

ABHISHIKTANANDA SOCIETY

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In the heart of every man there is something – a drive? – which is already there when he is born and will haunt him unremittingly until his last breath. It is a mystery which encompasses him on every side, but one which none of his faculties can ever attain to or, still less, lay hold of. It cannot be located in anything that can be seen, heard, touched or known in this world. There is no sign for it – not even the would-be transcendent sign of sannyāsa.

It is a bursting asunder at the very heart of being, something utterly unbearable. But nevertheless this is the price of finding the treasure that is without name or form or sign. It is the unique splendour of the Self – but no one is left in its presence to exclaim, "How beautiful it is!"

Abhishiktananda, *The Further Shore*, p.37

A Report on the Retreat-Seminar at Rajpur, 1-6 November 1990 on "MYSTICISM — ŚAIVA AND CHRISTIAN".

It was Swami Abhishiktananda's dream to realize a spiritual dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity. During his life-time most of the dialogue meetings in which he took an active part were in fact ecumenical meetings between Christians encountering Hinduism (cp. *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*). Together we had planned a Hindu-Christian meeting in Varanasi which did not come about. In fact, Swamiji's was a personal dialogue, first within himself, and with his Hindu gurus, friends, fellow sannyasis and disciples. The results of this he passed on to his Christian friends and disciples. Even after his death the "Study Week" which the Abhishiktananda Society planned in 1983 failed to take off. These failures perhaps taught us that real dialogue is not easy, that it cannot be forced, that it cannot even be organized like an academic conference. It becomes possible only after years of friendship and mutual trust. Therefore, it is not a matter of course that seventeen years after Swamiji's departure from this earthly scene a Seminar on Śaiva and Christian Mysticism could be held successfully in Rajpur, Dehra Dun, against the beautiful background of the Himalayan foothills.

At the time when the dates for the meeting were fixed, no one could have foreseen the political and communal tensions which led to cancellation of trains, violence and curfew in many towns in U.P. This troubled situation prevented seven of the speakers from attending the Seminar: but even so there were 27 participants in the six-day Seminar, at which twelve papers presented themes from various mystical traditions, each being followed by a response from a different tradition (thus a Śaiva paper had a Christian respondent, and vice versa). There was also a general introduction by the convener and a concluding session for evaluation. The presentations, the responses and the ensuing discussions were enfolded in times of collective meditation, morning and evening, and each day ended with evening worship led by one of the traditions represented. All Saints (1st Nov.) and Kārtik Pūrṇimā, or Dīpam (2nd Nov.) fell in this week and were celebrated in common.

The participants were not only scholars or religious, but included people from various backgrounds with a serious interest in mysticism (e.g., a medical doctor from Kashmir, a computer engineer, etc.), and this enriched the encounter. It was only at the end of the week that we discovered that we counted representatives of 17 languages among the 27 participants! Some of the Hindus experienced their first exposure to Christianity, and some of the Christians their first encounter with Śaivism. This was important, because academic seminars of specialists mostly remain limited in scope and are inaccessible to non-academics.

The papers maintained a high level of learning and spirituality. In the absence of Dr. K. Sivaraman, the discussions were ably led by Dr. R. Panikkar, who steered us between the two poles of personal sharing of experience on the one side, and of intellectual discussion on the other, into a real spiritual exchange.

There was no systematic attempt to define 'mysticism', which was taken in a broad sense, as was shown by the papers. It became clear that each spiritual tradition is a galaxy in itself, and that simple comparison is not possible, because this would presuppose a view from outside. We discovered many correspondences/homologies in the various mystical traditions, and yet were aware of the danger of making easy equations at the level of language (e.g., if we translate *icchā śakti* as 'will power'). Concepts have their meaning only in their total context. And yet communication is possible, at the deepest level in silence — as was intensely experienced in the last session.

In the absence of six Śaiva scholars who were prevented from coming by unavoidable circumstances, the discussion had a tendency to revert to

Vedantic concepts which bring in a very different problematic from that of the Śaiva context. For the same reason, some central aspects of Śaiva mysticism were hardly touched upon, such as *kundalinī yoga*, *krama yoga* and others. Rightly understood, these aspects of Śaiva yoga could be an important bridge to the sacramental and incarnational spirituality of Christianity.

The aim of the Seminar was not to reach any 'conclusions', or points of agreement. As was said in one of the preparatory circulars, the aim was to be found in the seminar itself, in the time spent together in reflection, the exchange of ideas and the deeper being-together in meditation and prayer. Most participants felt that the spiritual and intellectual dimensions became blended together and complemented each other, a combination of *bhakti* and *jñāna*. But the need for more time of personal sharing was also felt.

If we can speak of an indirect result, it may be described as follows: There was no attempt at mixing or diluting traditions, or at reducing the variety of traditions to any single one. On the contrary, the kind of 'super-bazaar' of religious traditions now found in Western countries, in the New Age Movement, etc., was in no way approved of or encouraged. There must be a healthy pluralism, where everyone follows his or her own spiritual path to the end. And yet, we are no longer living in closed systems; there are many lines of communication. A Hindu Swami having a deep experience of Christ, or a Christian finding her spiritual fulfilment in the advaita Śaiva mysticism, are concrete examples. The 'responses' also produced many instances which showed how the insights of one tradition can touch strings at the heart of another tradition. Thus bridges are built which are not based on political slogans, emotional illusions or cheap syncretism, but which are rooted in a deeper experience of reality. Last but not least, the mystical experience by its very nature transcends the narrow limitations of 'religions'.

Another legitimate question was raised, and indeed had been in mind ever since the Seminar was first mooted: Are we not running away from the cruel political and social realities by holding a meeting on mysticism? Are we not encouraging elitism and escapism? Some felt that, on the contrary, such a meeting helps to bridge the gulf between the different religions in this country and elsewhere, and gives an example of the level at which real dialogue should start. One held that the meeting needs no justification, since its value lies in itself. Besides, the example of Meister Eckhart's giving more importance to Martha, as the one who puts her love into practice, and the examples of Śaiva saints being a 'sign' for their times, show that mysticism does not lead to sheer passivity. Only a mystic like

Lal Ded could bridge the gulf between Śaivas and Muslims in Kashmir. But yet, we have to distinguish between the life of mystics which were often lived in times of crisis, and our talking about them.

Thus many issues were raised which could not be fully discussed, and it was therefore felt that this venture must be followed up, and that another meeting should be arranged with a more limited topic. Meanwhile the proceedings of the Seminar will be edited and published.

Bettina Bäumer

Reflections on the Seminar by a participant

It is a good opportunity for me to come over here to realize once again Śivayoga, unity with Śiva, realizing all the time that we who have assembled here are one, abiding in the one heart of the Lord, and that our being is the sole radiation of the central consciousness working through us. We proceed towards the centre, the retreat of *citta*, consciously through the medium of silent meditation so as to reach the source which is beyond speech, while at the same time it is the soundless sound. While approaching the retreat we cross along the way the stages of speech shining as *vaikhari*, *madhyamā* and *paśyanti* in ascending order. We try to make an effort to arrive at *parā*, the ultimate beyond, the core of silence shining luminously, encompassing all in its embrace. The meditation on the silence of nothingness, so to speak, empty of content, whether of form or of name, is so profound and exceedingly sublime that it is ever creative, dancing, pulsating in its relish of one's own delight.

We have here started with the theme of renunciation, negating everything, leaving all things behind and abandoning them, finally considering them as of no value. We first thought of reality as external, and later rejected it also in its internal aspect, to arrive at the nakedness of the Self free from all attributes – the Brahman or *niškala Śiva*. Only through the descent of divine grace can we unify everything that has been negated before. We might call the path of negation the path of *niyoga*; it is not the path of *yoga*. The path of *yoga* unites us not only with Śiva, the divine, but the divine process helps us so that everything shines in the essence of the light of that realization. This Śivayoga is unification of love with justice, unification of knowledge with action, unification of compassion with grace, will with bliss, bliss with consciousness.

H.N.Chakravarty

REVIEW by Dr Margaret Chatterjee

Swami Abhishiktananda: His life told through his letters. I.S.P.C.K., Delhi 1989. Pp. 384. Price: Rs. 95 (India only), \$.20.

The reader will recognize that this book is a labour of love on the part of its editor, for James Stuart draws on fifteen collections of Swamiji's letters which could have been none too easy to decipher, and the volume of correspondence involved during the course of the editing must have been daunting too. The result gives a unique insight into the day to day routine of a remarkable personality through a narrative which has all the excitement of a well-written biography. It is to be hoped that the book will not only be read by those already familiar with Swamiji's writings, but will also attract a larger readership among those who believe that inter-faith relationships need to go beyond encounter and dialogue to a deeper inter-fusion of insight. In terms of witnessing to such interfusion the life and person of Swamiji is unique.

His interest in India dated from 1934 when he was a young monk at Kergonan, but its fulfilment had to wait for many years. A letter written to the Bishop of Tiruchirappalli in 1947 was translated by Fr Jules Monchanin, and this began a close friendship which was to have much importance for them both. Dom Le Saux's first letter to Fr Monchanin gives a good idea of his early hopes for 'the tree of monasticism once more flourishing in all its variety, with hermits, solitaries and mendicants'. As he envisaged it, the ashram form of living would be fully compatible with the Benedictine Rule. There is an interesting mention of Gandhi too: 'Gandhi has asked Christian monks to give an example of manual labour.' He landed at Colombo on 14 August 1948 and went on to Tamilnadu which was the part of India that he first encountered. Learning the language, eating unfamiliar food, wearing the local dress, were all signs of an inner determination to identify himself with the people of India, and also to enter into their experience religiously as far as possible.

His well known meeting with Ramana Maharshi reveals both attraction and puzzlement. Probably it would be true to say that it was the impact of this meeting that provided the ground theme of Swamiji's lifelong exploration of Hindu spirituality (which itself has many mansions). Fr Monchanin and he began living at Shantivanam in March 1950 in conditions which were austere even by monastic standards. The difference in temperament between the two men becomes increasingly apparent. So also is the tension between the solitude of monastic life, the life within, and the project to enter into Indian life, and, more specifically,

make contact with Hindu monks. Not surprisingly this tension has a paradoxical result—his sense of solitude when he is with Hindu monks who cannot share his experience. *Pari passu* he also has the agony of realizing that even the little way he has gone in the direction of entry into the world of Hindu religious life was too much for many of his Christian brethren, especially those with ecclesiastical authority. In the mean time Fr Monchanin worked at an intellectual level, learning about India. On 24.4.54 the Swami writes: 'how agonizing it is to be perched on the knife edge between the opposite slopes of Hinduism and Christianity.' Around this time he makes a comparison between the Greek reliance on concepts and the Hindu attempt to go beyond concepts. This is reiterated in a large number of letters. A rather happy image is illuminating here—the intellect toils... the heart smiles... (p. 82).

Swamiji faced a major disappointment when those whom he hoped would be sympathetic to his *Guhantara* were put off by his whole approach. A question such as the following not unnaturally raised hackles: 'Which is most important—that individuals should be enrolled in the registers of the Church, or that they should live in a state of grace with God?' (Letter, 7.11.54) He also faced difficulty in finding postulants, especially Indian ones, for Shantivanam. The lack of rapport felt on the occasion of Fr Mahieu's visit raises another issue, the extent to which the 'religieux' needs to be of one mind and heart with his associates. The 'inner accretion' (to use Gabriel Marcel's phrase) experienced by Swamiji when he first met Ramana Maharshi in 1949 could hardly be expected to take place in those who had not had the experience. And yet, if experience cannot be 'transmitted', the whole post-Resurrection history of the Church would be impossible to account for. Fr Monchanin's own experience, it is clear from the letters, was not moving in an advaitic direction. Could an experiential influx ever override conceptual incompatibility? The project of trans-conceptualism makes of intellectual obstacles a bridge. But an experiential air must needs hover over such a bridge. What for one is a living experience, as in Swamiji's case, can be sheer hazard for another. To attempt to found a *community* such as Shantivanam brings in other imponderables, for example, the 'extraversion' needed in the day to day running of an institution and how this may fit in with a 'rule' which is largely contemplative. The history of monasticism shows how this has been encompassed, mainly through the recognition of the manifold nature of individual gifts. What Swamiji wanted, of course, went far beyond this. The Study Weeks that took place at Shantivanam after Fr Monchanin's death aimed at a sharing of experiences rather than at an exercise of intellect. Swamiji

continued in his belief that 'it is by the way of asceticism and contemplation that India will hear the message of the Lord' (MT 24.3.61).

On 27.2.63 he wrote to Fr Lemarié: 'no less than Fr Monchanin I remain a European and impenitently Greek'. This is something of a confession in the light of his customary discomfiture about what was 'terribly Jewish' or 'terribly Greek' about Christianity. The reader might wonder whether it would be any better to be 'terribly Hindu'!

It is perhaps the interplay between historical roots and new as simulations that poses challenges. Osmosis, after all, in its botanical sense, is something that takes place at root level. The editor's focussing of Swamiji's objectives in his writings throws much light on these questions. Swamiji, he says, wished to share his experience of the Hindu spiritual heritage as he understood it, recall Christians to the inferiority of their own faith, and finally try to integrate, theologically Hindu *advaita* and Christian faith. Of these the last was probably the most difficult of all. What is particularly persuasive is his belief that the test of integrative thinking (as evidenced, for example, in liturgical innovation) takes place above all at the local church level. To say this is to set *koinonia* above the attainments of individual *sages*, and moreover, not the *koinonia* of the contemplative community, but of congregations already entrenched in their own traditions. Swamiji almost suggests that those who have been able to enter into the experience of the Hindu faith have a calling which is partly pedagogic. This opens up the whole question of the content of ministry in a religiously plural world. To allow that the Spirit speaks in various tongues recalls both Pentecost and the idea of many *swadharmas*. It might be worth reflecting on the different insights of Swamiji and C.F. Andrews in respect of 'uniqueness' and 'fulfilment' in this context.

By 1973 Swamiji was nearing the end of the road. The editor refers to Marc's *diksha* as 'the true culmination of his twenty-five years in India' (p. 338). To begin to understand why this was is to have the key to this extraordinary life. In editing these letters, J. Stuart has put in his debt all those who wish to know more about the experience which nourished Swamiji's writings.

There could scarcely have been a busier person than Swami Abhishikhananda, and there could scarcely have been anyone for whom the descriptions 'pilgrim soul', and '*parivrajaka*' were both so apt.

OTHER NEWS

The *Retreat-Seminar*, described above, was the fruit of our President Dr Bettina Bäumer's long and careful preparation, for which the society

owes her most hearty thanks. We are also grateful to the Director and staff of the Christian Retreat & Study Centre, Rajpur, for the special arrangements made on our behalf.

An ashram, Santhi Sadan, has been founded in Kerala by Fr Emmanuel Vattakuzhy, which he says was mainly inspired by Abhishikitananda. Address: Avolichal, Neriyanangalam P.O. 686 693 Kerala.

A *Belgian branch* of the society has been started in Brussels by Fr Serge Descy, which meets for meditation and the Eucharist.

A *catalogue* of the books in Swamiji's library (kept in Delhi) has been made by Fr Serge Descy. Address: 3/16, Clos du Parnasse, B-1040, Bruxelles.

Talks on Swamiji, accompanied by P. Chagnard's film, have been given during 1990 to many interested groups by our Corresponding Member, Mme O. Baumer-Despeigne, whose tireless efforts are much appreciated. She has spoken in England (Ambleside); in Poland (Warsaw, Poznan and at the Benedictine Abbey at Lubin); in France (Paris, at Lanza del Vasto's Communauté de l'Arche, Valence, and at Centre La Source, Strasbourg); in Switzerland (Centre de Fleurier, Neuchatel, and at an ecumenical meeting in Berne); in the U.S.A. (N. American Board for East-West Dialogue). In addition, she has given several lectures on Hadewijch, the Beguine who was dear to Swamiji.

New publications by I.S.P.C.K. - *In Spirit and Truth*; *Swami Abhishikitananda: his Life told through his Letters*. New editions - *Prayer, Guru & Disciple: an Encounter with Sri Gnanananda, a contemporary spiritual master, The Mountain of the Lord - Pilgrimage to Gangotri, Saccidananda*. I.S.P.C.K., P.Box 1585, Kashmere Gate, Delhi 110 006.

Donations received since June 1989

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