

Abhishiktananda's Contribution to
Present-day Hindu-Christian Theological Research

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In order to evaluate Henri Le Saux's contribution to the current theological debate—in India as well as in Europe—we must first be clear what we mean by a specifically Indo-Christian theological investigation, and why it is so important that contemporary theology enter into to dialogue with the religious traditions of India.

Indo-Christian theology is the direction theology takes when it accepts India's challenge to Christianity and looks for ways to integrate and to enrich itself through the categories of Indian metaphysics and revelation. India's great challenge to the Church—especially India's Vedantin *advaita* tradition—is idealism and pantheism. Now it is true that the Church has always been involved in dialogue, has always integrated the cultures that it has come into contact with, be they Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Syrian, or other. As Monchanin noted, “It took four centuries for Christianity to integrate the culture that came from Greece; it will take at least that long to do the same for India.”¹

In his book *On the Essence of Christianity*,² Adolf von Harnack used the metaphor of a seed and a tree to describe his understanding the essence of Christianity. He argued that the essence—the seed—of Christianity was simply the original message of Jesus; Christianity's essence had nothing to do with the cultures that later shaped Christian doctrine. Loisy took the opposite position, arguing that the essence of Christianity was not the seed, but the tree that came into being when the message of Christ came into contact with the different cultures of the world.³

Le Saux was in agreement with the approach taken by Loisy. As he said, he had come to India to discover the hidden truths of Christianity. If Christianity is true, he argued, it will still be intact after traveling the way of yoga, and after passing through the tunnel of Vedantin *advaita*.

Before looking more closely at Le Saux's contribution to Indo-Christian theological investigation, however, we need to consider the early and later foundations of his own theology. I would stress the importance of the influence Jules Monchanin had on Le Saux, an influence that, in my opinion, has not been sufficiently recognized. If we do not know the theological position of Monchanin, I do not believe we can to understand *Sagesse hindoue, mystique chrétienne*, the most systematic Le Saux's book. The same could also be said about Teilhard de Chardin, whose thinking

¹ Jules Monchanin, *Mistica dell'India e mistero cristiano* (Genova: Marietti, 1992), p. 197.

² Adolf Harnack, *L'essenza del cristianesimo* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2003).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Monchanin integrated into his own theology and who played an equally important role in Abhishiktananda's thought.

The influence of Monchanin on *Sagesse hindoue, mystique chrétienne* is very clear. In this book, which Le Saux intended as his most important theological work, he cites the favorite authors of Monchanin—Gregory of Nyssa, Ruusbroec, Teilhard de Chardin—and he employs categories dear to Monchanin, such as *co-esse* and *pleroma*⁴. Le Saux's dependence on these authors in his earlier writings makes it possible for us to affirm that in the 1960s he was in total agreement with the theology of participation. Inclusivism, and fulfilment.

It is true that when Le Saux translated *Sagesse* into English in 1971-1972, he said that he now found it too Greek and would have expressed himself differently⁵. Nonetheless, he did translate it and had it published. By doing so, he recognized his debt to Monchanin. After Monchanin's death, Le Saux continued to regard himself as his disciple, even though the mystical experiences that followed his heart attack took him even farther away from the position of his mentor, especially when he said that his previous position had collapsed.⁶ The last writings of Le Saux, indeed, can no longer be read in the light of the inclusivist/fulfilment theology of Monchanin, Teilhard, or Rahner, but rather according to Raimon Panikkar's understanding of the presence of Christ, an understanding that is problematic, as we shall see later, because its sharp distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith leads, it would seem, to pluralism and relativism.

What then is the difference between Le Saux and Monchanin? In what way did Le Saux distance himself from Monchanin? Monchanin believed that *advaita* would have to die in order to enter into the *pleroma* of Christ. Le Saux did not. He believed that it was absolutely necessary for the Church to integrate *advaita*. Monchanin was against apophatism.⁷ Le Saux was not. Monchanin had offered India a theological proposal that was in harmony with Indian sensibilities, and yet radically different, since it was so totally Christian. He no longer looked for a true synthesis, for he believed that it was impossible.

⁴ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda. A Christian Approach to advaitic experience* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), pp. 134-142.

⁵ He said, "Je n'écrirais plus le livre tel quel; j'y ai été encore trop esclave des concepts grecs." Henri Le Saux, *Intériorité et révélation* (Sisteron : Editions Presence), p. 22.

⁶ Some months before his heart attack, Le Saux had written in his diary: "L'intera mia tesi di *Sagesse* è crollata" Abhishiktananda, *Diario di un monaco cristiano-samnyasin hindù*, [2 febbraio 1973] (Milano: Mondadori), p. 469.

⁷ Monchanin, *Lettres à sa mère 1913-1957*. Texte établi et présenté par Françoise Jacquin, (Paris: Cerf, 1989), p. 542.

In this regard, a question that Monchanin asked about yoga can help us understand how he differed from Le Saux. Monchanin wanted to know if yoga denotes essence or existence⁸. His question most likely reflects the debate that took place in the 1920s about the difference between acquired and infused contemplation, the difference, in other words, between natural contemplation, which is the fruit of human effort, and supernatural contemplation, which is a gift of God. The origin of this distinction can be traced back to the Fathers of the Church, who used the terms *theōria physiké* and *theologia* to explain how they differed. They were probably looking for some way to explain the mystical experiences of Plotinus, but the same need for an explanation is present when we consider the experiences of Shankara or of the Buddha. Le Saux differed from Monchanin in his belief that yoga involved essence: it was *theologia*, not *theōria physiké*. It was this faith in Hinduism that brought about a crisis in his relationship with Monchanin. It also brought about a crisis in his relationship to himself and to his Christian roots.

In addition to the differences already existing between these two founders, Le Saux developed a new perspective on Christian-Hindu theological investigation. At the basis of this new perspective is what I call a “tantric turn.” It seems that Le Saux came to the conclusion that the dialogue between Christianity and Vedantin *advaita* could not move forward.⁹ Thus, he began to draw closer to tantrism—even though no one at the time understood it very well, not even he. Abhishiktananda stopped speaking about *maya*—pure and simple illusion—as a negative function, and instead began to speak about *maya/shakti*, which has a positive function, because *shakti* is the divine energy in the cosmos that comes from God and leads back to God¹⁰.

What is interesting and important in this development is that Le Saux approaches tantric *shakti* in terms of the spirit referred to by Teilhard de Chardin and also of the uncreated energies of hesychasm. Le Saux’s experience can no longer be read through the lens of the classical axis between Shankara and Eckhart; it must now be read through the lens of the axis between Abhinavagupta and Gregory Palamas. It is no accident that Olivier Clement called Le Saux a “Palamist,”¹¹ and that in his last book, *Sannyasa*, Le Saux cited Silburn, who was one of the first

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 177

⁹ Richard De Smet, a theologian who was a contemporary of Le Saux, thought it could, but he and Sister Sara Grant were referring to a reading of Shankara that is no longer monistic. They understood Shankara through Kokileswar Sastri Vidyaratna, a thinker Monchanin also thought highly of and already knew of in 1941. Cf. J. Monchain, *Mistica dell’India, mistero cristiano*, p. 150.

¹⁰ Le Saux, *Diario di un monaco cristiano-sannyasin hindù*, [5 December 1953], p. 137.

¹¹ Monchanin, *Lettres d’un sannyasi chrétien a Joseph Lemarie* (Paris : Cerf, Paris 1999), p. 319.

translators of Tantric texts.¹² However, for the sake of historical accuracy, it must be said that Silburn corresponded with Monchanin, who at first thought it would be possible to make a connection between Kashmir Shaivism and sophiology.¹³ Moreover, Monchanin had called attention to the tantric roots of Aurobindo, who is another author of fundamental importance for Abhishiktananda¹⁴.

However, as I have already said, this “tantric turn” of Le Saux cannot be understood without reference to Teilhard de Chardin. *Shakti*, in fact, has the same function that the spirit has for Teilhard. If the tantric *shakti* is imminent and leads to Shiva, the Teilhardian spirit comes from pan-Christism imminent in the cosmos and leads to Cristogenesis, that is, the birth of Christ.

The encounter with Tantrism and Teilhard produces in Le Saux a new concept of *advaita*. It is no longer the acosmic Vedantin *advaita*, but a cosmic *advaita*, an *advaita* of the spirit, an *advaita* with *shakti* and the spirit of Cristogenesis present in matter and in the cosmos. The theology of Teilhard de Chardin, in fact, as understood by Monchanin, is essential to overcome both the pantheism and the idealism of Vedantin *advaita*. According to Teilhard the world is not immediately real; rather, it “becomes” real, it is even divinized, and this divinization comes about through Christ. The divinization of humanity and the cosmos, however, does not lead to pantheism—that is, to a fusion with or absorption in the divine—but to integration. The ontological difference between God and man is preserved. There is, we might say, an identity-in-difference. Chardin’s evolutionary model, in which Le Saux recognized his own position, thus makes it possible for Le Saux to overcome the all-important antithesis between immanence and transcendence, between emptiness and fullness, between *shunya* and *pleroma*. The world is a void that is filled by Christ through an evolutionary process that begins with matter, in which the spirit/*shakti* is present.

This position of Le Saux, however has changed in the last weeks of his life, after his “awakening.” Therefore we have to deal with the problems raised by the theology of Le Saux, especially the theology that is expressed in his final mystical writings. There are, in fact, two different sources. On the one hand, *Sagesse* and his other published books from this last period of his life, which do not raise any question of doctrine, and his diary, which he himself often did not review and which he often said contained only “working hypotheses.”

¹² Monchanin, *Initiation à la spiritualité des Upanishads* (Sisteron: Editions Présence, 1979), p. 167.

¹³ Monchanin, *Mistica dell’India e mistero cristiano*, pp. 157, 174, 196, 250.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 285-305 and 307-308.

The problems raised by the theology of Le Saux are basically two: one related to apophaticism and one related to Christology.

Regarding apophaticism, it must be said that Le Saux made reference to the doctrine of *avirodhavada*, which originates in the Buddhist *Nagarjuna* and which Gaudapada brought to Shankara. There are two levels of *avirodhavada*, and they should not be placed in opposition to one another. Difference belongs to the lower level, and identity to the upper. By adapting this principle Le Saux makes an interesting correction and draws a distinction between relativity, that is, the conditional aspect of religions and revelations, and relativism, which has a negative connotation¹⁵.

But in terms of a Christian point of view, Le Saux's position is still relativistic. Interestingly, Cardinal Ratzinger, in his book *Truth and Tolerance*, had challenged both the alleged Hellenization of Christianity and orthopraxis. That is to say, the future pope wanted to emphasize that Christian doctrine comes directly from the Bible, and that it is wrong to give greater importance to praxis than to dogma¹⁶. With regard to *avirodhavada*, however, the mystical experience of Le Saux, with its emphasis on *sahaja*, that is, on spontaneity and naturalness, seems closer to Zen Buddhism—which was indeed influenced by *nagarjuna*—than to Hinduism, even if it is true that Ramana Maharishi already talked about *sthiti sahaja*¹⁷.

With regard to problems arising from Christology, however, it must be said that they are reflected in the contemporary theological debate around the positions of Dupuis, Geffré, and Panikkar, not to mention theologians who espouse pluralism. Now it seems quite clear that the Christology of Panikkar and that of Le Saux are complementary. The theological reflection of Panikkar was certainly helpful to Le Saux, but I have the impression that Panikkar, with his neologisms, placed the mystical experience of his friend in a more systematic framework.

The problem comes from the fact that Dupuis, who was a friend of both, and sought to soften the problematic aspects of their Christology and make it more orthodox by distinguishing the incarnate Logos and the pre-incarnate Logos, found himself censured by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith¹⁸.

¹⁵ See J.B. Trapnell, "Panikkar, Abhishiktananda, and the Distinction between Relativism and Relativity in Religious Discourse" in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 41 (2004) 431-455.

¹⁶ Josef Ratzinger, *Fede verità tolleranza. Il cristianesimo e le religioni del mondo* (Siena: Cantagalli), pp. 97 and 127.

¹⁷ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda. A Christian Approach to advaitic experience*, pp. 38, 40, 196.

¹⁸ *Notificazione a proposito di un libro di p. J. Dupuis*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 26-27 febbraio 2001, 11.

The position of Dupuis—and also of Geffré—can be traced back to the mysticism of Abhishiktananda. Although he himself may not have been aware of it, Le Saux was the first to have made such a radical distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ. With Le Saux, in fact, Christ becomes a kind of ontological category that is reached by those who, having evolved spiritually, have attained enlightenment.

The monk, not surprisingly, ended his spiritual journey using the vedantic category of *aham asm* (I am) without making any distinction between Christ's "I am" and the "I am" of a human being. In one of his last letters he wrote, "What Christ is, I am."¹⁹ Teilhard de Chardin spoke about a spiritual evolution that culminates in an awakening that can be called Christ, or better, "Son." Abhishiktananda, however, does not fully explain the difference between his being a son and the divine Sonship of Jesus, between his way of being Christ and Jesus' way of being Christ.²⁰

I recently came across an interesting article on the Internet entitled "Can Jesus be called Siva?"²¹ The title accurately captures the thinking of Le Saux. But the only possible response from the standpoint of Catholic doctrine, if we are not to revert to a Nestorian position, is "no." The uniqueness of Christ consists in the fact that the historical Jesus and the Christ are inseparable.

On closer examination, however, what we are dealing with here it is ultimately the problem of the name that mystics give to the "depths" of the soul. Buddhists speak of *thathagata*, the Buddha nature present in every human being, tantrics speak of Shiva, Christians, speak of the generation of the Word (Eckhart), of the Cosmic Christ (Maximus the Confessor), of Cristogenesis (Teilhard de Chardin), or of Christophania (Panikkar)..

But the question is: how does one give a name to a reality that is beyond all names? That exists on another level of being? The contribution that Le Saux makes to the contemporary Hindu-Christian theological debate is, in the last analysis, to ask crucial questions, to open a debate that has not yet come to a conclusion.

Abhishiktananda's legacy, therefore, is twofold: a heritage and challenge. The heritage is left to the mystics who must live the experience that he lived. The challenge is left to the theologians, who must find better ways of making clear the mystery of Jesus Christ *in se* and the mystery of Christ present in the depths of every human being.

¹⁹ James Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda. His life told through his letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 308.

²⁰ He said, for example, without any further comment, "There is only One Son. Each of his manifestation is both one and unique" (*ibid.*, p. 310).

²¹ <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/Issue3/Dupuche.htm>