admire him working hard and listening patiently to the Indian scholars (*pandits*) and taking painstaking notes regularly and on a daily basis from 8:30 AM onwards. He had the remarkable stamina for hard and sustained intellectual work.

The classes he taught at Jnana Deepa were highly appreciated. He had the knack to simplify the abstruse philosophical concepts and make them relevant for the contemporary situation. As a teacher, he had been a mentor to generations of students, who have been inspired by his wisdom and intellectual acumen. Many of the privileged students would never forget the long hours of walk at the outskirts of Pune (Wagholi), which starts with a rosary and moves on to intellectual exchange and ends with a sumptuous and refreshing dinner. He was a man of self-discipline, regularity, punctuality, diligence and elegance.

We will peep into five of the significant books that Vattanky has authored. Through these books he has impacted the academic world, especially in Indian philosophy.

a. Gangesa's Philosophy of God

Gangesa's Philosophy of God (1984), a product of his persistent scholarship and genuine hard. Work discusses the proofs for the existence of God. It is not only a translation but also a thorough critical interpretation and evaluation of Isvaravada in Gangesa's monumental work, *Tattvacintamani*, an epoch-making work of Indian logic.

While discussing the issue of the existence of God, Vattanky, the world-authority on Navya-nyaya, has also raised a well-connected chain of issues in respect of

b. Development of Nyaya Theism

Vattanky's second book, *Development of Nyaya Theism* (1993), is a journey into Nyaya logic and epistemology. A key feature of this book is the manner in which the force of logic is made to bear upon the argument for the existence of God. While discussing the issue of the existence of God, Vattanky, the world-authority on Navya-nyaya, has also raised a well-connected chain of issues in respect of theism, some of which have far-reaching implications of logic, epistemology metaphysics, and ethics/religion.

c. Nyaya Philosophy of Language

Nyaya Philosophy of Language (1995) is yet another milestone in his contribution to the Nyaya Philosophy. With a view to making available the richness of thought contained in these works to all those who are interested in Indian Philosophy in general and in Navya-Nyaya in particular, Vattanky decided to translate the whole of *Karikavali*, *Muktavali* and *Dinakai* and interpreted them in the light of *Ramarudri* and *Subodhini*. This is pioneering and landmark work.

d. Karikavali

Kārikāvali of Viśvanātha Nyāyapañcānana Bhaṭṭacārya (1997) is the translation with commentary of the Sanskrit text of Upamana and Sabda sections of Karikavali, Muktavali, and Dinakari. This is edited primarily with a view to helping the scholars who may like to study his previous work Nyaya Philosophy of Language systematically.

e. A System of Indian Logic

A System of Indian Logic: The Nyaya Theory of Inference (2003) is a translation and interpretation of the section on the inference of Karikavali, Muktavali and Dinakari. As Vattanky states in the preface, the intention of the book is “to present the actual contents of logic as developed in the Navya-Nyaya tradition.”

His Three-Fold Passions

What guided his philosophical quest and Christian reflection may be summed up in three of his enduring passions:

a. Passion for Indian Philosophy

His training at Oxford and Vienna prepared him to be an erudite and meticulous scholar, capable of long hours of serious and dedicated research. He had truly fallen in love with Indian philosophy and its nuanced interpretations. He was fully convinced of the relevance of classical Indian philosophy. That is why the first festschrift in his honour was aptly titled *An Indian Ending: Rediscovering the Grandeur of Indian Heritage for a Sustainable Future* (2013). It was remarkable that his book *Gangesa's Philosophy of God* was favourably appreciated by Kanchi Sankaracharya, who honoured him specially. It is this passion for his Indian roots that made him the most sought after Christian thinker among the secular or University circles in India.

b. Rooted in Logic and Love

A man of deep conviction, faith and devotion, Vattanky had a rigorous and inferential mind for philosophizing, especially the logic of Navya-nyaya system and equally heart for God and the people. His intellectual acumen brought him closer to the people, especially the weak and vulnerable. It is no wonder that the second volume in his honour was titled *Logic and Love: Reflecting on Professor John Vattanky's Contribution to Indian Philosophy and Spirituality*. He was both a logician and a lover who is devoted to simple spiritual practices like regular Eucharist, rosary and meditation with the depth of a mystic and vision of a profound Christian thinker. Truly he was a passionate lover of the Church, of India and the Indian philosophical system.

c. Open to Oriental Roots

Towards the last phase of his life, he had discovered the depth of Oriental theology and symbolism. After learning Syriac in his old age (2012), he studied the life and writings of St. Ephrem (306-373) and was truly enamoured by his symbolic theology, which he believed, fulfilled his mystical orientation. He was fond of giving the solemn blessings in Syriac with a sense of pride, belongingness and awe. Aware of and firmly rooted in his tradition, he opened himself to different sources of wisdom.

Living in the Presence of God

These three fold passions were fully founded on his undivided loyalty to the Divine. Vattanky firmly believed that it is only in the absolute that a human being is able to explain himself. According to Nyaya philosophy in general and Vattanky in particular, a “proper self-understanding of a human being is not possible without the absolute. In other words, a human being cannot understand himself properly except in the absolute; and so it follows inevitably that he is able to develop himself and

realize his full destiny only in a relationship with the personal God” (Karimundackal 2020: 92).

The living and loving God permeated every aspect of his being. As a genuine Christian and faithful Jesuit, he encountered God speaking to him in everything. “A God who is only real but who enters into the fabric of human existence intimately and profoundly is the starting point as well as the culmination of one of the major systems of Indian thought, namely Nyaya. The absolute of the Naiyayikas is a personal God to whom we owe allegiance and adoration. The best philosophical traditions of India, therefore, speak about a God who is real and who permeates the whole fabric of human existence” (Vattanky, 1983: 340).

Conclusion

Prof Vattanky passed away at 4.15 AM on Monday, 22 February 2021 at Christ Hall, Kozhikode, after being bedridden for five long years. He endured the suffering peacefully and never complained about his difficult times. He was ever thankful to his numerous caretakers and caregivers!

Vattanky was truly a passionate thinker, based on Indian tradition! He was a logician-lover, open to both reason and devotion. He was also open to his oriental roots, which did not limit him. It enabled him to open himself to others with a deep love for the Church, for the nation and for his traditions.

May the life and vision of Prof John Vattanky be an inspiration for us as Indian and Christians to be fully committed to our God, to the nation and the Church, so that we are fully human and fully divine! With our mind, heart and soul. He was indeed a scholar, believer and lover!

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