

## ABHISHIKTANANDA SOCIETY

Brotherhood House, 7 Court Lane,  
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“There is always an element of aestheticism in our way of sharing the lot of the poor. There is always something wanting in respect of the complete truth . . . I know something of this myself, living as I do half with the established Church and half with those who have nothing, half with Christians and half with Hindus—a very uncomfortable situation, believe me! That is why I find your remark about the ‘bridge’ very illuminating. It is precisely one’s existence as a bridge that makes this uncomfortable situation worth while. The world, at every level, needs such bridges. If, to be a Hindu with Hindus, I had become a complete sannyasi, I would be unable either to communicate the Hindu message to Christians or the Christian message to Hindus . . . However, the danger of living as a ‘bridge’ is that one risks not really belonging anywhere, whereas, however harrowing it may be, one has to belong wholly to both sides. This is only possible in God’s mystery.” (Letter, 9 February 1967)

### THE STUDY WEEK

*Date:* Sunday 4 December to Saturday 10 December 1983.  
*Place:* Retreat & Study Centre, Rajput, Dehra Dun-248 009, U.P.

*Theme:* “The role of Renunciation in the Contemporary World”. Aspects of the theme will be presented by speakers from the great religious traditions, who will relate them to the urgent problems of our day. The findings of the Holyoke

Symposium (mentioned in the last *Bulletin*, and now available in Professor Panikkar's new book, *Blessed Simplicity*) are likely to be relevant to our study.

*Character* of the week: we hope to have an experience of living together in a contemplative and prayerful atmosphere. As well as the two main sessions for discussion, there will be time for shared prayer and meditation and for worship, led by persons of different traditions.

*Invitations* to speakers will shortly be sent out by the organizing committee. Others who would like to know more about the Study week are asked to write to the Secretary at the address of the Society.

*Finance*: we are in a position to offer free hospitality at Rajpur to all participants. We also hope to have sufficient funds to meet the cost of II Class rail fare within India for any who require it.

### ‘GOD’S HARPSTRING’

**Abhishiktananda as perceived by Fr. Shigeto Oshida of Japan**

There was some secret in him which he revealed to nobody, a certain vision in the secret place of his heart which was so much ‘him’ that he did not disclose it in any way, not even perhaps to himself. “Even the wickedest, even the meanest, is not excluded from Christ”—not precisely this, but something like this, not a concept however, but a living Light which suffused the natural light of his intelligence and enabled him to choose instinctively the more essential.

The uniformity of his life—a hermit’s life constantly maintained in spite of his outgoing tendencies—discloses the existence of a Secret in him. His single-eyed devotion to his own *raison d’être* is not to be attributed to some ‘Breton’ quality of flint-like persistence.

When Jean Leclercq, the French mediaevalist, came to our fraternity So-an, situated in the mountainous part of Japan, I took him to see our nearby spring, and before leaving he presented me with a copy of *Une messe aux sources du Gange* (Eng., *The Mountain of the Lord*) by Dom Le Saux. Ever afterwards the freshness of our gushing spring reminded me vividly

of those “sources of the Ganges” described by this unknown and yet somehow intimate person.

In the same year 1968, at an international conference on Monasticism, held in Bangkok, I heard the name of Dom Le Saux as having been one of the invitees; but he had declined to come. This fact turned my attention to him more seriously.

In 1970 I received a visit at So-an from Murray Rogers who had come to Japan from India in connection with the East Asia Christian Conference. He urged and well-nigh compelled me to attend some of his meetings, and I discovered the spiritual solitude in which at these sessions he so often found himself. I could not forget the urgency of his face as we said goodbye on the platform of the station at Atami; and thus, when I received his letter of invitation to India, I could not find it in my heart to refuse. He was himself shortly about to leave India. He told me that Dom Le Saux, whom I shall henceforward more properly call ‘Swami Abhishiktananda’ or simply ‘Swamiji’, would also be waiting for me, having come down from his hermitage at Uttarkashi in the Himalayas. I knew of the close relationship that existed between Swamiji and Murray. I sensed in this letter something bigger than friendship. I felt that something very symbolic was taking place.

Jyotniketan, the small community of which Murray was the leader, was an indispensable place for Swamiji in the carrying out of his vocation. Here was one of the few places where he could feel himself really at home and understood—somewhere where he could talk freely and unburden himself of some of the mental sufferings inevitable in one whose ‘blood’, despite his manner of life, was still inexorably French . . .

Together we made a pilgrimage to Hardwar and there, on the first night as we sat on the bank of the Ganges, Murray put the question: “What has Christianity meant to this land of India?” I said a few words and then fell silent, and we continued to sit in a deep quietness under a crescent moon, listening to the rapid stream. I was ‘listening in’ to the one Mysterious Note that was and is at the source of the integrity of both my companions, a note sounded by the principal string of the harp of God on which he has lovingly played since the world began. Four years later, soon after we together received in the Old City of Jerusalem the news of Swamiji’s death, I remarked to Murray:

"There are certain others endeavouring to live a Christian community life in India in the Hindu style, but it seems to me that the atmosphere of their lives is a little different from that of Swamiji. Don't you think so?" He replied: "I think it is very different. He dived simply and completely into the Ocean of Hinduism." This man who once before, when taken prisoner by the Germans, had after an hour and a half clambered through a hedge and jumped from there to freedom, plunged later into the Ocean of Hinduism, this time to remain for the rest of his life. And this time he leapt in naked, retaining nothing . . . You would know what I mean if you watched him, dressed as a Hindu swami, enter a shop on a narrow street to buy a little napkin of cotton or some other small item that forms an indispensable adjunct to the Indian way of life . . .

But, I must tell you, my friends, of another harpstring, lest I be guilty of a grave omission. The harpstring of which I spoke just now is the harpstring of Soul and Spirit, but now I am going to tell of the harpstring of Body and Heart.

I perceived in Swamiji a remarkable thing. Despite the completeness of his dive, his own character and nature, even his western education, remained in him 'safe and sound', genuinely without loss or diminution. Herein lay a drama of the soul.

He lived among Hindu sadhus and swamis in a natural manner, and himself took Indian nationality. For him this was simple and straightforward, and at the same time he remained, equally simply, himself. Yet this deep dive into Hinduism had meant inevitably a complete rupture with the past. In his daily living his past remained hidden, unknown to those among whom he moved. For some twenty years he was cut off, physically at least, from his motherland, his family, friends and Benedictine brothers, and from the culture which through his early years had shaped him from birth. Never again did he taste the bread, cheese and wines of his childhood. He never returned to France.

During the first week of my stay in Jyotimiketan I was confined to my bed, and each day, morning and evening, Swamiji came to visit me—and long were our talks if Murray, fearful lest I be overtired, did not come to take him away! Sometimes during these talks he would allow to escape his lips those inner thoughts that will never be published. On one such evening all

the members of the ashram gathered in my room for recreation and evening prayer, and I suggested to Swamiji that he should sing us a song of Brittany. He covered his face with his hand in a quick movement and after an intake of breath stayed very still, instinctively doing violence to some inner urge. He did not weep, but I saw the trembling of the heart within him. The silence was heavy and I regretted my own thoughtless stupidity. After a few moments he started to sing a Breton fisherman's song in a rather broken voice. It was only then that I realized the intensity of his drama.

As we walked round the streets of Hardwar, Swamiji spoke of his own Thomist training and the Gregorian chant which figures so prominently in Benedictine life. Then, while walking on the banks of the Ganga river, he told me of something which had happened in Lucknow a few years previously, in a Hindu ashram. Swamiji was in the ashram kitchen and was watching two girls, both Catholics, who were making chapattis. It was Christmas time, the feast of the Nativity. One of the girls began to sing in Gregorian a chant of the feast, and the other soon joined in. They, like myself at Jyotimiketan, were quite unaware of the drama of Swamiji . . . Suddenly the repression of many years gave way, and he cried out explosively: "Stop, please stop!" "It was," he said, "an *ecartement*, a real *ecartement* (it really tore me asunder)." An older Hindu who was standing by said: "Christ is here. I am looking at him."

This second harpstring is intertwined with the first so that, like soul and body, they cannot be distinguished.

God played on this harp a melody that was little known but very beautiful, and one of the most beautiful notes of all was, I think, the last—so clear, so transparent, though rather solitary—solitary, and yet a culmination and summary of all the rest. The last touch of the hand of God sounds often the most exquisite note of all. He fell in a street of Rishikesh, stricken by a heart attack. Some months later, never fully recovered, he entered the sleep of deep peace in the Sister's Hospital at Indore.

Oh, praised be God by that beautiful harp that was Swamiji himself! We await the day when we shall hear your music once again and now transfigured. May you receive the reward of your solitude.

Surely the beauty of his music will one day be revealed—the

music of this man whom many regarded as a weird and even crazy monk.

#### REVIEWS

*Interiorite et Revelation: essais theologiques* by Henri Le Saux, OSB (Swami Abhishiktananda). Ed. Presence, 1982, 333p. 87F.

(Reviewed in *Informations catholiques internationales* of 15 Sept. 1982 by I-H. Dalmais.)

That great and fine book (*Henri Le Saux: le passeur entre deux rives*) by M-M. Davy began to uncover the significance of the extraordinary experience which for a quarter of a century was lived out by this Benedictine monk from Brittany who boldly plunged into the fire of India's spiritual tradition. The texts already published—notably in the essays collected in *Initiation a la spiritualite des Upanishads* (Presence, 1979)—mark stages in his deep exploration into the depths of this tradition. Those which are now brought together in this book enable us to follow some of the decisive steps in his reflection as a Christian theologian. In fact it was not long—herein lay his anguish—before Fr. Le Saux perceived the limits of such reflection at the level of concepts and the inevitable hiatus between the words which we have to use and the experience into which he entered, that of 'non-duality' (*advaita*). In addition, a number of these essays (which, like Teilhard de Chardin, he wrote to gain a better understanding of the experience he was living) have remained unfinished.

The introduction, precise and discriminating, is by Fr. Jacques Dupuis, a Jesuit theologian and biblical scholar, who has long lived in India and was closely associated with Fr. Le Saux. In it he draws out the basic themes of this undertaking and the questions which remain open—and are, perhaps, to some extent insoluble—from the point of view of the Christian theologian.

*Indian Christian Sanyasa and Swami Abhishiktananda* by Emmanuel Vattakuzhy. Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1981. pp. xx + 244. Rs. 20.

Professor of St Joseph's Pontifical Seminary in Alwaye, Kerala, Dr. Vattakuzhy offers here what is probably the first full

length theological study of the thought of Swami Abhishiktananda. It centres on the insights of Swami on the nature of *sanyasa*. But the book does more: it gives fairly comprehensive information about Abhishiktananda's life and thought, and explores the question of *sanyasa* from other sources, Hindu and Christian, well beyond the writings of Abhishiktananda. At times this extraneous matter seems to interfere somewhat with the flow of idea.

The book is well informed in the area it covers, as the author had access to all the published and unpublished material by and on the Swami of Gyansu. (My review article, "Exploring the Further Shore" in *Vidyajyoti*, December 1976, is however not mentioned. I would think it is relevant to the matter studied, and the problems there mentioned about Abhishiktananda's theology of *Sanyasa* have unfortunately not been tackled in the thesis.) One of my problems with this book, however, is that it is too synthetic: it seems to me that it interprets Abhishiktananda's thinking in *The Further Shore* in terms of his earlier *Sagesse hindoue* . . . (*Saccidananda*). One could argue that at the end of his life the Swami had moved away from (or one may prefer to say, beyond) the view presented in his earlier books, *Saccidananda* and *Meeting-Point*.

This is undoubtedly an important contribution to the theological thought of Abhishiktananda, and his friends will be grateful to Fr. Vattakuzhy for his sympathetic and painstaking effort.

G. Gispert-Sauch, S.J.

#### NOTES

*The Diary of Abhishiktananda*. Good progress has been made in preparing the manuscript for publication, and it is hoped that the French edition will be ready in time for Swami's 10th anniversary in December 1983.

*The Memoir of Abhishiktananda* is in active preparation, and ISPCK plans to publish it before December.

*Blessed Simplicity* by Professor Panikkar is published by Seabury, New York.

Fr. M. Basil Pennington OCSO has kindly sent copies of his books, which contain several references to Abhishiktananda.

*Daily We Touch Him* and *Centering Prayer* (Doubleday, 1977, 1980) present the call to contemplation to western people. *Monastic Journey to India* (Seabury 1982) contains a long section on Shantivanam.

We are grateful for continued contact with Centro Inter-religioso Henri Le Saux in Milan and for the *Notizie*, edited by Miss C. Conio. Similarly we are very glad to receive from the Monchanin Cross-Cultural Centre (4917 St-Urbain, Montreal, H2T 2W1) their magazine, now called *Inter-Culture*; from the Benedictine Priory (1475 Pine Avenue W., Montreal, H3G 1B3) the Letters of Dom John Main; and from the A.I.M. North American Board for East-West Dialogue (Osage Monastery, Rt. 1, Box 384-C, Sand Springs, OK 74063) their *Bulletin*. In the Feb. 1982 issue it contained an article by Abhishiktananda, "The Depth-Dimension of Religious Dialogue". Its Secretary, Sr. M. Pascaline Coff OSB, maintains a stock of Swamiji's books for the western hemisphere.

*Donations* received since the last Bulletin are acknowledged with thanks: Shri Dharam Paul, Rev. Richard W. Taylor, Prof. Corrado Pensa, Rev. R.D. Keithahn, Mr. Anthony E. Gilles, Miss Rose S. Massey, Nashdom Abbey, Dr. Madan, Dr. (Mrs) M. Chatterjee, Rev. L.N. Childs, Mme R. Lefebure, Mr. D. McCarthy, Shri P.Y. Deshpande.

For convenience cheques and drafts should kindly be made out in the name of "Abh'shiktananda Society", rather than in the name of any individual.

*The Bulletin*. Please inform the Secretary if you know of anyone else who would like to receive the Bulletin.