

## Swami Abhishiktananda Centenary

### A Personal Testimony

If there was any lesson Swami Abhishiktananda clearly left us it is that words must spring up from the depths of experience. Experience is the soul of theology, indeed of all authentic knowledge. So I should start my reflections on the centenary of his birth with an attempt to recollect my experiences of the man we are celebrating. But since I saw another slot of time allotted to the task of explaining his relation to Fr Dupuis and other theologies, I shall at the moment speak of my personal memories of him.

I met him only towards the end of his pilgrimage on earth. But he was a person that left a permanent impact on those who knew him. Many in this seminar knew him much better, and are better equipped to give a testimony of the person. But let me add my little grain to the collective memory of the man. What I remember him for is first and foremost his sense of humour, his laughter and even ‘wicked’ remarks that never offended any one. But there was also an obvious depth of commitment to God and to the call of spiritual dialogue with the Hindu tradition.

I was a young professor of theology in Kurseong, in the hills of North Bengal in 1969, when a visit of Swami Abhishikatananda was suddenly announced (not recorded in Fr James' *Life*, nor consequently in Madame du Boulay's *The Cave of the Heart*). It must have taken place during the trip of Swamiji to Jyotiniketan and Banaras (*Life*, p. 220) to promote the cause of a pilot seminary for priests to involve themselves in inter-religious dialogue. The issue, raised in the 1969 All-India Seminar at Bangalore, never came to fruition as initially envisaged, but at the time several people inspired by Swamiji were enthusiastic about it, among them Fr Dupuis of the Kurseong College of Theology. About this project Swamiji would write to Panikkar a couple of months later:

“... Some years ago I dreamed about this pilot seminary with the idea that in a Gandhian type of ashram there could be an initiation into classical India, so vital for the development of the Church here. But now we have to rethink the whole conception of what a priest is. While gladly accepting these new points of view, I feel myself absolutely out of my depth. I am incapable of the mental revolution required to share these new categories well enough to help others to find their way in them” (*Life*, 223).

I am not sure that Fr Stuart is right in suggesting that the Swami “now preferred to distance himself from the project” (*ibid.*): even four years later, just before his death, he was still interested in helping the project to materialise, even if he would not be the executor of the same.

The visit to Kurseong was very short. A few of us had an evening of informal exchange of views with the Swami mostly centred, if I remember well, on the inculturation of theology and of the liturgy. I was quite impressed by the bold views of Swamiji, expressed in a language seemed to be equidistant from English, French and Hindi!

A few months later I would meet him in Jyotiniketan, where I spent about ten days for a prayerful retreat in the context of an ashram, spiritually inspired by the community of Murray and Mary Rogers and Heather Sandeman. Towards the end of my stay Swamiji appeared on the scene, and I asked him to hear my confession, which he did most willingly. He also took interest in the studies I had made, and even asked for the MS of my thesis on Ānanda in Vedic literature (mostly the Upanishads) which I had with me and handed over to him. He kept it overnight and read part of it, and was quite encouraging in his reactions. I think that the theme of ānanda (bliss) as a characteristic of the Absolute Brahman was very dear to him.

When St Mary's College was transferred to Delhi with the new name of Vidyajyoti, at the end of 1971, the Swami would occasionally visit us crossing over the wall that separated us from the Brotherhood of the Ascended Christ where he normally stayed when passing through Delhi, which he did whenever he was on the way from or to Gyansu. Several members of the staff had opportunities to share with Swamiji in the area of the theology of religions, but especially Fr Jacques Dupuis, who was very close to him. Both being originally French speakers, the monk from Brittany and the Jesuit from Wallonia, communicated very easily and for long hours. Abhishiktananda's insistence was typical: devaluation of theology as based on *nāma rūpa* and the stress on the centrality of experience. This inspired me to reshape my course on faith and revelation, I had to overcome the typology of the period (based on Cuttat, if I recall well), namely that there are religions of experience and wisdom (‘eastern’) and religions of revelation and faith (‘western’). I stressed on my students that revelation itself is nothing but the articulation of the faith, and that faith is biblically and theologically an *experience* of God as present in our lives and in history. The starting point of theology is truly *experience*, i.e., faith as a divine experience, on which we reason and articulate the experience in intelligible terms (*fides quaerens intellectum!*). It is from within faith that we become aware of the ‘Word’ of God in what we

call 'revelation'. In India we should study faith first, and then revelation.

Fr Dupuis asked Swami to give one or two lectures on an Indian Christian understanding of the Trinity and of Christology, for he was teaching these two treatises in the Faculty. Though reluctant to enter into the field of theological exposition in which he had not much faith, to say the least, Swamiji could not deny the request of his friend, and eventually prepared some notes to give the classes. He never delivered them, for his heart attack at Rishikesh liberated him from this unpleasant task. But years later the notes were found, partially transcribed into his diary, which showed his attempt to articulate in Indian thought patterns what he thought would be the mainlines of an Indian account of the Christian faith. These notes were written in French, and Fr James Stuart of the Brotherhood of the Ascended Christ patiently made an very careful translation of them into English. This was published with my introduction and notes in our monthly, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 64 (August 2000) pp. 598-612. An abbreviated version is also found in *Intériorité et Révélation: essays théologiques*. Edited by M.M. Davy. Sisteron: Présence, 1982.

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