

Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktananda and the Hindu-Christian Encounter

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This article focuses on two Benedictine monks, Fathers Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, who spent many years in the sub-continent where they immersed themselves in Indian philosophy and spirituality. The article compares and contrasts their differing responses to the "problem" of the relationship between Christianity and the Hindu tradition. The article argues that the more inclusivist understanding of Hinduism by Le Saux (who became better-known under his Indian name, Abhishiktananda) allowed him to reconcile the tensions and contradictions evident in the life and work of his fellow-monk. The article also explores Abhishiktananda's understanding of the ideal of renunciation as a meeting-point for the two traditions.

*Let the Yogin ever integrate himself
Standing in a place apart,
Alone, his thoughts and self restrained,
Devoid of earthly hope, nothing possessing.
(Bhagavad Gita VI.10., Zaehner translation)*

The Background: Christian Missionizing in the East

It is no secret that over the last century Christian missionizing in India has attracted criticism from many quarters. The Theosophists, the neo-Hindu reformers, Western Vedantins, fictionalists such as Somerset Maugham, historians, and the post-colonial critics, have all lambasted the whole missionary enterprise. The auxiliary role of Christian missionizing in the spread of European imperialism and in the extirpation of traditional cultures has, quite properly, come under attack. However, it must also be recognized that the enemies of Christianity (and often of religion in general) are ever-ready to portray its representatives in the worst possible light, to attribute to them the most sinister of motives and to attribute to them all manner of ills. Certainly there is no hiding from the dismal fact that an arrogant and intolerant Christian exclusivism has sometimes been an accomplice in rapacious empire-building. At the same time, it is as well to remember that missionaries often resisted and condemned the exploitative aspects of imperialism.¹ Recent scholarship has confirmed "the great variety of missionary

relationships to and attitudes toward imperialism, so that no generalization, save that of variety, can be maintained" (Forman, 1987: 32; see also Lund, 1981). Furthermore, we need to recognize the creative role missionaries have played in nurturing a deeper understanding of the religious heritage of the East. Recall the pioneering work of the Jesuits in India, Tibet, China and Japan in dispelling European ignorance about Asian religions: the legacy of men such as Fathers Nobili, Desideri, Matteo Ricci and Francis Xavier in promoting a dialogue between West and East and in opening European eyes to the spiritual riches of the East is not one that can be easily ignored. Think, too, of the role of missionaries who have, in some sense, become advocates of Asian religious and philosophical traditions *against* the European values and assumptions which they themselves ostensibly represent: one thinks of figures such as Dwight Goddard, Richard Wilhelm and, more recently, the comparative religionist Klaus Klostermaier and the missionary-sinologist, D.H. Smith. In recent times missionaries have often been in the vanguard of movements for national liberation and the achievement of human rights and social justice. So, the story of missionary activity is a complex one. In this article another aspect of this complex phenomenon is explored: the way in which a missionizing enterprise is sometimes transformed into a profound inter-religious encounter. The focus will be on two Benedictine monks, Fathers Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, whose contrasting experiences in India illuminate a whole series of issues inherent in inter-religious encounters generally and, more specifically, in the ongoing intercourse between Christianity and Hinduism.

Christian Missionaries and the Christian-Hindu Encounter

Vasco da Gama arrived in the south Indian port of Calicut in 1498, and Pedro Cabral in Cochin two years later. The search for spices was soon joined by the quest for souls. The earliest European missionaries in India were Franciscans and Dominicans, soon to be followed by the Jesuits. By the middle of the 16th century the Jesuits were entrenched in Goa and its hinterland, and well-advanced on their first major task—the mastery of the principal languages of the region. In 1579 the British Jesuit Thomas Stephens arrived in Goa and was soon able to produce several works in Indian languages, culminating in his 11,000-verse *Christian Purana*, “the unsurpassed masterpiece of Christian missionary literature in an Indian vernacular”. But it was Father Roberto Nobili (1577-1656) who “led the missionary effort to an entirely new level of theoretical and hermeneutic awareness” and who best exemplifies “the problematic nature of the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism” (Halbfass, 1990: 37-38). His efforts to find some sort of doctrinal rapprochement between the two traditions inevitably overstepped the ecclesiastical bounds of orthodoxy. Nobili found in the *Upanishads* a pristine monotheism and even intimations of the “recondite mystery of the most sacred trinity”, discerned the “natural light” of reason in Brahminical sciences and philosophy, and argued against their dismissal by Europeans as

superstitious, “as if the heathen sages were not also bringing forth valuable teachings which could likewise be of use to Christians” (Halbfass, 1990: 40). Nobili found some precedent for his approach to Hinduism in the reception of Greek thought by the early Fathers. Nobili in turn served as an inspiration for Father Bede Griffiths (1906-1993), an English Benedictine monk in India three centuries later. Nor was Nobili playing a lone hand. Heinrich Roth (1620-1668) produced the first European Sanskrit grammar, philosophical commentaries and translations. Father J.F. Pons, another Jesuit, was probably the author of a grammar of Sanskrit in Latin in about 1733. Then, too, there were the Protestant missionary scholars such as the Dutch Calvinists Abraham Roger and Philippus Baldaeus who published Indological works in the 17th century, and the Moravian Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg who wrote substantial hermeneutical works on the customs and beliefs of the Hindus.

In his remarkable study of the encounter between India and Europe, Wilhelm Halbfass points out that the work of the missionaries of the 17th and 18th centuries laid the foundations of Indological research well before the appearance of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 and the pioneering scholarship of Jones, Wilkins and Colebrooke, the first British Orientalists-proper. The legacy of the Jesuits was to be found not only in their texts—grammars, dictionaries, translations, commentaries and the like—but in the collection of manuscripts and their development of methods of collaboration with Indian scholars (Halbfass, 1990: 45).

By the mid-19th century the missionary ethos was increasingly influenced by the idea of fulfilment, foreshadowed in some of Nobili’s writings and embryonic in the ideas of Max Müller and Monier Monier-Williams. The missionary and Indologist J.N. Farquhar was perhaps its most influential exponent. Thus, following T.E. Slater’s claim that “All religions wait for their fulfilment in Christianity”, Farquhar could argue that

The Vedanta is not Christianity, and never will be—simply as the Vedanta: but a very definite preparation for it... It is our belief that the living Christ will sanctify and make complete the religious thought of India. For centuries... her saints have been longing for him, and her thinkers, not least the thinkers of the Vedanta have been thinking his thought (Farquhar quoted in Halbfass, 1990: 51).

Furthermore, he added,

This is the attitude of Jesus to all other religions also. Each contains a partial revelation of God’s will, but each is incomplete; and He comes to fulfil them all. In each case Christianity seeks not to destroy but to take all that is right and raise it to perfection (Farquhar quoted in Sharpe, 1965: 260).

This idea was later to find an ironic echo in the neo-Hindu claim that all other religions and creeds are subsumed by Vedanta.²

During the 20th century many missionary societies and individual missionaries have had to come to terms with the palpable historical fact that, in India at least (and indeed most other Asian countries, the Philippines and to a lesser extent Korea, being the notable exceptions), Christian triumphalism was quite misplaced, that the rates of conversion are pitifully small, that while most Hindus are perfectly willing to accept Christ as one *avatar* among many, they remain impervious to the fulfilment theory and its many variants. So much for the kind of thinking behind Macaulay's boast in 1836 that English education would see to it that thirty years hence "there will not be a single idolator [i.e., Hindu] among the respectable classes in Bengal" (Macaulay, 1876: 455). The general failure of Christian missionaries to win significant number of converts eventually moved the accent of mission work onto ideals of witness, service and dialogue rather than conversion (See Colasuonno, 1992). However, it would be a mistake to measure the validity of the missionary enterprise purely in terms of conversion rates. As Frithjof Schuon (1975a: 81) remarked,

[Christian] missionaries—although they have profited from abnormal circumstances inasmuch as Western expansion at the expense of other civilizations is due solely to a crushing material superiority arising out of the modern deviation—follow a way that possesses, at least in principle, a sacrificial aspect; consequently the subjective reality of this way will always retain its mystic meaning.

Surveying over three centuries of European missionizing in India, Wilhelm Halbfass (1990: 53) concludes:

... the missionary efforts in this country can hardly be described as having been successful, and dogmatism and intolerance have frequently played a dominating role... This notwithstanding, the achievements of the missionaries comprise a very important chapter in the Western encounter with Indian thought, a chapter that is exemplary from a hermeneutic standpoint and which, moreover, has had historical consequences. The missionaries have performed pioneering, detailed work in several areas. But primarily, in spite of or perhaps precisely because of their "prejudice" and dogmatic limitations, they have also helped to define and clarify the central problems involved in approaching and understanding that which is alien... their outstanding exponents embody a desire to understand whose singular power and problematic nature arise from their deep and uncompromising desire to be understood (Halbfass, 1990: 53).

The "problematic nature" of missionizing is dramatically personified in the 20th century in the lives and work of three Benedictine monks, each of whom wished to reconcile Hinduism and Christianity: Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux and Bede Griffiths. Certain themes and issues circulate through the experiences and writings of each: the so-called "problem" of religious pluralism, the proper role of Christianity in India, the renewal of Christian monasticism and the revival of its contemplative and mystical heritage, the doctrinal reconciliation of Advaita Vedanta with a Trinitarian Christianity, the existential problem of living out a spirituality which drew on both Eastern and Western sources. Father Bede

Griffiths is the best-known of these Benedictine monks. After spending many years in a Benedictine monastery in England, he went to India in 1955. With Father Francis Mahieu, a Belgian Cistercian, he established one of the first of the "Christian ashrams" in India, at Kottayam in Kerala. In 1968 he moved to Saccidananda Ashram which had been founded by Fathers Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux. Under Griffiths's leadership, the ashram (also known as "Shantivanam") attracted seekers from all over the world and Griffiths became widely respected as a key figure in Hindu-Christian dialogue. He was the author of many works, including *Return to the Centre* (1976), *The Marriage of East and West* (1982) and *A New Vision of Reality* (1992). Because the work of Bede Griffiths is already today pretty well known in the West, we will here focus on Monchanin and Le Saux, situating them in the problematic of the modern encounter of Hinduism and Christianity.

Jules Monchanin (Swami Arubianandam)

The first forty years of Jules Monchanin's life were unexceptional for a provincial French priest.³ He was born near Lyons in 1895, decided at an early age to enter the priesthood and completed his theological training in 1922. 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. He served in three parishes before a serious illness was followed by appointments as a chaplain, first in an orphanage and then at a boys' boarding school. Throughout these years he continued to move in a university milieu and applied himself to a range of studies. Since boyhood he had felt an attraction to India which now steered him towards Sanskrit, and Indological and comparative religious studies. From the early 30s Monchanin was exploring the possibility of living some sort of Christian monastic life in India, no easy task for someone bound to Mother Church. It took many years of negotiations before he finally received the approval of the Bishop of Tiruchirapalli to work amongst the scattered Indian Christians in the region evangelized centuries before by both Francis Xavier and Roberto Nobili. Monchanin left Marseilles for India in May 1939 (See Weber, 1977: 16-25).

For the next decade Monchanin was immersed in pastoral work in India. These were years of social deprivation, physical hardship, and acute loneliness, preparatory to the contemplative life for which he yearned. At last, in 1950, he was able to establish a monastic hermitage on the banks of the Kavery River, a Christian ashram which he and his fellow Benedictine and compatriot, Henri le Saux, called "Saccidananda".⁴ Le Saux articulated their 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 (Weber, 1977: 73).

It might be said that this ideal aimed to synthesize Vedantic philosophy, Christian theology and an Indian lifestyle. Abhishiktanada hoped that "what is deepest in Christianity may be grafted on to what is deepest in India" (Weber, 1977: 2). This was not a syncretic exercise which would issue forth some religious hybrid but an attempt to fathom the depths of Christianity with the aid of the traditional wisdom of India which, in the monks' view, was to be found in Vedanta and the spiritual disciplines of the renunciate. The lifestyle was to be thoroughly Indian: meditation, prayer, study of the Scriptures of both traditions, a simple vegetarian diet, the most Spartan of amenities. Each donned the ochre cloth of the *sannyasin*, Monchanin (informally) becoming Swami Arubianandam and Le Saux, Swami Abhishiktananda.

Monchanin had alluded earlier to the case of Dom Joliet, a French naval officer in China who became a Benedictine in 1897 and waited thirty years to realize his dream of founding a Christian monastery in the Far East. Monchanin had written, "Will I someday know the same joy, that in India too—from its soil and spirit—there will come a [Christian] monastic life dedicated to contemplation?" (Weber, 1977: 21-22). The dream was not to be fully realised in Monchanin's lifetime. On the face of it, the efforts of the French monks were less than successful: it was a constant struggle to keep the ashram afloat; there was little enthusiasm from either European or Indian quarters; there were endless difficulties and hardships; not a solitary Indian monk became a permanent member of the ashram. By the time of Monchanin's death in 1957 there seemed little to show for the hard years behind them. Monchanin was not even able to realize his desire to die in India as he had been sent to Paris for medical treatment. But the seeds had been sown. A decade after Monchanin's death, Father Bede Griffiths and two Indian monks left their own ashram and committed themselves to Saccidananda ashram. There were to be many difficult years still ahead, but Monchanin's dream finally came to fruition under Bede Griffiths who later wrote of Monchanin's mission:

The ashram which he founded remains as a witness to the ideal of a contemplative life which he had set before him, and his life and writings remain to inspire others with the vision of a Christian contemplation which shall have assimilated the wisdom of India, and a theology in which the genius of India shall find expression in Christian terms (Weber, 1977: 3).

In Monchanin we find a formidable intellect, considerable erudition, and a refined sensibility with an appreciation of Europe's cultural heritage; he might easily have fashioned a splendid academic or ecclesiastical career. We have the testimony of some of the leading French Indologists of the day to this effect (Weber, 1977: 16). 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 (Vattakuzhy, 1981: 67).

Instead, all is surrendered to plunge himself into the materially impoverished life of the Indian villager and the eremitic life of the monk, the Christian *sannyasi*. In 1941 he had written in his journal, "May India take me and bury me within itself—in God" (Weber, 1977: 56). It was a noble ideal.

The annals of Christian missionizing are replete with stories of heroic self-sacrifice, of dedication to tireless, often thankless work in arid fields, an exacting and lonely life in the service of Christian ideals—precisely, the pursuit of a vocation. Monchanin, however, is a fascinating case because in him the missionary dilemma, if one may so express it, becomes fully and acutely self-conscious. The poignancy and tragedy of Monchanin's life in India is that he was unable to find his way out of the dilemma. Here is a telling passage from the autobiography of Alain Daniélou, the French scholar who lived for many years in India, committed himself to Hinduism, and produced some imposing work on the Indian tradition:

Then there was the curious little ashram of Père Montchanin (sic). This priest... had been deeply influenced by Hinduism and wanted to combine the two religions. He wore the draped orange cloth of Hindu monks, but obviously did not perform the ritual ablutions... he lived in a hermitage with a few followers and exerted a great influence on that special brand of foreigner who, while acknowledging the spiritual, philosophical, and moral superiority of Hinduism, still insists on Christian supremacy... Instead of mellowing through Hinduism, Montchanin and his devotees remained frustrated, neurotic, ill at ease, and, on the whole, rather disagreeable people... (Daniélou, 1987: 213).

This passage itself might be seen by some as somewhat "disagreeable", lacking in charity, and tainted with that condescension which is sometimes the mark of the Western "Vedantin". Nonetheless, it is insightful. It is clear from Monchanin's own writings that he intuitively understood "the limits of religious expansionism" (to borrow a phrase from Frithjof Schuon). He was intelligent enough to see that insofar as Christians were bent on converting Indians, the enterprise was doomed to failure (the odd individual convert being the exception that proves the rule). He rightly sensed that devout Hindus found the idea of conversion abhorrent—"a betrayal, cowardice" (Weber, 1977: 96). Shortly before his death he wrote,

The root of the matter is that Hindus are not spiritually uneasy. They believe they possess supreme wisdom and thus how could they attach any importance to the fluctuations or investigations of those who possess lesser wisdom. Christ is one among *avatars*. Christianity in their eyes is a perfect moral doctrine, but a metaphysics which stops on the threshold of the ultimate metamorphosis (Weber, 1977: 97).

He was also, as Daniélou intimates, well-equipped to appreciate the vast storehouse of Indian spirituality. But throughout his life he felt bound to the conventional Christian belief in the ultimate superiority of his own faith, a position to which he was theologically committed by the weight of the centuries. His friend Père Henri de Lubac had characterised Monchanin's task this way: "to rethink everything in the light of theology, and to rethink theology through mysticism" (Weber, 1977: 25). The problem was that the theology and the mysticism were pulling in opposite directions, the tension arising out of a dogmatic literalism and an ossified exotericism in the Catholic Church which insisted on the *exclusive* truths of Christianity and, *ipso facto*, on its *superiority* to other faiths. During a near-fatal illness in 1932 Monchanin had vowed that, if he were to recover, he would devote himself to the salvation of India (Weber, 1977: 25): his years in India taught him, at least sub-consciously, that India (insofar as it still cleaved to Hindu orthodoxy) was in no need of salvation! Consider a few quotes from Monchanin's writings (all from Weber (1977: 77-78, 82, 126)):

India has stood for three millennia, if not longer, as the seat of one of the principal civilizations of mankind, equal to if not greater than that of Europe and China...

India has received from the Almighty an uncommon gift, an unquenchable thirst for whatever is spiritual. Since the time of the Vedas and the Upanishads, countless numbers of its sons have been great seekers of God.

Century after century there rose up seers and poets singing the joys and sorrows of a soul in quest of the One, and philosophers reminding every man of the supremacy of contemplation...

Cheek by jowl with lofty passages such as these we find quite contradictory ones:

Unfortunately Indian wisdom is tainted with erroneous tendencies... Outside the unique revelation and the unique Church man is always and everywhere incapable of sifting truth from falsehood and good from evil.

So also, confident in the indefectible guidance of the Church, we hope that India, once baptized into the fullness of its body and soul and into the depth of its age-long quest for Brahma, will reject its pantheistic tendencies and, discovering in the splendours of the Holy Spirit the true mysticism and finding at last the vainly longed-for philosophical and theological equilibrium between antagonistic trends of thought, will bring forth for the good of humanity and the Church and ultimately for the glory of God unparalleled galaxies of saints and doctors.

...we cannot hide [Hinduism's] fundamental error and its essential divergence in terms of Christianity. Hinduism must reject its atman-brahman equation, if it is to enter into Christ.

The tensions between a rigid Christian exclusivism and a recognition of the spiritual depths of Hinduism could hardly be more apparent. Monchanin's life

would have been much easier had the Vatican II renovation of Catholic attitudes to other religions taken place half a century earlier.⁵ He might also have been spared much agonizing by recourse to the works of traditionalists such as his fellow countryman, René Guénon, or Frithjof Schuon. Seyyed Hossein Nasr states the problem concisely:

The essential problem that the study of religion poses is how to preserve religious truth, traditional orthodoxy, the dogmatic theological structures of one's own tradition, and yet gain knowledge of other traditions and accept them as spiritually valid ways and roads to God (Nasr, 1972: 127).

This was the problem which Monchanin could never quite overcome. His successor, Bede Griffiths, was able at least partially to resolve the dilemma by discerning that the task at hand was not to "Christianize" Hinduism—an undertaking to which the Indians themselves remained, for the most part, supremely indifferent—but to "Hinduize" Christianity, that is, to recover the mystical and contemplative dimension of the Christian tradition, and its metaphysical underpinnings, by recourse to a sapiential wisdom and a more or less intact spiritual methodology still comparatively untouched by the ravages of modernity. This became the governing impulse of Griffiths' life and work in his later years in India and is evident in such works as *Return to the Centre* (1976) and *The Marriage of East and West* (1982).

Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda)

Henri Le Saux arrived in India in 1948 to join Monchanin in the monastic venture at Shantivanam. He was never to leave the shores of his adopted country. Le Saux was born in Brittany in 1910 and entered a Benedictine monastery in 1929. Like Monchanin he felt the call of India as a young man but he too had to endure a lengthy wait before achieving "his most ardent desire", and embarking for the sub-continent. Soon after setting up the modest ashram the two French Benedictines travelled to Arunachala to visit Ramana Maharshi who made the most profound impression on Le Saux:

Even before my mind was able to recognize the fact, and still less to express it, the invisible halo of this Sage had been perceived by something in me deeper than any words. Unknown harmonies awoke in my heart... In the Sage of Arunachala of our time I discerned the Unique Sage of the eternal India, the unbroken succession of her sages, her ascetics, her seers; it was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. It was a call which pierced through everything, rent it in pieces and opened a mighty abyss... (Baumer-Despeigne, 1983: 313).

It is interesting to compare this with a strikingly similar account of the Maharishi's nature and significance by Schuon:

In Sri Ramana Maharshi one meets again ancient and eternal India. The Vedantic truth—the truth of the Upanishads—is brought back to its simplest

expression but without any kind of betrayal... Sri Ramana was as it were the incarnation, in these latter days and in the face of modern activist fever, of what is primordial and incorruptible in India. He manifested the nobility of contemplative “non-action” in the face of an ethic of utilitarian agitation and he showed the implacable beauty of pure truth in the face of passions, weaknesses and betrayals (Schuon, 1959: 44).

In the years following Ramana’s death Le Saux spent two extended periods as a hermit in one of the holy mountain’s many caves. He wrote of an overwhelming mystical experience while in retreat at Arunachala and stated that he was “truly reborn at Arunachala under the guidance of the Maharishi” (Stuart, 1980: 170), understanding “what is beyond silence: *sunyata*.” “Ramana’s *Advaita* is my birthplace. Against that all rationalization is shattered” (Baumer-Despeigne, 1983: 316). He also became a disciple of Sri Gnanananda Giri of Tiruykoyilur, giving an account of this in *Guru and Disciple* (1967) and *The Secret of Arunachala* (1974). He remarks that upon meeting Gnanananda he *automatically* yielded his allegiance to him, something which he had never previously done (Royster, 1988: 311).

Over the next few years Abhishiktananda gradually loosened his connections with the ashram at Shantivanam (though he continued to visit right up to the time of his death) and spent much of his time as a wandering *sannyasi* in the Himalayas. It was his impregnable conviction that the life of renunciation was the meeting point of Christianity and Hinduism:

Believe me, it is above all in the mystery of *sannyasa* that India and the Church will meet, will discover themselves in the most secret and hidden parts of their hearts, in the place where they are each most truly themselves, in the mystery of their origin in which every outward manifestation is rooted and from which time unfolds itself (Abhishiktananda, 1974: 162).

He formalized his Indian citizenship in 1960 (he had long been a spiritual citizen), and founded a small hermitage on the banks of the Ganges at Uttarkashi in the Himalayas. Here he plunged ever deeper into the *Upanishads*, realizing more and more the Church’s need of India’s timeless message. He also consolidated his grasp of Sanskrit, Tamil and English, and often participated in retreats, conferences and inter-faith gatherings. It was appropriate that most of his books were written here, near the source of the Ganges. In his last two years he gathered a small group of disciples, including Marc Chaduc (Swami Ajatananda) (See Rawlinson, 1997: 146-150). Abhishiktananda died in 1973. In his final illness he had experienced again “an inner apocalypse”, “an awakening beyond all myths and symbols” (Baumer-Despeigne, 1983, 327-328), returning him to one of his favourite Upanishadic verses (of which we can find echoes in many mystical works of both East and West):

I know him, that great Purusha
 Of the colour of the sun,
 Beyond all darkness.
 He who has known him
 Goes beyond death.
 There is no other way.

(*Svetasvatara Upanishad*, III.8.)

He wrote in one of his last letters, "the quest is fulfilled" (Baumer-Despeigne, 1983, 329).

Abhishiktananda seems to have had a more natural affinity for the actual practices of Hindu spirituality than did Monchanin and was less troubled by the doctrinal tensions between the two traditions which he was seeking to bridge. It is surely significant that it was Abhishiktananda who was able to surrender to the extraordinary *darsan* of Ramana. It is also suggestive that, of the three Benedictines associated with Saccidananda Ashram, only Le Saux became universally known under his Indian name. Unlike Monchanin, he became the *chela* of a Hindu guru, and was at home in the pilgrimage sites, the maths and ashrams of India, mixing freely with swamis and sadhus (renunciates) over the length and breadth of the subcontinent. One also gets the impression, in reading the writings of the two men (including their more intimate letters and journals), that Abhishiktananda suffers little of Monchanin's angst about their missionizing. Indeed, he affirms quite explicitly that the true monk has no essential function but to *be*. In a tribute to Monchanin he wrote that

The monk is a man who lives in the solitude (Greek: monos) of God, alone in the very aloneness of the Alone... He does not become a monk in order to do social work or intellectual work or missionary work or to save the world. The monk simply consecrates himself to God (Abhishiktananda, 1975: 13).

Abhishiktananda makes an interesting contrast with Monchanin insofar as he *gave primacy to his own mystical realisation* over the theological doctrines to which he was formally committed as a Christian. As he somewhere remarked, "Truth has to be taken from wherever it comes; that Truth possesses us—we do not possess Truth." On the basis of his own testimony and that of those who knew him in later years we can say of Abhishiktananda that, through the penetration of religious forms, he became a fully realised *sannyasi*—which is to say, neither Hindu nor Christian, or, if one prefers, both Christian and Hindu, this only being possible at a mystical level where the relative forms are universalized.⁶ As he wrote in *The Further Shore*, "The call to complete renunciation cuts across all dharmas and disregards all frontiers... it is anterior to every religious formulation" (Abhishiktananda, 1975: 27). One of his disciples referred to his "glorious transfiguration" and "the transparency of his whole being to the inner Mystery, the divine Presence" (Baumer-Despeigne, 1983, 327).⁷ In his diary he wrote of himself as "at once so deeply Christian and so deeply Hindu, at a depth where

Christian and Hindu in their social and mental structures are blown to pieces, and are yet found again ineffably at the heart of each other” (Stuart, 1980: 173). As Frithjof Schuon has remarked,

When a man seeks to escape from “dogmatic narrowness” it is essential that it should be “upwards” and not “downwards”: dogmatic form is transcended by fathoming its depths and contemplating its universal content, and not by denying it in the name of a pretentious and iconoclastic “ideal” of “pure truth” (Schuon, 1961: 16).

Abhishiktananda never denied or repudiated the doctrines or practices of either Christianity or Hinduism, nor did he cease to observe the Christian forms of worship and to celebrate the sacraments; rather, he came to understand their limitations as religious *forms*, a form necessarily being limited by definition. His own “statements” on doctrinal matters, he said, were to be regarded as “no more than working hypotheses” and as “vectors of free inquiry” (Baumer-Despeigne, 1983, 320). Religious structures (doctrines, rituals, laws, techniques, etc) were *signposts* to the Absolute but could not be invested with any absolute value themselves (Abhishiktananda, 1978: 47). In this insight he again echoes Schuon who writes:

Exotericism consists in identifying transcendent realities with the dogmatic forms, and if need be, with the historical facts of a given Revelation, whereas esotericism refers in a more or less direct manner to these same realities (Schuon, 1975b: 144).

It is true that Abhishiktananda many times referred to the tensions arising out of the simultaneous “presence of the *Upanishads* and the Gospel in a single heart” (Baumer-Despeigne, 1983: 310) and that he occasionally used the language of fulfilment when addressing Christians but this would seem to have been a case of *upaya*, “skilful means” as the Buddhists have it, or what Schuon calls “saving mirages” (Schuon, 1986: 185n2). As Schuon also observes, “In religious esoterisms, efficacy at times takes the place of truth, and rightly so, given the nature of the men to whom they are addressed” (Schuon, 1995: 8). In Abhishiktananda’s case we can trace through his writings a move *away* from all notions of Christian exclusivism and triumphalism, *towards* the *sophia perennis*. All the evidence suggests that Abhishiktananda did indeed undergo the plenary experience and see that Light that, in Koranic terms, is “neither of the East nor of the West”. In communicating that experience, and the knowledge that it delivers, Abhishiktananda felt comfortable resorting to the spiritual vocabulary of both theistic Christianity and monistic Vedanta. Take, for instance, passages such as these:

The knowledge (*vidya*) of Christ is identical with what the Upanishads call divine knowledge (*brahmavidya*)... It comprises the whole of God’s self-manifestation in time, and is one with his eternal self-manifestation (Abhishiktananda, 1974: xi).

Step by step I descended into what seemed to me to be successive depths of my true self—my being (*sat*), my awareness of being (*cit*), and my joy in being (*ananda*). Finally nothing was left but he himself, the Only One, infinitely alone, Being, Awareness and Bliss, *Saccidananda* (Abhishiktananda, 1984: 172).

In his Introduction to the English edition of *Saccidananda*, Abhishiktananda states:

Dialogue may begin simply with relations of mutual sympathy. It only becomes worthwhile when it is accompanied by full openness... not merely at the intellectual level, but with regard to [the] inner life of the Spirit. Dialogue about doctrines will be more fruitful when it is rooted in a real spiritual experience at depth and when each one understands that diversity does not mean disunity, once the Centre of all has been reached (Abhishiktananda, 1984: xiii).

One measure of Abhishiktananda's mystical extinction in Advaitic non-dualism, and the problems this posed for some of his Christian contemporaries (and for all rigidly theistic theologies), is evident in a talk he prepared in the last months of his life:

In this annihilating experience [of Advaita] one is no longer able to project in front of oneself anything whatsoever, to recognize any other "pole" to which to refer oneself and to give the name of God. Once one has reached that innermost center, one is so forcibly seized by the mystery that one can no longer utter a "Thou" or an "I". Engulfed in the abyss, we disappear to our own eyes, to our own consciousness. The proximity of that mystery which the prophetic traditions name "God" burns us so completely that there is no longer any question of discovering it in the depths of oneself or oneself in the depths of it. In the very engulfing, the gulf has vanished. If a cry was still possible—at the moment perhaps of disappearing into the abyss—it would be paradoxically: "but there is no abyss, no gulf, no distance!" There is no face-to-face, for there is only That-Which-Is, and no other to name it (Teasdale, 1994: 14).

This passage, reminiscent of Eckhart, can take its place amongst the most exalted of mystical commentaries; it also dispels any doubts as to the validity and fullness of Abhishiktananda's own mystical annihilation, called by whatever name.

The last decade of Abhishiktananda's life saw the publication of a series of books bearing the fragrance of his long years of prayer, meditation, study and spiritual awakening. The English-language versions of these books are: *The Mountain of the Lord* (1966), an account of his pilgrimage to Gangotri, the sacred source of the Ganges, *Prayer* (1967), *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point* (1969), *The Church in India* (1969), *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church* (1970), *Saccidananda: A Christian Experience of Advaita* (1974), probably his most mature theological work, *Guru and Disciple* (1974) and *The Secret of Arunachala* (1974), in which he recalls his experiences with Ramana and with Gnanananda, and *The Further Shore* (1975), his deepest meditation on the *Upanishads* and the

ideal of *sannyasa*. A collection of several of his essays appeared posthumously as *The Eyes of Light* (1979).

There can be no doubt that, in the words of his friend Raimundo Pannikar, Abhishiktananda was “one of the most authentic witnesses of our times of the encounter in depth between Christian and Eastern spiritualities” (Royster, 1988: 308). But his significance goes well beyond this. In his last work, *The Further Shore*, Abhishiktananda writes movingly and wisely of the ideal of the *sannyasi*:

Sannyasa confronts us with a sign of that which is essentially beyond all signs—indeed, in its sheer transparency [to the Absolute] it proclaims its own death as a sign... However the sannyasi lives in the world of signs, of the divine manifestation, and this world of manifestation needs him, “the one beyond signs”, so that it may realize the impossible possibility of a bridge between the two worlds... The sign of sannyasa... stands then on the very frontier, the unattainable frontier. Between two worlds, the world of manifestation and the world of the unmanifest Absolute. It is the mystery of the sacred lived with the greatest possible interiority. It is a powerful means of grace—that grace which is nothing else than the Presence of the Absolute, the Eternal, the Unborn, existing at the heart of the realm of becoming, of time, of death and life; and a grace which is at the same time the irresistible drawing of the entire universe and its fullness towards the ultimate fullness of the Awakening to the Absolute, to the Atman... Finally, it is even the taraka, the actual one who himself carries men across to the other shore, the one and only “ferryman”, manifested in manifold ways in the form of all those rishis, mahatmas, gurus and buddhas, who throughout history have themselves been woken and in turn awaken their brother-men (Abhishiktananda, 1975: 42-43).

Abhishiktananda himself came to embody and to live this ideal. No man could have a more sublime epitaph.

Endnotes

- ¹. The last century of Christian missionizing in Latin America furnishes many examples.
- ². One might adduce the redoubtable Swami Vivekananda as one amongst many spokesmen for this claim.
- ³. For a biography of Monchanin see Weber (1977).
- ⁴. “*Saccidananda*”: Brahman, or the Ultimate Reality, conceived of as Being, Sentience and Bliss; sometimes paralleled with the Christian Trinity.
- ⁵. Vatican II was, in common parlance, a “a very mixed bag” but the mitigation of centuries of exclusivism was a significant step in the right direction.
- ⁶. On this subject see Schuon (1981).
- ⁷. The fact that this kind of language is used indiscriminately about all manner of dubious “gurus” should not blind us to the fact that, in some cases—and this is one—such language is perfectly appropriate.

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