

ABHISHIKTANANDA SOCIETY

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“...A blessed Christmas and great inward joy! The crib—that is for the children. In monasteries Christmas should be kept after the manner of Tauler, by meditating on the divine birth in the depth of the soul. As was said by the Jesuit Angelus Silesius, a marvellous German mystic: ‘So long as Christ is not born in me, his birth at Bethlehem means nothing for me.’ If the Word has become flesh, then as a consequence I myself have passed into the divine sphere, as the Offertory prayer says. Either I take this seriously, or I do not. It is not a matter of smiling at the Babe in the crib, but of taking seriously the fact that in his birth as man, I myself am born into the divine ‘nature’, as St Peter said, and of living accordingly. Christianity is dying out in our convents and in the world at large, because we—all of us who call ourselves Christians—are only playing at it. How much one feels this when one lives among people who are not Christian! So long as the Gospel does not shine out in our lives, we are only obstacles to the fulfilment of the kingdom of God...”
(From a letter to a *Benedictine nun*, 14.12.62)

SWAMIJI'S DIARY

A word from the Editor

In our technological world only the mystic will survive. All the others either get caught in the web of modern gadgetry and become mere parts of the megamachine, or fall victims to dismay, despair, cynicism or callousness, even if their physical and mental health is not lost.

In my discussions with Swamiji I used to act as the devil's advocate, arguing that total acosmism is not only unfeasible but also unjustifiable. He often replied by pointing to the snow peaks of the Himalayas which, though inaccessible, play an important rôle both physically and spiritually. We need these

high and unattainable mountains, he used to say. People look at them and are influenced by them, without needing to climb them. Not every way is for every wayfarer, as we agreed.

More than a decade has elapsed since his *śamādhi*. The world at large has not checked its lethal course towards destruction, and India too is not spared. More than ever, the example and the message of Abhishikānanda is timely and important. He did not want to be 'useful' or 'influential', and yet more and more people are looking towards him, as they look at those immaculate peaks of the Himalayas, as a symbol of hope and a bearer of light. Again and again I have repeated that the spiritual 'weight', the importance, of Swāmiji does not lie in his 'ideas', but in his being. He is just 'there', and with the passing of years his eminence stands out all the more, just as the mountain heights become more and more impressive, as we leave behind the lower valleys.

Many people are impatient to see the publication of his Diary. He did not leave behind any instructions about this, whether or when it should be published, and my delays in the preparation of the manuscript have all been involuntary. Yet I sense the hand of Providence in the delay, allowing more and more people to come to know this Hindu-Christian monk and to thirst for the intimate musings of his heart. It would not be proper to let the unprepared reader enter into his inner chamber before he has become acquainted with him through his other writings. In fact it is only by knowing the background of his published works that those who did not know him personally can avoid the danger of misinterpreting his private reflections. We hope that the original in French will appear in 1985. Meanwhile we trust that people will not merely look forward to satisfying their curiosity in reading it, but will prepare themselves for the challenge of a spiritual experience.

R. *Pamīktār*

"SWAMIJI—AN INWARD JOURNEY"

(A film on French TV by Patrice Chagnard, reviewed in *Vijā* by J.-P. Manigne.)

In 1948 a French Benedictine monk, Henri Le Saux, came to India on the morrow of its independence, in order to found a

Christian ashram there together with Fr Monchanin. (This was to become Shantivanam, 'the grove of peace', on the bank of the river Kavery.)

Fr Le Saux's great hope was to actualize on Indian soil a form of Christian monasticism, whose charter would be the Rule of St Benedict, but whose actual forms would draw as much as possible from the cultural and ascetic traditions of the country. One may well ask if at this stage he had fully realized to what a point of no return he would be led by his intention to appropriate and pay passionate and respectful attention to the great mystical themes and initiatory paths of Hinduism. At that point, perhaps not, for in writing to Fr Monchanin, who had preceded him in India, he says of the choice of the Rule of St Benedict, that it contains 'a sound monastic tradition which would save us from launching out into the unknown'.

The unknown—he very soon found himself plunged into it, as into a new baptism, when he sought to follow the way of the *Sādhis*, those world-renouncers of the Indian eremitic tradition, ascetics without hearth or home, pilgrims of the Absolute.

Very soon the fullness, the all-embracing character, of this experience put to the test the Christian faith of Fr Le Saux (or Swāmī Abhishikānanda, as he was known to his Indian friends), just as it had already tested the faith of Fr Monchanin—this is a point of similarity between the two men, but also enables one to understand the difficulties which they met in their mutual dialogue. The path on which Fr Le Saux now entered was one whose hazards were only too familiar to Fr Monchanin—the challenge it poses for Christian faith, and the dark night in which it envelops the man who follows it—so that he was unable to give unreserved support to his friend. Out of the depth of this night, this abyss, we now hear the voice of Swāmī Abhishikānanda.

The further I go, the more I feel the gulf between my Hindu brothers and myself, my Church. I desire to build a bridge across it, but know not where to fasten it, the walls are too slippery.

This is the route, the inward journey made without map or compass, the voyage between the unexplored shores of the human and the divine towards the source of their final unity, that Patrice Chagnard and Raymond Vidonne have had the nerve to put on film. Since inevitably the heart of the matter eludes our sight, they have had to seek out the tracks, the foot-

prints, the signs left by this road towards what cannot be seen. By dint of respect for their subject and its demands, they achieve their goal. Their whole film...passes continually from a text, a testimony, to a face, a gesture, a countryside. Like Henri Le Saux, we climb up to the source of the Ganges, the life-supporting river, "Mother Ganga", the unity from which all derives: the gods, the rites of birth and death... The river of beginning and ending, alpha and omega, in which Le Saux finds a cosmic sign of the Word "in whom all things were made".

For the Sadhu the signs, the stopping places, the landmarks on this path of initiation are directly that which they symbolize, and we are invited by the pictures to draw as near as possible to his experience. "I notice with astonishment that by burying myself in the caves of Arunachala, I have penetrated to the very heart of Hinduism." One of the most beautiful sequences in the film enables us to see what the hermit saw, perched high on the side of Arunachala, the temple lying at the foot of his cave, veiled in the red mist of twilight, while like an insistent echo we hear a Gregorian chant. "This morning," wrote Henri Le Saux in the notebook which he never put aside, "before my Mass I hummed the melody of the Blessing of Palms, sang the hymn 'All glory, laud and honour...' Nostalgia for a time that has passed, like the joys of childhood to which the adult can never return. The abyss has swallowed me up too deeply. The abyss of the Self."

"Unless the grain of wheat dies..." Henri Le Saux accepted a death, a death to all possessions, and even to the dearest possession of all, that of 'his' Christianity. It caused him indeed to suffer a mortal agony, to the point of truly longing to die. But his last words testify to a superhuman joy. Unity has been achieved, "the seed bears much fruit". A disciple, Marc, set out in his turn, like Elisha wearing Elijah's mantle...

...Do not fail to see "Swamiji"; it is rare that television confronts us with such a pure and blazing beauty.

REVIEW

The Eyes of Light by H. Le Saux/Swami Abhishiktananda. Dimension Books, 1983.

In view of the steady demand for the writings of Swami

Abhishiktananda, especially in the U.S.A., it is not surprising that Dimension Books decided to publish a translation of *Les yeux de lumiere* (Centurion, 1979).

Although at first sight the book might seem a collection of disconnected fragments, in fact they make a good introduction to the characteristic insights of Swamiji and an invitation to explore his longer writings.

It opens with a long letter written in 1947, a year before he came to India, introducing himself to Fr Monchanin who was to be his colleague in starting the Shantivanam ashram. He reveals the aspirations which had been formed in him during the previous thirteen years of waiting for a chance to fulfil his Indian vocation. (It is interesting to note how quickly some of them were modified, once he came in touch with the real India.)

There follow seven essays which form the main portion of the book. In these we meet several of Swamiji's deepest concerns. One was his desire to awaken western Christians to the value of eastern spiritual experience, above all, the advaita of the Upanishads. In the first essay (sent as a contribution to the Monastic Congress of 1973) he explains its distinction from the 'prophetic experience' which lies at the heart of the Christian revelation, and pleads for its integration in a truly Catholic Christianity. This is more fully worked out in the longer essay, 'India and the Carmelite Order', revealing his hope that Carmel would lead the way in this integration.

Another concern was to spread the practice of contemplative prayer among Christians. The second essay, 'India's Contribution to Christian Prayer' (or 'The Prayer of Silence', as it was called when published in a Spanish periodical) is a typical example of his approach.

Two other essays ('The Theology of Presence as a Form of Evangelization' and 'The Priest for whom India, the world, is waiting') reveal the deep pastoral concern which the hermit Swamiji never lost. The first is really a criticism of missionary work as it is usually understood, and sets out an ideal of evangelism as the deepening of awareness of the divine Presence in mankind, which of course can only be done by those who are themselves living in that Presence. The other discusses priestly formation, a subject to which he gave much thought in his last years, and shows that this is incomplete if it merely turns out

'professional' religious functionaries, however competent, above all they should seek to have experience of that which they expound, so as eventually to be true 'gurus'.

The second section of the book contains interesting extracts from Swamiji's immense correspondence, in which we see the man himself. Included here are spiritual letters to a Carmelite nun, descriptive letters to his family, and letters about his experiences to a priest friend in Paris.

The last section gives some brief extracts from his Diary, a sample of what before long will be made available to the public. Having said so much, can we recommend this book in its English form? Sadly, only with considerable reserves. The fact is that it appears to have been produced with too much haste and too little care. The translation in general leaves much to be desired, being too literal and wooden. One often finds sentences which are confusing or say the opposite to what is expected; when compared with the French, words or idioms are found to be simply mistranslated, or else some nuance has been missed. A mystifying example comes on p. 38, where the French word 'sien' (i.e., 'his') has been taken as a technical term and translated as 'supreme'! Unfortunately, the translator seems to have been too little in touch with Swamiji's thought or even with the Indian background. This leads to some odd misunderstandings, for instance, about Indian customs: on p. 156, or the 'definition' of *puja* at the foot of page 168. Signs of carelessness abound: so many names wrongly spelt, starting with 'Gandhi' (who more often than not becomes 'Ghandi'), sanskrit terms misspelt, chaos in the notes on p. 185. It is only fair to say that a large number of these slips originated in the French edition, and have been simply copied; but they might have been checked. In the very 'Brief Biography' given on pp. 5-6 there are at least half a dozen mistakes; and most surprising of all, the bibliography on p. 4 merely lists *French* titles of his books. No attempt was made to discover what has been published in English; and yet immediately below is printed the address of the Abhishiktananda Society, which would very gladly have provided information on request!

So, how much of Swamiji comes through to the reader of this book? Something certainly, but so much less than it could have been. It is at least an object-lesson of the need for the Abhishiktananda Society.

J. D. M. S.

NEWS

Publications

The Indian S.P.C.K. have reissued three of Abhishiktananda's writings this year: early in 1984, *Saccidananda: a Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience and Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*; and in December, *The Further Shore*. The first and last of these have been enriched with additional material. To make his books more easily available to readers in North America, a stock is being held by Sister Pasaline (North American Board for East-West Dialog) at Osage Monastery, Rt. 1, Box 384c, Sand Springs, Oklahoma-74063.

Dimension Books (P.O. Box 811, Denville, N.J. 07834) have published *The Eyes of Light*, translated from the French original (1979). Our review is printed above.

Le Cerf (Paris) is reprinting *Eveil a soi—eveil a Dieu* (previously published by Le Centurion), the first of Swamiji's books in French to be reissued.

Articles about Swamiji

"The Spiritual Journey of Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktananda" by O. Baumer-Despeigne in *Cistercian Studies* 1983, No. 4, 310-329.

"Abhishiktananda's Contemplative Theology" by Wayne Teasdale in *Monastic Studies*, Autumn 1982, 179-199.

"Abhishiktananda's Mystical Intuition of the Trinity" by Wayne Teasdale in *Cistercian Studies*, 1983, 60-75.

"Swami Abhishiktananda on Prayer" by A.R. McKearney in *New Fine*, Winter 1983, 479-484.

"In the Cave of the Heart: Silence and Realization" by Beatrice Bruteau in *New Blackfriars*, July-Aug. 1984, 301-319.

C.H. Beck (Munich) is publishing *Grosse Mystiker, Leben und Wirken* (Great Mystics, their Lives and Writings) in two volumes. The first has appeared and contains the lives of twenty Christian mystics, beginning with Gregory of Nyssa and ending with three from the 20th century—Charles de Foucauld, Dag Hammarskjöld and Abhishiktananda. Bettina Baumer wrote about Swamiji and will make the selection of his writings.

Please inform us about any other such articles.

Television

Patrice Chagnard's film on "Swamiji—un voyage interieur" was shown on French TV in three portions on successive Sundays in September 1984. It is also available on video (Le Jour du Seigneur, 121, avenue de Villiers, 75849 Paris). It has been very well received (see the notice on page 2).

The spoken word

Several of our members have from time to time taken the opportunity of speaking in public about Swamiji, and have thereby actively promoted one of the aims of the Abhishiktananda Society. It is safe to say that none of us have been as active in this way as Mme O. Baumer-Despeigne, our Corresponding Secretary for Europe and the West, especially in the last three years. Not to mention earlier speaking engagements in the U.S.A., Japan and Italy, she has since 1982 accepted more than twenty invitations to present Swamiji to a wide range of audiences in France, Belgium, Switzerland, England and Korea. Her personal acquaintance with him and her wide knowledge of his writings (especially the Diary) have specially qualified her for this labour of love, and her efforts have been greatly appreciated. Recently she has spoken in nine religious houses (three French Carmels, including Lisieux; the Trappe of Chimay; and five Benedictine Abbeys in Belgium, France and England), in two university institutes, to five private circles in different countries, and also for three successive years at Les Voies de l'Orient in Brussels. Last April she helped to lead a retreat at St Jean de Sixt on Swamiji's approach to prayer, and in August at an international conference in Seoul she contributed a paper on Hindu-Christian Encounter with special reference to Swamiji as a spiritual pioneer. Indeed a notable record!

Donations

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