Now this ātman is the bridge and the boundary separating these worlds. Day and night do not cross over this bridge, or old age or death, or sorrow, or good works or bad works; all evils turn back from it, for this world of Brahman is free from evil.

Thus, after crossing that bridge, the blind man sees, the wounded one is healed, the sufferer is freed from suffering. Therefore, for the one who has crossed that bridge, even the night is transformed into day, for the world of Brahman is ever illumined.

Chāndogya Upaniṣad III.4.1-2

This is the bridge for those who worship,
The highest imperishable Brahman—
For those who seek to cross ever
To the fearless further shore...

Katha Upaniṣad III.2

It is precisely the fact of being a bridge that makes this uncomfortable situation worth while. The world, at every level, needs such bridges...
The danger of this life as a ‘bridge’ is that we run the risk of not belonging to either side; whereas, however harrowing it may be, our duty is to belong wholly to both sides. This is only possible in the mystery of God.

Abhishiktananda, Letters, p. 213
Editorial

The Sanskrit word SETU means bridge, anything that binds together or unites, but it also means a dam or ridge that prevents a field from being flooded. This symbol with its multi-layered meaning is the motto of our new Bulletin: In the sense of the Upanishads quoted it should be a bridge to the “further shore beyond darkness”, a favourite symbol of Abhishiktananda; a bridge from the visible to the invisible, a bond unifying our disturbed world to the ultimate harmony where all fears end, all conflicts are resolved. In this sense it wants to serve a spiritual purpose. Abhishiktananda’s role as a bridge is also double; in one sense it expresses his belonging to the two shores, east and west, Christianity and Hinduism, and his life has been a real bridge on which people from different religions and cultures can move from one side to the other, can communicate, and even unite. In the other sense he was and is a bridge between the human and the Divine, as is every true saint.

The symbol of SETU therefore points to the ideal inspired by Abhishiktananda, of throwing a bridge across the painful divisions between religions and cultures, making communication and communion possible, by overcoming age-old misunderstandings. As the word SETU implies, a bridge not only unites but in the form of a dam it also prevents confusion and overflowing. If one danger today is the often violent conflict between religions, the other danger is an indiscriminate mixing of traditions. Communication is needed, not confusion.

Twenty years after Abhishiktananda’s mahāsamādhi his ideals are still very much needed, in India as anywhere in the world. Had he lived until today, he would have been pained to see that we have moved backward as far as inter-religious relations are concerned; he would also have evolved his ideas further; but his basic insights would still be true. This Bulletin does not want to stop at his ideas but to carry them further in the same spirit.

The enlarged form of the Bulletin will contain articles relating to any spiritual tradition, comparative studies as well as a section on witnesses of inter-religious understanding. The Bulletin wants to relate the scholarly insights and study of the texts of the various religious and spiritual traditions with the concrete involvement by people from all walks of life and all religious traditions in creating communal harmony and understanding. Therefore short reports and testimonies are welcome, as also reports about meetings and seminars, book-reviews and news of activities of the Society and related groups inspired by Abhishiktananda.

The present issue contains a detailed report about the second inter-religious retreat-seminar organized by the Abhishiktananda Society in Bangalore in December 1993, and being the centenary year of the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago, we also publish the speech delivered by Jagadguru Dr Shivamurthy Shivacharya Mahaswamiji at the Centenary celebrations in Chicago, which relates directly to burning communal questions in India. Besides, we have the sad duty to pay our tribute to some of the spiritual personalities who in one way or another are related to Abhishiktananda and who passed away in the year 1993: Fr Bede Griffiths, Lilian Silburn and Dr D.K. Mehta.

Bettina Bäumer

SAKTI and PNEUMA

Energy and Spirit in the Hindu and Christian Traditions
Report of the Abhishiktananda Society’s
Retreat-Seminar, Bangalore, 2 – 7 December 1993

by Bettina Bäumer

The second Abhishiktananda Society Retreat-Seminar took place at Bangalore from 2 – 7 December 1993, in commemoration of Abhishiktananda’s 20th death anniversary falling on 7th December. The topic chosen was intended to continue and deepen the discussion on mysticism of the first seminar by focussing on a more specific subject. About twenty-five participants from various Hindu and Christian traditions took part. We enjoyed the hospitality of Jagadguru Dr Shivamurthy Shivacharya Mahaswamiji of the Viraśaiva tradition, in his newly built Taralabalu Kendra Religious and Cultural Centre at Bangalore.

Apart from the papers and discussions, the programme included times of silent meditation, prayer, recitation and bhäuser, pūjā and liturgy, at the three times of sandhyā (morning, noon and evening). In fact, it was this sharing at the level of silence which created the right atmosphere for the sharing at the level of words. And in spite of the great differences in the
real presupposition of the possibility of sharing and understanding between two religious worlds which have grown on very different, specific, historical soil.

The point is not to make an intellectual comparison, nor a mere translation, but to penetrate into one another’s experience so as to grasp the sāmānya of both concepts, where they overlap, point to a similar reality and mediate a similar experience. We neither want to reach a simplistic one-to-one equation, nor do we want to deny the multiplicity and wonderful plurality of religious experiences and expressions. We rather want to build that bridge of understanding between religious traditions at a level which pertains to the very core of our experience. This may be not only an intellectual but also an existential risk. Therefore our exchange has to be based on the solid ground of our respective scriptures and traditions, before we can take a leap into that very freedom for which Śakti and Spirit empower us.

At the outset Śakti and Spirit seem to relate to quite different realities, since our first association with Śakti is the feminine aspect of the Divinity, with so many manifestations in goddesses and female partners of male gods. Therefore some Hindu friends spontaneously associated Śakti with the Virgin Mary who seems to play a similar role in Christian mythology and iconography. Though the sophia tradition in Christianity would not be alien to this view, this is rather a secondary association. The primary relationship is in the realm of metaphysics or theology and of spiritual experience.

Considering the living context of both, Hinduism and Christianity, there seems to be a fundamental difference between Śakti and Pneuma. The images that spring to mind are that of a feminine power and divinity in the case of Śakti, and the biblical images of the Holy Spirit symbolized by the elemental powers of Wind, Fire and Water. Śakti is a wide-spread presence in so many popular and classical forms, beliefs and practices. I know many Hindus who claim that they do not believe in God, but who have great devotion to Śakti. She seems to pervade every field, even the most ascetical and male-dominated tradition of Śaṅkarācārya, who worship the Śrīcakra. Besides, in daily life, a pious Hindu regards woman in general, but in particular his mother and his wife, as a manifestation of the Śakti.

These practical manifestations seem to be worlds apart from a Christian concept of the Holy Spirit, who is so intangible, subtle and invisible that “he” has almost sunk into oblivion. But in fact, Christian existence depends entirely on the Holy Spirit, the so-called “third Person” of the Trinity, the

religion and intellectual backgrounds of the participants and of their status in their respective traditions, a feeling of spiritual unity was created resulting in mutual enrichment. We were also fortunate to be allowed to participate in Mahaswamiji’s private puja which left a deep impression on the participants.

The bhajans and recitations, especially by Dr Sarla Kumar (Devi bhajan) and Mrs Parvati Nagaswamy (Lalitāsahasrasanāma and Tevaram) added to the spiritual atmosphere.

Apart from the academic programme, a public lecture on Swami Abhishekatananda was given by Swami Nityananda Girija on Sunday 5th December, followed by a screening of the English version of the film on Swamiji made by French Television: Swamiji, an Interior Voyage. In connection with the film there was also a discussion on the relevance of Swamiji’s ideals in the present situation in India.

A part of the introduction to the topic of the seminar may throw light on its background and on the approach:

“Every religious tradition has a constellation of basic concepts derived from its revelation and belonging to a total theological or philosophical universe. More than being concepts, they represent experiences crystallized in certain words and symbols which open up a whole world of meaning to the believer, and which cannot be seen in isolation. The question is: do these ‘concepts’ only have a meaning in their own universe? And are they so specific that there is no bridge of understanding?

Language itself can give us a clue to this problem. If I learn a language of which no dictionary exists, I have first of all to learn the meaning of a word with all its shades and associations in the particular universe of thought of that very language. Only then can I search for adequate words in my own language and try to translate, however adequately or inadequately it may be.

But there is a deeper dimension to this understanding between concepts of different religious universes. Bhartṛhari would say in the philosophy of language that every word having a specific meaning (viṣeṣa), must also have a generic meaning (sāmānya). And Abhinavagupta takes these two concepts in the realm of metaphysics: to say that every specific perception or experience (viṣeṣa) can only exist because it shares in the universal consciousness (sāmānya). The more one gets identified with universal consciousness, by way of spiritual practice, the closer one comes to the essence of everything experienced in this world, whether external or internal. This would be the
“Breath of God”, the bond of love between Father and Son, the creative and renewing power. “Send forth your Spirit and they will be created, and you will renew the face of the earth”, sings the Psalm (104,30). It is the Spirit who enlightens, who purifies, who unites, as one of the most common prayers says: “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love.” The Spirit is not only intimate, he pervades the whole universe with his sanctifying presence. It is a possible theory which came to my mind while reflecting on this theme that one of the reasons for the desacralisation of the world which we witness in the Christian countries of Europe, is the forgetfulness of the universal presence of the Holy Spirit, of his immanence, whereas one of the reasons of the sacrality of the world in Hindu India is the awareness of the presence of Śakti.

In spite of these vast differences, we have theologies of Śakti and Spirit in the two traditions which attribute the following powers and qualities to the two:

- it is a creative energy of God
- it is the very active and dynamic power of God
- it is the Power of Love, in whatever sense
- it is the inmost Divine presence
- it is the very power uniting the soul with God
- it is possible to share in the Divine Energy by experience, but not in God directly
- it is so interior and intimate that this power cannot be objectified or externalized
- it is the very power of wisdom and knowledge
- it is the very power of freedom
- it is the Divine immanence in the cosmos
- it is the power of grace: one can be possessed by it, but one cannot possess it

Spiritual transmission and initiation is a “descent of Śakti” (śaktipāta) and a “descent of the Spirit” which affects a total transformation of the person, and spiritual realization is an “ascent” or “ascension” of the same Power.

These are some of the essential characteristics shared by both. Their place in the total theology of the different religious systems will have to be seen, as well as their role in spiritual practice. This is the task of our papers, discussions and sharing in these days. ...

Religions are alive precisely because of the Śakti or Spirit acting in them, otherwise they would be frozen institutions handing down unchanged forms and beliefs of the past. But the very inner dynamism of Śakti and Spirit makes them open to change, renewal and interaction with other religious worlds.”

In his welcome speech, Mahaswamiji Dr Shivanurthy gave us a refreshing approach to inter-religious dialogue and communal harmony showing his openness of mind and acute awareness of the present critical situation in India.

The papers presented showed a high standard of scholarship and reflection and a freshness in approach which made communication easy. It seemed meaningful to start with the paper on “Śakti in Popular Perception” by Dr D. P. Pattanayak who not only gave a survey of the Vedic and pre-Vedic conceptions of Śakti, but who made the popular tradition of myths, songs and rituals come alive. His presentation of the Jagannāth cult, of Subhadra being understood as sister as well as wife of Jagannāth, and of the Tāntic identification of Jagannāth with Dakṣiṇākālkā very revealing.

The biblical conception of Pneuma or the Holy Spirit was presented by Sr Sara Grant (St John) and by Fr Lucien Legrand (St Paul) in a comprehensive way. Fr Leonard Fernando gave a survey of the conception of Pneuma in the Fathers of the Church.

While the scriptural studies provided the necessary background, especially in an interreligious gathering, papers relating to the living tradition made these concepts assume flesh and blood. Dr Blitzka Mukerji in her paper on “The manifestation of Śakti as Śādhana in the life of Sri Mā Anandamayi” presented a lively image of one of the greatest spiritual personalities of our times and of the spontaneous way in which the Śakti became manifest in her.

Besides textual studies and papers on the living tradition, the topic was further enriched by presentations of the artistic and iconographic aspects of both Śakti and Pneuma. Dr R. Nagaswamy gave an original and very instructive survey of the symbolism and iconography of Śakti, especially in South India, not only from an archaeological perspective but quoting from ancient Tamil and Sanskrit literature, and demonstrating the connection of popular or folk and classical forms of the Śakti cult. His visual material
was rich and spoke its own language.

Jyoti Sahi presented the Christian symbolism and iconography of the Holy Spirit by giving its Old Testament background, connecting the symbolism of the bird (dove) with the Genesis myth of the original chaos on which the Spirit is brooding, and with the Indian symbol of the Hansa, equally a symbol of the Spirit and of freedom. He presented interesting examples of the iconography of the Holy Spirit in icons and medieval illuminated manuscripts. He also emphasized the feminine or mother element of the Spirit which had been much neglected in Christian theology.

Both the visual papers revealed that images and symbols are often more apt to convey the deeper meaning than concepts.

One session of the seminar was devoted to “Spirit and Šakti in the writings of Swami Abhishektananda”, selected and presented by Odette Baumer and Fr G. Gisbert-Sauch. In fact, the inspiration for this topic came from Swamiji. It was a kind of meditative reading, followed by sharing and discussion.

In the absence of a Kashmiri Šaiva Pandit, I gave a presentation of the Kashmiri Šaiva concept of Šakti, its metaphysics as well as mysticism, especially in the Kuṭḍalīni Yoga. The discussion on this paper clarified some important points, like for instance the concepts of trinity and trika in the Christian and Šaiva theologies, their overlapping and their differences. It is in this metaphysical framework that Šakti and Pneuma have to be understood. Complementing this presentation, Swami Nityananda Girī read the paper by Pandit Jankinath Kaul in absentia, which gave other aspects of Šakti in Kashmiri Šaivism, and which was also devoted to an exposition of Śrīvidyā, elaborated further by Swamiji. The highly complex symbolism of the Śrīckara could be visualized in its two forms as bhūprastāra and meruprastāra, a specimen of the latter being placed in the meditation room by Dr R. Nagaswamy.

Fr Sebastian Pañnadath gave a very clear exposition of Meister Eckhart’s concept of the Spirit which strikes a similar chord in Hindu spirituality, in the advaita of Śaṅkara as well as in Kashmiri Šaivism.

Dr Cornelia Vogelsanger complemented the papers by presenting an anthropologist’s view of the cult of the Black Madonna in Europe (with slides), again showing the connection of popular belief and spirituality which could find many parallels in Hindu beliefs and practices. Swami Sitadevi gave a personal account of her experience of Spirit and Šakti. Fr David Fleming presented the paper by Prof. C.-A. Keller on “The Perception of Energy in Hinduism and Christianity” in absentia, in which he has attempted a direct comparison. Among the points of convergence which he found are the following: “In both traditions, Energy is perceived as at once cosmic and active individually in beings. Cosmic and universal, Energy is singularized to become active in particular phenomena.

Both traditions stress the simultaneously positive and negative character of divine and universal Energy. It is creative and destructive, life-giving and death-dealing.” He also stressed the feminine nature of Šakti and Ruah, the Hebrew word for Spirit which is feminine.

All the papers were followed by a response by a participant belonging to another tradition, and by discussion. The discussions often took the form of a lively sharing, ranging from the personal and experiential to the scholarly and speculative.

It would be impossible to summarize the insights of the seminar in a few sentences, but I may mention a few points which emerged: the essentially dynamic nature of the Divine Energy; the identity of the Divine Energy with the guru, with grace; the aspect of illumination and wonder (cakrakrti), of inspiration; all these are common elements in both traditions. In fact, what emerged was not so much a contrast — much less a contradiction — between hindu and christian conceptions, but the tension between concepts and practices, between the feminine and masculine concepts of God, between the so-called “great” and “little” traditions, between theology and popular practice, between texts and images. However, we remained conscious throughout that these tensions are in fact creative polarities and not contradictions, that they complement each other and have to be transcended in a wider and all-embracing vision.

I may conclude with the words of Mā Anandamayī quoted by Dr Bithika Mukerji: “For the Divine itā of Šakti all is possible all the time.” The Christian counterpart of this itā is that “The Spirit blows where he/she/it wills.” And we could experience both in a special way.

After the seminar, a group of the participants made a pilgrimage to Tiruvannamalai, to Arunachala and Sri Ramana, which proved to be a unique conclusion of a rich experience, following the steps of Abhishiktananda.
WITNESSES OF INTER-RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

Hinduism and Harmony

by Sri Taralabalu Jagadguru
Dr Shivamurthy Shivacharya Mahaswamiji

Dr Shivamurthy Mahaswamiji, Jagadguru of the Viraśaiva S.T.J. Māth at Sirigere, Karnataka, is one of the outstanding Hindu religious leaders who is also deeply engaged in inter-religious dialogue as well as in social reforms. He has kindly permitted us to publish here an abridged version of his speech delivered at the Centenary Celebrations of the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago on 31st August 1993:

Dear members of the Global Family!

About two years ago, I had been to Costa Rica in Central America on the invitation of the University for Peace to give a talk at an International Conference on the theme “Religions Responding to Global Threats”. One of the participants was a Rabbi (Jewish priest) from Israel who narrated an interesting incident. At the time of his departure from his country, he met an old man and told him that he was going to attend the Conference in Costa Rica on the theme “Religions Responding to Global Threats”. The old man who had some problem with his hearing, mistook the theme of the Conference and immediately responded nodding his head: “Yes, yes, religions are the global threats!” Perhaps the old man is right and only we are mistaken!

The primary aim of all religions is to make man happy both in this life and in the life hereafter. “Yato bhuyodaya-nisreyaeza-ziddhyah sa dharmah” (True religion brings earthly happiness and heavenly paradise), says the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra, a treatise of one of the six schools of Indian Philosophy. Religions propagate mutual trust, peaceful co-existence and humanism, among the people of the world. No religion preaches any violence to its followers. But there is no country in the world where there has been no violence or bloodshed in the name of religion and God. Basaveswara, who led a great socio-religious movement during 12th century AD in Karnataka (South India), strongly condemns the acts of violence in the name of religion. He stresses the need of being kind and gentle at heart towards all living beings, if one really wants to win the grace of God:

What is the use of religion which has no compassion?
Be compassionate to all living beings in the world
Compassion is indeed the root of all religions
Lord Kudala Sangama
Does not like it otherwise!

- Basavanna (250)

Religions influence our thoughts, our behaviour and our relationships with people around us. In theory, religions do not advocate violence, but in practice we experience a situation quite contrary to it, causing much bloodshed and conflict in the name of religion. Recently, I happened to read a letter written by a Muslim reader of the “Indian Weekly” (July 2, 1993) in London stating that religion has done more harm than good to humanity and that ‘religion is the tragedy of mankind!’. He minced no words in saying: “The world today is delirious with hatred, and the conflicts are cruel and unceasing and in most cases religion or religion mixed with intense nationalism is responsible for man’s inhumanity to man. If a religious leader decrees that a novelist deserves to die for something he has written in a work of fiction, then he is inciting an act of violence.” We need such ‘critical insiders’ within every religion if religions have to regain their true character. It is in this sense that the Bhagavad Gītā ordained: “Tad viddhi pranipātena, paripriśāsena sevaṇa...” – i.e., Be humble while learning at the feet of your teacher, but do not blindly accept what is being taught. And never hesitate to ask questions to satisfy your inner conscience in the quest for knowledge. We should, thus, be the critics of our own religion. Instead, we find growing fundamentalism and an aggressive attitude of religions towards other religions and their condemnation, rejection and destruction. Communism is fast diminishing, whereas communalism is fast growing all over the world today.

The World Parliament of Religions held here in Chicago, a century ago, is very much associated with the name of Swami Vivekananda. People of those times were fortunate enough to have seen such a wonderful soul of great spiritual heights. From this global platform, Swami Vivekananda emerged as the shining star of the world’s religious leaders. He stirred the soul of humanity with his opening remarks: “My dear Sisters and Brothers of America”. These words, simple as they are, emerged from the bottom of his heart full of love and affection for mankind. The same words, if uttered today by any one on this platform, would make a mockery of it and will not have the same
impact or electrifying effect on the mind of the listener as they did hundred years ago! Today, we know that such words or even better phrases that are frequently used by speakers on any public platform or in private life, carry no meaning as they are used out of mere courtesy and not out of genuine concern! People have all nice words for others when they meet, but spit out all venom about the other person when they depart. Many of the modern social manners or etiquettes are nothing but accepted norms of hypocrisy!

Hinduism is known to the world as the most tolerant religion of the world. At the first World Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda proclaimed: "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true." But are we now in a position to lay claim to the same? Even after hundred years of that global religious meet, it is a shame that religions continue to be the divisive, and destructive forces of humanity in the hands of religious fanatics, politicians, and the states all over the world today. And Hinduism has also unfortunately joined its hands in this global race of intolerance contrary to its teachings.

It is very unfortunate that at present our country is witnessing the worst communal disturbances, untold misery, loss of thousands of innocent lives and destruction of national property on the issue of the Mandir-Masjid controversy. For centuries, the issue of Ramajanma-bhoomi and Babri Masjid has been a local dispute not much known to the people in other parts of India. Ayodhya, the birthplace of Sri Rama, a popular deity of the Hindus, has been more a mythological place than a historical place in the minds of ardent devotees of Sri Rama. A pious Hindu takes the name of Sri Rama in his everyday life. When somebody meets his friends or relatives, he would greet them with the words "Jai Rama ji ka". Like the sudden and involuntary reaction of the eyelid to dust, his tongue would automatically exclaim "Hey Rama!" at times of distress or whenever something suddenly went wrong. We all know from the history of the freedom struggle of our country that the father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, when hit by the cruel bullets of Nathuram Godse, breathed his last with the worlds "Hey Rama, Hey Rama, Hey Rama!" In Banaras, when a dead body is carried on the shoulders for cremation at the Ghats of the Ganga, we hear people saying "Sri Rama Ram Satya hai, Sri Rama Ram Satya hai,...". A common Hindu has no problem in remembering and seeing his Rama in all his daily activities.

For a pious Hindu, the water from any river is the water from the Holy river Ganga (Ganga-jaal). A Hindu priest while performing the religious rites, invokes the presence of all the Indian rivers in the waters he pours into the jar (Kalasha-sthapana):

Gāgī ca yaṃune caiva godāvarī sarasvatī
Narmade sindhu kāverī jale'smin sannīṭhitam kurū

O the holy rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri!

Please sanctify this water with your holy presence!

The word Ganga-jaal is almost used as a synonym of water. When somebody is on the death bed, people hurriedly ask to bring Ganga-jaal, meaning water, to pour into the mouth of the dying person.

Similarly, a Muslim truck driver has no problem in offering his prayers to Allah wherever he goes driving. At the usual time of doing Namaz, he would just stop his vehicle on the roadside, spread a carpet on the ground under the shade of a tree, kneel down facing the West and do the Namaz unmindful of the surroundings.

The problem of Ayodhya has not been a problem of the common Hindu or the common Muslim. As I wrote earlier, people in other parts of the country were not at all aware of this problem till recently when a particular political party discovered it as a trump card for its political success. The Mandir-Masjid dispute which was once a local problem for centuries, soon became a national problem a couple of years ago and now after the violent incidents of 6th December 1992, it has become an international problem also. If the Masjid in Ayodhya is demolished by the Hindus, the Mandirs in Pakistan are demolished by the Muslims.

Every country has got its own national territory with a definite geographical boundary separating the territory of other neighbouring countries. Any unlawful crossing of its frontiers by any individual of other countries would be viewed very seriously and legal action would be initiated against the trespassers through diplomatic channels. Apart from the political boundaries forming various nations, people have formed their own invisible mental boundaries based on religion, race, language and what not! These invisible mental boundaries are stronger than the political boundaries. The political boundaries may change from time to time but not the mental boundaries, especially those based on religion, which we see growing stronger and stronger.
and returns home weeping, the mother should take her own child to task and not come out of the house and yell at the neighbouring lady. Even if one’s child is found to be not at fault, the mother should admonish her own child. And with a loving touch in her arms, she should advise her child not to invite such troubles in future. If this has been done by all the religious leaders of our country, whether Muslim Mullahs or Hindu Gurus, to all their followers, the sad episode of Ayodhya last December, would not have happened at all. Unfortunately, many of the Swamis, Sadhus and Mullahs in this country are more politicians than religious leaders.

Rand send sidhi samnyasi
inse bache to kashi!
If you can guard yourself
From the temptation of the prostitutes,
From the charging bulls
From the slippery steps
And from the Pandas (priests) who swindle money
On the Ghats of the holy river Ganga
You are qualified to visit Banaras!

sage a popular saying in Banaras. The country is set on fire with the ever on growing flame of communal violence. In the burning fire of Hindu-Muslim hatred, thousands of innocent people have lost their life. How many mothers have lost their loving sons! How many young ladies have lost their dear husbands and become widows experiencing a gruesome hell in this very life! No financial help from the Government, nor from any voluntary organization can bring back the life of those victims! The bereaved families can never forget the shocking events in their life. I am afraid that the feelings of hatred and animosity will be thus handed down from this generation to the next generation like it has been in the past. When are we going to learn to live in peace and harmony? In the freedom struggle of this country, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, all have shed their blood. The freedom won by the sacrifice of thousands of dedicated souls in the past, who were not fortunate enough to live long enough to see the free India, is a big responsibility and not a waywardness. Every citizen of India whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian has a right to live in India. But he has also an obligation to honour the constitution of India, under whose secular umbrella he is living, as he honours his own religious texts. What for is this tussle between Hindus and
Muslims? Whether it is a Temple or a Mosque, whether we call that divine spirit Ram or Rahim, is it not to the same God that we all pray? Is there a different God for Hindus and a different God for Muslims? “Ekam sadvipra bathudha vadan” (Veda), “Devanobha Nama Halava” (God is one but his names are many – Basavanna), “La ilaha illallah”, all mean the same reality which is beyond human comprehension. When are we to understand such lofty ideas and ideals found in every religion? We all know the Pauranic story of the young boy Prahlada who showed the presence of God, the Lord Vishnu, in a pillar of the palace to his atheist father Hiranya Kashipu. Today, if we were to ask the same Prahlada, would he not have ventured to show the holy presence of Sri Rama in the dome of the disputed structure in Ayodhya demolished by the Hindu chauvinists?

We have enough Mandirs and Masjids to pray to God but very few people who go there with true devotion to God. The need of the hour is not to construct or demolish the Masjid or Mandir. Instead, we should aim at demolishing the walls of hatred and enmity in the minds of Hindus and Muslims and learn to live in harmony as brothers and sisters of the same family on the firm foundations of mutual trust and friendship.

Let me conclude with a Peace message which I wrote for a book on Peace being published by UNESCO in France:

Satyam Šivam Sundaram

God is one, but His names are many
Reality is one, but its ways are many
Spirituality is one, but religions are many
Humanity is one, but human beings are many

There cannot be one religion for the whole world
Religions are like flowers of a beautiful garden
Every flower has got its own individual beauty
Adding to the total beauty of the garden

Enjoy the beauty of the flower of your choice
While enjoying the beauty of the garden!
Let not your choice be thrust on others
Nor be it a cause for coercion and conflict!

OBITUARIES

The Mahāsamādhi of Fr Bede Griffiths

by Jyoti Sahi

Dr R. Panikkar has called the three gurus of Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, another ‘trinity’: Fr J. Monchanin, the founder, Swami Abhishiktananda, the transformer and Fr Bede the reformer (see his obituary in Ashram Aikiya Newsletter, No 28, Sept. 93). In spite of their great differences he stresses their great inner freedom as their common characteristic. Jyoti Sahi, artist and disciple of Fr Bede, has given us a personal account of Fr Bede’s passing and his funeral.

When the news finally filtered through to us that Fr Bede had died on the evening of May 13, it was not such a surprise. Ever since Fr Bede’s heart attack after the very elaborate birthday celebrations held on December 17 last year, we had sensed that he had now reached the limit of his physical strength. The last year had been a hectic one – he had travelled to Europe, to America, even to Australia. An Australian television group had been filming him for a couple of weeks in December at Shantivanam and this had also added to his physical and even psychic exhaustion. He was, after all, now 86 years old, and for many years had lived a peaceful and very ordered contemplative life by the side of the holy river Kaveri in the Ashram originally founded by the Abbé Monchanin and Swami Abhishiktananda. This Ashram stretches along the shores of the river near the small Tamil village Tannirpalli.

Fr Monchanin had been parish priest of the local Christian community, when he decided to experiment again with the idea initiated by the great Jesuit missionary De Nobili, to live the Gospel values within the Hindu culture. A local Christian family had donated a couple of acres of land to Fr Monchanin to experiment with his idea of a Christian Ashram by the holy river. This he called “Shantivanam” or the forest of peace. He dedicated the Ashram to the Hindu concept of Trinity: Sat, Cīt, Ānanda – meaning Truth, Consciousness and Joy, which he applied to the Christian experience of God, Three in One. The Ashram was co-founded by the French Benedictine monk Dom Henri Le Saux, better known in India as Swami Abhishiktananda, who lived many years in Shantivanam before he shifted in 1968 to the Himalayas.
It was then that Fr Bede had come from Kurisumala Ashram which he had co-founded with Fr Francis Acharya, a former Cistercian monk from Belgium. In fact, when I first met Fr Bede when I was an art student in London in 1963, he had quite recently written the book "Christian Ashram" in which he introduced to the English speaking world the idea of Christian contemplative community living the pattern of the Indian Ashram ideal.

The Christian spiritual seekers in India like Monchanin or Abhishiktananda had been almost hermits, following a very individual path which was hard for anyone else to follow. It was the charism of both Fr Francis and Fr Bede, that they wanted to address the Indian Christian community, and try to draw them to the ancient Indian contemplative tradition. That is why they had gone to Kerala, to embrace the Syrian Christian community, which had after all its cultural origins in the Syrian Church whose liturgy had been shaped by such contemplative poets as St Ephrem, whose hymns still form the basis for the Syrian Christian life of prayer. It was to these sources of Eastern mystical experience that both Fr Francis and Fr Bede turned to establish an authentic Indian version of the great contemplative way of life in the Church. But Christianity in India has for long been shaped by more active missionary forces, and though contemplative experience has been of the very essence of much of Indian spirituality, this has largely been resented by those converts to the Church who have come from marginalized groups who saw in the Gospel message a hope for liberation from what was largely perceived by these people as the oppressive culture of the dominant high caste. The Ashram movement has often been criticized as too Sanskritic, and too much based on the cultural mores which has been bitterly resented by those who come from the tribal and outcaste groups of Indian society.

Fr Bede, however, always laid stress on a kind of perennial philosophy, which he saw as transcending all cultural and political aberrations. The values of contemplative experience, he felt, lie beyond the social patterns which determine the particular forms that a culture may make. In that sense, though the Ashram movement in the Indian Church has been sometimes characterized as an example of inculturation, it follows a kind of theology which is not really incarnational, but is rather philosophical and abstract.

Driving through the darkness towards Tamilnadu from Bangalore, in order to reach in time for the burial of Fr Bede scheduled for the morning of May 15, I wondered very much what form this last rite would take. Who would be there at the Ashram to celebrate the "Mahā Samādhi", or final rest of this great soul? In India there is a strong belief that it is important to take leave of the dead person - to actually see, have Darshana, of the now abandoned physical form of that eternal soul which had been present amongst us in this corporal image. Creation, after all is image - Mūrti. Images are of their very nature temporal, and are therefore subject to the very forces of dissolution which characterizes the whole of nature as we experience it. The rituals of the dead found in Hindu tradition are often very beautiful and deeply moving. Would Father be cremated, I wondered? Just by the Ashram on the river banks there is a cremation ground, and living in the Ashram we had often watched groups of villagers coming down to the river to burn their dead, and then immerse the ashes of the dead in the life-giving waters of the river. Fr Bede had always expressed a deep sense of empathy for this primordial world-view, calling his commentary on the Bhagavad-Gītā "The River of Compassion". It was from this commentary that I read some of his own reflections on the meaning of Death.

Those who had assembled around the body of Fr Bede, laid out amid heaps of flowers at the centre of the simple Ashram Chapel, were in fact mainly villagers from near by. These simple and devout people had been present at his birthday celebrations, which have been very much village occasions, taking on the form of a village festival. Who was Fr Bede for these villagers? A kind and wise old man, who even though he did not speak their language, exuded a silent spirit of love and caring. Those who came to bow before his body now, and decorate his body with garlands, had really no need of words. The Tamil Mass which was celebrated over him, was presided over by the local Vicar General from Trichy, in a purple chasuble which clashed against the prevailing saffron shades. The Mass was traditional Roman Catholic – and any thought of Indian ritual symbols at this last moment seemed to be largely put aside.

To whom does the spirit of Father Bede finally speak? What was he saying at this solemn occasion when we had assembled around the last remains of his body? Was his body after all important? Once I remember him writing to us soon after he had shifted to Shantivanam that this would be the place of his Resurrection. Now his body which lay before us, which after all would not be burnt on any visible pyre, seemed to have been consumed by some inner heat. Was this, I wondered, a day of burial or marriage? The marriage which he had hoped for, was the marriage of East and West. That symbol of marriage had often recurred in his writings. When his body was
being carried at last to a deep sepulchre beside the chapel under a group of trees, a strong hot wind blew up from the river, engulfing us in dust. It was almost as if nature was also in mourning.

At a simple prayer after the day’s events, Br. Martin expressed the Ashram’s sense of loss. But, he said, when Fr Bede had been told before he died that the Ashram would always remain a kind of memorial to his spirit, he had objected by saying, “Not my spirit – that is not important; what is important is the Holy Spirit.” I remember Fr Bede as really a man infused by that Other Spirit – a Spirit which is eternal, and which is the Comforter. It is that Spirit which renews creation and is present everywhere, though we often do not recognize it. Perhaps here in the person of Fr Bede, we can learn to see the workings of the Spirit in the transformation of the world in which we live. Fr Bede wanted to live the mystery of the Trinity. We remember him for his Truth, for his Consciousness which he clung on to the very end, and ultimately his spirit of Joy which gave expression to his experience of the Holy Spirit.

Lillian Silburn

by Bettina Bäumer

On 19th March 1993 the French scholar of indology and mystic Lillian Silburn died in Le Vésinet, near Paris, at the age of 85. To the outside world she was known as a great Sanskrit scholar, who had made original contributions to Vedic and Buddhist studies, but whose greatest merit was the “discovery” of the Kashmir Śaiva tradition. In fact, it is mainly due to her painstaking and beautiful translations of the Kashmiri Śaiva texts that this important school of Indian philosophy and mysticism became known and attracted scholars and seekers alike. Her introductions to these texts are illuminating and they transmit more than scholarly analyses, they introduce us in a spiritual world with great sensibility and depth.

Lillian Silburn worked together with the great French Vedist Louis Renou, and she was associated with the C.N.R.S., the Scientific Council of France, during her entire academic career. She was designated “Master of research” and devoted all her time to her studies and writing and to guiding seekers on the mystical path.

She came to India before Independence and, at a time when Kashmir was almost inaccessible to foreigners, she travelled to Kashmir in search of Pandits of the Kashmir Śaiva tradition with whom she could study the texts. She was fortunate to meet Swami Lakshman Joo who at that time lived in solitude at the foot of the mountains, and who agreed to teach her. For many years she spent months in Kashmir learning from Swami Lakshman Joo. Besides him, she met a Sufi guru at Kanpur who transmitted to her the highest experience.

Lillian Silburn was a rare combination of a scholar and a mystic. Without any external publicity, remaining hidden, she yet attracted many spiritual seekers, and a group of her disciples met for regular meditation. She was always open to help any sincere seeker and she had the rare capacity to transmit the light and joy she was constantly bathed in. In fact, it is impossible to describe her wonderful presence, her fine sense of humour, her radiant joy, the depth of her silence. All those who were fortunate to have met her feel a deep sense of loss.

As far as I remember, it was Swami Abhishiktananda who first talked to me about her, who recommended me to read her books and to meet her. I am grateful to him for this, because she was one of the most powerful and subtle spiritual personalities I ever met. And I am grateful to Lillian for her kindness to me, for the unforgettable sessions with her, for her inspiration and encouragement.

Dr Dinesh K. Mehta

by Uma M. Vesci

Dadaji has gone! He was a very good friend of Swami Abhishiktananda, and one who, according to the latter, genuinely embodied the depth of “Hindu” or better, “Indian” spirituality. Actually, the broadmindedness of Dadaji, together with the circumstances of his life, put him at the cross point of many religious traditions. He was, in fact, a Parsi by birth; and throughout his life and spiritual experiences never forgot his origins and duly paid his homages and respects to Zarathustra and his Fire Godhead. But he also strongly felt his Hindu milieu, with its traditions, its pull toward inner personal experience and the Ashram-type organization in which he built his ‘Society of the Servants of God’; and in his way he behaved as a genuine Hindu guru for his followers and devotees. Yet, oddly enough if one keeps in mind his milieu (in which the Mahatma Gandhi also played a substantial role, if only by being his patient in his Nature Cure Clinic), Dadaji’s personal spiritual experience came to him through visions from the christian Rabbi of Nazareth: Jesus the Christ.
This strange and unexpected feature of his "call" into a deep spirituality was what, at first, brought Dadaji, Dr Dinesh Mehta, in contact with Swami Abhishiktananda, Father Henri Le Saux. After the startling apparition with which his repeated previous calls to spirituality were sealed, Dadaji was humble and serious enough to turn to the Christian Church for better and genuine informations about his "Caller". Swamiji, actually, took the place of a Goan priest who was rebuked by the official Church when it became clear that Dr Dinesh Mehta did not intend to convert according to the rules. Swamiji's position as a Christian Sadhu removed all obstacles in his interactions with "holy people" belonging to Hinduism or other religions.

But, once in contact, Dadaji and Swamiji met on a common ground of adusita inclinations, acosmic depths, and deep spiritual affinities. What Christ's personal call brought to Dadaji was not a closer approach to the Christian message as the official Church holds it, nor a Christian bent in the running of his Society (apart from the unknown identity of his designation, 'the Servant of the Servants of God', with that used for the Pope in the Vatican City), but rather a kind of seal or mark in his personal spiritual path. As the Christ's main characteristic as a human person was his close association with suffering and pain, which culminated in the agony of his Passion and Death on the Cross, so Dadaji's happy nature, born laughing and striving towards a perfection which he sought first in a complete control of his body and meticulous concern for health, was soaked in sorrow and pain, till it reached the bottom of unbearable.

Under the weight of his care for the troubles of others, his once perfect body deteriorated, losing its independence, his heir and support of the Society preceded him in his last samadhi and he knew the depth of loneliness and despair. In all this he never learnt the solace of crying. He could only burst into sudden laughter when his feelings become too powerful to be kept inside. Perhaps, the deterioration of his health and of his surrounding, which by Hindu standards would possibly be taken as witness to his failure to keep up with his spiritual message of self-perfection and self-realization, is what testifies to the height of his "call" and his faithfulness to it. Christ died as a failure on a foreign instrument of cursed death; Dadaji reached the bottom of human helplessness, even denied the last comfort of his heir, Mataji Sundari, and was left with his poor, stranded followers whom he was no longer able to sustain and comfort.

It is only fair to think that he at last could burst into an hearty final laugh, this time of genuine happiness and relief, when he was at last allowed to be finally released from his sufferings.

NEWS

The Abhishiktananda Society. The business of the Society is carried on by the Executive Committee in India, which meets once or twice each year. Apart from the Occasional Bulletin (distributed free), it does not engage in publishing on its own, but fosters the publication of Abhishiktananda's writings in various languages and seeks to ensure the quality of translations through its representatives (e.g., the President for German, Miss C. Conio for Italian). In order to further dialogue between Hindus and Christians in the spirit of Abhishiktananda, it has organized two "retreat-seminars" (the latest in December 1993), whose proceedings will be published in book form. It also helps research students and others interested in Abhishiktananda to have access to materials which they may require.

Members of the Society took part in the Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago last year, including Prof. R. Panikkar, Mme O. Baumer-Despeighe and Prof. James E. Royster, who made contributions from Abhishiktananda's experience.

In July 1993, on the initiative of Dom Godfrey Stokes of Elmore Abbey, a day's meeting was organized in London, hosted by the Society of St John the Evangelist. After Dom Godfrey's papers, lively discussions took place to which J. Stuart and especially the president (coming from Vienna) were able to contribute.

Mme O. Baumer is frequently invited to speak, especially to religious communities, both in Europe and further afield. Last year these included Swamiji's own community (Abbey of St Anne, Kergonan), the nuns of the Abbey of Our Lady and St Peter, Faremountiers, and the Carmelite Convent on Mount Carmel in Israel.

The video of Patrice Chagnard's film; "Swamiji: an interior journey" was shown in Bangalore on the occasion of Abhishiktananda's 20th anniversary. Afterwards Fr G. Gisbert-Sauch showed it to seven other groups in the city. If desired, copies can be obtained from the Secretary.
Articles on Abhishiktananda. Two thought-provoking articles on the important question of Abhishiktananda’s experience of Advaita have appeared:


Besides, Fr James Stuart’s article on Swamiji has appeared in The Mountain Path:


An article by Mrs O. Baumer appeared in the Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, no.48 (October 1993) “The Spiritual Way of H.Le Saux/Sv. Abhishiktananda” – unedited (sc. unpublished) texts. This utilizes parts of Swamiji’s Journal and correspondence which have not so far been published.


Donations to the Society received since December 1992:

Thanks are due to the following: Fr J. Mattam, Mr Andrew Robinson, Fr John W. Groff (Jr), Prof. Milena Pavan, Mr Maurice Salen, Br Rolf Fernandez, Mme R. Lefebure, Sr Rebecca, Fr Douglas Conlan, Fr R. Stephens, Mr Martin Heath, Dr Ursula Baatz, Ms Bocara, Jonathan Monk, and Anon.

Donations towards the cost of printing and postage of SETU are welcome, since there is no subscription.

Abhishiktananda Society, Registered Office: 7 Court Lane, Delhi – 110054
Address of the President: Dr Bettina Bäumer, B 1/159 Assi Ghat, Varanasi – 221005