What is unknowable, what is ungraspable, the void, that which pervades even non-existence.
Contemplate on all this as the Supreme.
At the end (of this contemplation) illumination will dawn.

Vijñāna Bhāratav 127

A being lost in my source, a being lost in my fulfilment. And in this very loss, I am...
Jesus is this mystery of advaita in which I can no longer recognize myself separately. Lost as much in the space [ākāśa] of the heart as in that of the span of the universe, as much in the Source as in the shining, the radiance that empties me.
And I am Fullness, pūrṇam, precisely in this letting-go of myself everywhere, sarvatra...
And my pūrṇam is precisely this emptiness of all self.

Abhishiktananda, Diary, December 24, 1971
Editorial

Even though we strive to go beyond the limitations of space and time - and many spiritual traditions consider the overcoming of a sense of time the most important condition for spiritual progress - a lot of importance is now being attached to the entering into the third millennium. The prophets of gloom may already have been proved right if we consider the brutal wars and the cruel natural calamities of this year - the last being the devastating cyclone in Orissa which we experienced. All the more do we need to strengthen the spiritual forces which alone can provide a basis for the future of humanity.

In the realm of time we may remember that Swami Abhishiktananda came to his holy land of India half a century ago (15th August 1948 - 1998) and that he passed to the “further shore” 25 years ago (7th December 1973 - 1998). It is not without significance that his spiritual Diary has come out in a much improved English version to celebrate these anniversaries. Since his Diary is now accessible to a wider readership, its impact may be received now, after a long period of expectation.

For these reasons the contributions to the present issue of SETU are dedicated to Swamiji. The following issue will be devoted to the topics which will be discussed at the dialogue at Sarath (December 1999) with Buddhists, Hindus and Christians on Void and Fullness (see News).

Bettina Bäumer.

SWAMI ABHISHIKTANANDA: Theologian of Inter-culturation

by Antony Kallith
Bangalore

1. At the threshold of the third millennium, the world community is frantically searching for convincing models which can give direction and consistency to the future evolution of the coming generation. In the first and second millennia, there have been generally accepted frameworks (e.g. the classical vision of the first millennium, the enlightenment model of the second millennium) which have supplied consistency and character to humanity’s general perception and interpretation of reality world-wide. Today, while humanity is struggling to face up to a pluralistic culture, we do not find any paradigm which can universally be applied or accepted. Rather, we find confusing trends and conflicting models cohabiting in an inordinate mutual accommodation (globalization and cultural nationalism; dialogue among religious and religious fundamentalism; socialist eco-nomy and capitalist market). Coming to the religious spectrum, today, we don’t find any particular faith having complete hold over its adherents as used to be the case in the past; there seem to be many centres of meaning in the universe of faith. The movements of unity and forces of fragmentation are coexisting and influencing the people in a nebulous and ambivalent manner. Futurists are quite vague and evasive concerning what is in the offing. It all leads to a sense of unpredictability and uncertainty pervading in the collective consciousness concerning what is going to be unfolded in the coming millennium.

However, it seems that the most crucial challenge in the coming millennium will be in terms of a pluralist culture in which the focus will be on plurality in order to safeguard unity. That is to say, a cultural philosophy and political system in which various cultural and ethnic identities and religious traditions are not merely respected but creatively interact and interface in a pluralistic vision and paradigm.

In this process what is needed is not a mere inculcation or adaptation but an inter-culturation which may not necessarily lead to a third reality; it implies a composite cultural consciousness in which one is very much on one’s shore of beliefs and faith but at the same time is related to the partner’s belief systems and philosophies in a creative contemplation, more in terms of experience than of abstract categories. Abhishiktananda calls this pluralistic framework a ‘bridge consciousness’. It is more a consciousness of plurality in unity than of unity in plurality. Once this consciousness is achieved at the depth level of one’s being, then it will be easier to develop a culture of collaboration and dialogue among religions at the phenomenal level without confusion and conflict. Today many consider Swami Abhishiktananda as a prophet and pioneer of a fine embodiment of inter-religious consciousness especially in the realm of Hindu-Christian meeting. Hence a challenging model for the coming
millennium, which will be characterized by pluralistic values in terms of inter-culturatiom.

2. Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda) was born in a very pious Catholic family on 30th August 1910 at St. Briac, a small town on the north coast of Brittany in France. While Henri was undergoing seminary studies, he was profoundly drawn to monastic life and eventually entered the novitiate in 1929. He made his final vows on the 30th May 1935 and was ordained priest in the same year (Stuart 1989: 1ff). In the beginning his fascination for India was more of a spiritual attraction. Eventually this acquired a mystical meaning in the process of his God realization. In one of his letters to Fr. Monchanin, his future co-worker, Henri Le Saux wrote from France: “I deeply love holy India; [and] her call makes my heart ache.” “I am scared and feel crushed but the call of India is deep in me. Inscribed as it is on my inmost self” (Stuart 1989:19).

Dom Henri Le Saux left France on the 26th July 1948. He disembarked at Colombo (Sri Lanka) on 15th August 1948. On the following day he arrived at Madras by ship. The following period of twenty five years, culminating in his death on 7th December 1973, was an exciting phase of his intense search into the mystery of Hindu-Christian dialogue.

3. The methodology adopted by Abhishiktananda in his experiment with Hinduism was existential and experiential to the core. He totally relied on Indian spiritual means (śādhanās) to achieve his experiential meeting with the Hindu genius. Indian śādhanās are generally classified under three titles: bhaktimārga (means of devotion); karmamārga (means of action); jñānamārga (means of knowledge). Abhishiktananda, on his part, mainly relied on jñānamārga of Upanishadic advaita (non-dualism) in his enquiri.

To situate himself radically in an Indian ambience of self-enquiry, Abhishiktananda, along with Fr. Monchanin who was then a missionary in Tamil Nadu, founded Saccidānanda Ashram (Shantivanam) in 1950. Living there, he made an entry into the dynamics and practice of Indian sādhanās. However, later he had to forsake his Ashram when he was finally drawn to the acosmic life in the Himalayas; it was the supreme expression of solitude and asceticism to which śādhanās ultimately lead the true seeker.

4. Theological Vision: Like the sages of Eternal India, the fundamental fascination of Swamiji was the mystery of Being. His writings are his attempts to peer at his own intense experience of Being. He has tried to comprehend the mystery of Being in the paradigm of Cycle of Being (it, however, implies no cyclic movement). Swamiji interprets the Christ-Event as the exemplar par excellence of the Ideal of Cycle of Being (see Kalliath 1996: 137ff). According to Abhishiktananda, the key to understanding the mystery of the Christ-Event is what Jesus said: ‘I have come from the Father and I return to the Father’. This coming and returning of the Word is the birth and rebirth of Being. Wo/man, as a being endowed with self-awareness, can become conscious of this mystery of the birth-rebirth of Being in a profound way in his or her own self (ātman), the interior core and ground of being. Abhishiktananda is of the opinion that Hindu-Christian meeting has to first take place at the plane of rebirth — the process of the return of the Word to the bosom of the Father, one’s awakening to the Self (svayam-jyoti).

Abhishiktananda, in his writings, emphasizes through and through that Truth is not conceptual; it is simply “awakening”- jīvita (glow). Abhi-shiktananda has reached this Truth by responding to the irrepressible call of advaita. He has taken a radical decision of unconditional submission to the call of advaita even at the risk of “bracketing out” (époque) his Christian presuppositions for a short period. Subsequently, he begins to interpret the Christian self-understanding in terms of the advaitic awakening. At the ātman level, he finds a reconciliation between advaita and Christian experience of God, though not conceptually. Henceforth Christian mythos has meaning only at the level of nāmarūpas in his vision and experience. In the advaitic awakening Abhishiktananda writes in his Journal: “I simply find myself profoundly Hindu and Christian at the same time”. (Henri Le Saux 1986:47).

Now, coming to Abhishiktananda’s understanding of awakening, he fundamentally interprets it in terms of God’s presence to Himself — I AM. Wo/man enters the PRESENCE in the mystery of Self. “This pres-
ence is entirely mine, founded in me, fixed in me, gushing out from the very depth of my presence to my self” (Henri Le Saux 1986: 384). According to him, all our attempts to understand God gush out from the fundamental mystery of human being -- ‘I am’ (aham asmi). So awakening to Self is awakening to God in the theological vision of Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux 1986: 404).

5. Jesus Christ in Swamiji’s Awakening: The unconditional surrender to the call of advaita made Abhishiktananda transcend his Christian moorings and mythos. Then, what about his attitude towards Jesus Christ? More precisely, if the self-awakening is awakening to God, does such a position necessarily include the reality of ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ in the God-experience of Abhishiktananda? What we can infer from his Journal and other writings is that it is in the mystery of Guru that Abhishiktananda has tried to understand Jesus Christ -- a Christology of Guru. That is to say, Christ is encountered in the mystery of every human being -- I AM. This does not imply that Abhishiktananda diminishes the value of Jesus of Nazareth. What Abhishiktananda emphasizes is a higher level in which Jesus lived in front of the Father, mute and silent -- Jesus simply gazed at the Father. This SILENCE is the ‘tension’ of the being to the Self, the Father -- the mystery of Christ. Abhishiktananda writes in his Journal: “This fundamental experience of ‘I am’ which lifts Jesus from every ego and makes him the one who is no more than the ‘tension’ towards the Father, towards his fellow beings” (Henri Le Saux 1986: 467). Therefore, Jesus’ name is the saving name (Supernome) because it helps his followers to ‘participate’ in this tension towards the Self (Father).

Abhishiktananda explains the meaning of ‘Jesus’ in the spectrum of self-awakening in the following way: In the beginning (ev arché) God said to himself: I am. This aham asmi is the verbum, the origin of consciousness, outside time and space. “Christ is the total transparency of this aham asmi to which I am awakened in the principle of my consciousness. Christ -- if he means anything to me -- is the very mystery of this awakening to me... Christ is the revelation of my aham, of my paripara (reciprocity) with every consciousness, every awakening.” Hence Abhishiktananda says: “Jesus is not merely an idea... But the very mystery of Jesus is to be discovered in self. Above all [Jesus] is not a Christological gnosis, but the I AM, that I can only know in my AHAM.” (Henri Le Saux 1986: 405).

For him the ‘name’ I AM which Jesus applies to himself (Jn 8:24) is the key to his mystery. The discovery of this Name (in the depth of one’s own ‘I AM’) is truly Salvation for each one of us (Stuart 1986: 342). Jesus remained as his inviolable Guru in the process of his self-realization. He writes: “If I say that I believe in Christ, that means that Christ is God for me. God-for-me, because there is no abstract God... Jesus is God’s face turned towards man and man’s face turned towards God” (Abhishiktananda 1988: 92).

6. Hindu-Christian Meeting: The fundamental position of Abhishiktananda regarding the problematic of Hindu-Christian meeting is that it should not primarily be considered as an encounter between two religions. Rather, it may be a soul-to-soul mutual meeting of two fundamental experiences of humankind at the most profound level of being, despite the basic strains between them on the conceptual level. Abhishiktananda says that the tension between advaita and Christianity is insoluble because the supreme experience of Christianity -- Trinity -- is the mystery of faith. This is of quite different order when compared with a Hindu jñān’s direct realization of being. The plane of the experience of advaita and that of faith cannot meet each other. The gulf between them, in this sense, is very real.

Nevertheless, Abhishiktananda held that to be a disciple of Jesus i.e., to ‘participate’ in the experience of Jesus -- I AM -- “does not mean that one needs to be a member of a sociological group. The experience of ‘I AM’ is the fundamental experience of every human being in the Cave of the Heart (atman). Such a meeting cannot be named, located or seen and is without any form (arūpa, anāma, alīnga, avyakta); it is the unique splendour of the Self. So India in her depths calls to the Church; for, it is only in the depth that the marvellous encounter will manifest itself.” (Henri Le Saux 1983: 69).

Thus, Hindu-Christian meeting was never a mere academic or theological concern for Abhishiktananda. It belonged to the very religious fibre of his being. He found himself torn between the “extreme borders
where the two Oceans (Hinduism and Christianity) mingle their waters dangerously” (Henri Le Saux 1986: 101). Remaining there, he considered himself profoundly Hindu and Christian at once. About this double loyalty he says: “It is precisely this being torn apart between advaita and Christianity which enables me to live the fundamental experience and to express its mystery to some extent.” (Stuart 1989: 207).

This fundamental experience, according to him is like a ‘profound mutation’. On his part, he decides to be the bearer of this tension rather than to stay out of it. Abhishiktananda thinks that this ‘border-experience’ has to go on for some time in the Church before a theological crystallization of the meeting takes place in the future. Being the bearer of this ‘border-experience’ Abhishiktananda thinks about himself as a ‘bridge’ between these two fundamental experiences of humanity — a bridge which unifies the ‘frontiers’. To be such a ‘bridge’, he thinks, is his vocation (see Kallith 1996: 337–339).

7. Meaning of Self-Awakening: Abhishiktananda wrote in his Journal on 11 May 1972: “The experience of the Upanishads is true. I know it” (Henri Le Saux 1986: 425). Though we find such a clear statement very late (just one year before his death) the advaita had been the inner bedrock of his life and thinking through and through. Evidently, this assertion is more of a personal and experiential confession than of an intellectual statement. The question is how Abhishiktananda intends the insertion of his Christian experience of God in this affirmation.

For Abhishiktananda, advaita is neither monism nor dualism. It means the experience of being surging towards its Source. This surge corresponds to the ontological tension between the two Poles of Reality — One and Many. This ontological tension is advaitic for it is the co-incidence of One and Many or the simultaneity of the Non-Manifest and Manifest. Endowed with intellect, only a human being can become aware of this ‘tension’ at the depth of his/her being (ātman) in a profound way. The theological as well as experiential locus of Abhishiktananda’s statement — the experience of the Upanishads is true — is to be sought precisely in his intense awareness of this ontological movement of being in the realm of his subjectivity (aham asmi). It is in this sense that, I think, Abhishik-

tananda ‘appropriates’ or makes the ‘insertion’ of the Upanishadic advaita into his Christian consciousness (see Kallith 1996: 369–71).

Advaita is only the inner experiential point de départ to enter into the mystery of God in Abhishiktananda’s awakening; advaita is not the final state of realization. So he speaks of a trans-advaita which we can only witness in a profound interior solitude. However, he considers that the Christian revelation is a better way of understanding this trans-advaita realm in the mysteries of Trinity and Love.

In the advaitic ‘fire’, Abhishiktananda gives primary importance to the trans-historicity of Christian experience. In different words, he tries to appropriate ‘Jesus’ existentially in the ‘now’ more than in the ‘historical’. It should be said that the ‘historical’ of Christian faith experience is somehow overshadowed or rather ‘marginalized’ when Abhishiktananda increasingly interpreted Jesus’ mystery in terms of ātman experience.

At this juncture, attention is called to the frequent critique that Abhishiktananda has underestimated the importance of the mediation of concepts while emphasizing the primacy of experience. Abhishiktananda himself agrees with that. But at the same time one should not miss Swami’s emphasis in this regard. First of all, Abhishktananda is of the opinion that Western language is ‘shut in’, one-dimensional and very much desacralized. So he thinks that “to harmonize ... the deep experience and its expression ... the Mediterranean ‘expression’ is terribly unsatisfying if not misleading.” According to him, “What is horrifying in theo-logy and Canon Law is the treatment of nāma śruti as absolutes.” (Stuart 1989: 275, 307).

What he insists upon is that all our dogmas must be considered as the upāsana (meditation) or vidyā (knowledge) of the Upanishads. Here, what we discern is that Abhishiktananda is more a metaphysician than a philosopher in the matter of subjecting experience to interpretation and mediation. Abhishiktananda does not share his ‘awakening’ as a philosophy. A metaphysician is more concerned “with matters which cannot be publicly proved but can only be demonstrated i.e., made intelligible by analogy.” (Coomaraswamy 177:8). Hence Abhishiktananda’s texts can be misunderstood if they are separated from his pursuit and quest.
From a western, rational theological perspective, as some may point out, Swamiji could not succeed in subjecting his awakening to the mediation of concepts. According to Gregory of Nazianzus, the best theologian is not the one who gives a systematic and logical account of his theme, but the one who ‘assembles more of Truth’s image and shadow’ and thus moves beyond the boundaries of pure rationality (France Young 1988: 297–312). This does not mean abandoning rationality, but at the same time one should not favour reductionism of theology to rationality. Abhishiktananda’s writings are more of Truth’s images and shadows of the mystery of Hindu-Christian dialogue. In this sense he is a prophet as well as a pioneer theologian in the field of inter-faith theology.

Communication in depth across the boundaries of one’s religious faith is the most important in fashioning the destinies of future humanity (Thomas Merton 1973: 313). John Dunne says: “The holy man of our time, it seems, is not a figure like ... a man who could find a world religion, but a figure like Gandhi, a man who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions, and comes back again with new insight to his own. Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time.” (1972:ix). In today’s world of religious pluralism, this spiritual adventurousness is an imperative for the greater cohesiveness and harmony of various religions and cultures. But this ‘passover’ has to be realized first at the depth level. Abhishiktananda used to say that the seed should be sown as deeply as possible so that the plant may be deep-rooted in the soil for a lasting and fruitful growth. Through a radical encounter with Hinduism, Abhishiktananda has given to humanity a profound model of inter-culturation and thus of how to be ‘holy’ in an ethos of pluralist vision which is going to be the hallmark of the coming millennium.

References
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"Ascent to the Depth of the Heart":
Book, Discussion on the Spiritual Diary of Swami Abhishiktananda at India International Centre, New Delhi, on March 29, 1999

The publication of the English version of Swamiji’s Diary marks an important event for the Abhishiktananda Society. Instead of publishing a review, we are presenting here a shortened version of the book discussion which took place on 29th March 1999 at India International Centre, New Delhi, under the chair of Dr. Karan Singh. This event made Swamiji known to a wider public and it assumed greater significance in a situation of tension between Hindus and Christians in recent months in India. The need for a deeper understanding and bridge-building was all the more felt, and Swamiji was unanimously accepted as one who could mediate between the two religious traditions. After an introduction by the chairman, Dr. Karan Singh, Member of Parliament and one of the leading Hindus in interreligious dialogue, Dr. (Mrs) Sarla Kumār welcomed the participants in the name of the Society. Then Fr. George Gisbert-Sauch SJ introduced Swami Abhishiktananda by giving a life-sketch of which we are reproducing extracts. Dr. Bettina Blanquer gave a presentation of the Diary with quotations, and Dr. Susan Vishwanathan, Associate Professor
of Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru University, presented a section of her book on Swamiji, placing him also in the present social and political situation in India. At the end Dr. Karan Singh gave very inspiring concluding remarks. The response of the audience was encouraging.

Introductory Remarks

by Dr. Karan Singh

The year 1893 marked the beginning of inter-faith dialogue. Uninvited Swami Vivekananda turned up at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago and he left his mark with the historic address. Exactly 100 years later, in 1993, 6000 delegates gathered at Chicago. I led the Indian delegation. Out of the two halls one used for the first Parliament of Religions was pressed into service. The third Parliament of Religions is going to take place at Cape Town this year (1999).

According to both the Marxian and Western liberal view religion was supposed to have lost its relevance. But it has had its abiding impact on people for good and bad. Cathedrals, temples of South India, etc. remind one of the religious influence. It is also a fact that more people have been killed in the course of history in the name of religion. A strong religious factor is involved in the present war that is going on in Yugoslavia.

The context of India’s pluralistic culture and multi-religious setting provides ample opportunity for the inter-faith movement. Inter-religious dialogue forms a part of this movement. One of the components of it is the Hindu-Christian dialogue. Two factors have contributed to it. One is some of the Christians like Shri Krishna Prem and Swami Subramaniam became Hindu swamis. The second is of the Christians remaining loyal to their religion have plunged into Hindu spirituality. Among them Swami Abhishiktananda stands out. Once he came to India in 1948 he never went back. Having the darshan of Ramana Maharshi had a great influence on him.

Then we have Bede Griffiths who took over the ashram at Shantivanam near Tiruchirapalli from Swami Abhishiktananda. Rampoo Panikkar with whom many of us are familiar may be called a Christian-Hindu or Hindu-Christian. He has made his own translation of the Veda, titled

"Mantra Mañjari" which is a significant contribution to the quest of modern man for the Divine.

There have been many attempts to enter and absorb the depth of the Hindu Vedanta and scale the heights of Advaita. As Mvudaka Upanishad says: “In the farthest sheath abides the Brahma.” Depth is usually associated with descent. But the diary of Swami Abhishiktananda is rightly titled "Ascent to the Depth of the Heart" because one rises into the luminosity of that Beatific vision which is experienced in the heart of such seekers.

Some parallels are striking between Swami Vivekananda and Swami Abhishiktananda: Swami Vivekananda had the vision of Siva’s fiery column at Amarnath. It was an overwhelming experience for him. He survived five years after this experience. In the case of Swami Abhishiktananda too something similar happened when he suffered a heart attack on the road in Rishikesh which he described as being burnt by the fiery column of Siva of Arunachala.

Theologically the Hindu and Christian traditions can be different. But at the level of spiritual experience differences dissolve. Swamiji had no problem when he had the ecstatic experience of seeing the fiery column of Siva. Nor did Ramakrishna Paramahansa have any theological problem when he had the vision of Christ.

Spiritual alchemy is at the heart of any transforming spiritual experience.

Swami Abhishiktananda’s favourite mantra was from the Śvetāṣṭara Upanishad:

I have come to know that mighty Person
golden like the Sun, beyond all darkness.
By knowing him a man transcends death;
there is no other path for reaching that goal. (3.8)
Swami Abhishiktananda

by Fr G. Gispert-Sauch SJ

It is a personal pleasure and privilege to introduce a person whom I have long admired even if I met him only three or four times. One could speak at length and humorously about the lively Breton who would burst into song in the middle of the chores of dish-washing as he could hold an audience fascinated by the glow of an inner vision which his eyes more than his clumsy words would convey. He was a monk nostalgically humming the Gregorian cadences of his early youth in the same breath as he submitted all structures, mental or in the Church, to pitiless criticism. He could as much laugh at himself as he liked to poke fun at others, and yet his message was always about the Absolute, Brahman and our search for Liberation. One could speak in contradictions of the absent-mindedness of an intellectual that he disliked to be, and the practical sense inherited from his Celtic ancestry of fishermen. But since it is futile and impossible to transmit a personal experience, I will just trace the high points of his rather simple yet extremely rich life, because they are recorded in the book we want to comment on and form the background to the evolution of his thinking.

... Dom Le Saux wanted to come to India not only to continue his personal search for God in a less structured religious culture, but also to give to the monastic life, and particularly the Benedictine tradition, of the Church a new avatāra in India, a new expression that would enrich it. This could only be done through a humble presence and a dialogue in depth between the Hindu and the Western tradition.

This today we call inculturation, a word that has become currency in Christian theology only in the last thirty years or so. The Diary that is at the heart of this meeting is a personal testimony of this process.

Both his abundant correspondence and his diary give us a fascinating glimpse of the process through which God was training this monk and of the results of that process.

Abhishiktananda discovered that the Indian spiritual tradition required from him a total stripping of his mental apparatus, of his theological and over-rational approach to God, and of the strongly activist element of the spiritual life developed in the West. He had not to strive after God, but to discover God within, by removing all the mental layers that seemed to prevent the eternal light from shining. There are moments in his encounter with God seems to be at the point of renouncing his Christian faith in favour of a Hindu wisdom. The fascination of his diary is precisely in seeing that he never lets go of two commitments. He is certain of both views: "The Upanishads are true, I know it," he exclaims towards the end of his career on earth, and yet he never lets go of his Christian moorings. In the last page of the diary he speaks of Christ as the one who has made the Trinitarian Mystery discovered in the depth of the Self. His celebration of the Eucharist continues to the end of his life, if he was physically able. He does feel a tension, even a contradiction within himself, but he is sustained by a higher force not to let go of either expression of Absoluteness.

This is in a sense the power of this writing: Abhishiktananda refuses easy solutions of the problem of the meeting of the two great religions that sustain him in his search. He will not make of Christianity a more sādhanā at the bhakti level that needs to be left behind at a higher level of gnosis. But he equally refuses to see Hinduism as a prāparatiya, to use the old expression of Eusebius so often repeated in Catholic theological circles. From within the Hindu tradition he perceives that this understanding is not possible. The two visions, though irreconcilable as far as our mental perceptions are concerned, must be held as absolute and valid.

The experience of life forced Abhishiktananda to redefine his own identity. He had come to India in search of God, surely, but not merely as an individual seeker. A Christian monk that is he always saw that search in a communitarian perspective. His vocation, his call was to bring to the Church in India the value and dimension of contemplative life and to live it in an Indian way, grafted in the old traditions of Hinduism, and indeed of the even older tradition of the Śramaṇas. In his hopes, this vocation would be realised by a group having a certain continuity. But his vision of an Indian benedictine institution proved a mirage: His hope of his personal experience and witness being communicated to at
least some disciples seemed futile at least till almost the end of his life. He would be a solitary voice that would witness but not be heard. His role would end with his life. He then saw that the contemplative life is really a life that does not properly belong to any religion. Religion deals with structures and the world of signs. The contemplative deals with the invisible world. He (or she too) is a paradox; himself a sign beyond all signs. In this sense Abhishiktananda believed in a brotherhood/sisterhood of all contemplatives of all religions, whose main purpose is to relativise all forms of worship, all theological concepts, all the world of nāmarūpa, all religion, therefore, in function of the One.

Was he unconscious of the social obligations of our earthly existence? Was he unaware of the enormous problems of our world where millions starve while enormous wealth is accumulated in privileged regions of the earth and in privileged homes of every region? Was he sensitive to the social problem? He was. He did a fair amount of sharing of the little he possessed. He knew of the sin of the world. But he believed that it could only be redeemed with deeper consciousness of the Absolute Reality. He thought truly that the absence of God was much more terrible than the absence of bread, because it cuts at the very root of our humanity. Some (many?) of us may think that his option was warped. That may be the difference between us and the mystics.

Introducing the Diary

by Bettina Bäumer

It has taken a long time for the Spiritual Diary of Swami Abhishiktananda to see the light of the day in an English translation. The French original was published in 1986, that too after a gap of 13 years after the passing of Swami Abhishiktananda. In the meanwhile some of us who were involved in this process of editing and translating expressed doubts as to whether the content of the Diary would still be relevant by the time it comes out in English. We live in a fast-moving time when the concerns and interests are changing almost daily. Would the reflections and experiences of a French monk and Indian Sannyāsī not be outdated and appear old-fashioned at this turn to the third millennium?

The contrary seems to be true. In India and outside India Swami Abhishiktananda has been hailed as a pioneer in the intercultural and interreligious scene of our time. Many people who are in search of a spirituality which is open to other traditions without negating one’s own have turned to Swami Abhishiktananda as a guiding light. Without wanting to become a thinker defending religious pluralism, Swami has rather demonstrated with his life what it means not only to respect other religious traditions, but to get deeply involved in them. As he expresses almost with a sigh at the beginning of his stay in Tamil Nadu: “I have two loves.”

What is the relevance of a Diary as compared to the books written by the same author? In his books he pursues a specific topic and purpose, with the necessary literary and academic expression. Most of his books are mainly meant for Christians, to make them understand the deep spiritual values of India and the convergence between Hindu and Christian thought and experience. In his Diary he is just dialogue with himself, without any fear of inhibition and without any intention other than pouring out his deepest thoughts and experiences. Thus the Diary is an authentic witness to the inner struggles and tensions as well as to the overwhelming discoveries of a life lived at the confluence, the Sangam, of two spiritual traditions and cultures. In the words of Dr. Panikkar: “We witness the development of a soul’s archetypes under the influence of two different cultures. To live at the meeting point of several traditions is the destiny of a large portion of the human race. For very many people it is hardly possible any longer to feel at home in a single culture. To camp out in the workshops of technology does not answear to human aspirations. A new insight is required. This is where Abhishiktananda’s experience seems to me to be of great importance.” (p. XVI)

“Much of the present-day controversy between religions, in India and elsewhere, starts from the simplistic view of assuming that religions are closed boxes and that people belong to one or the other of these boxes without interaction and mutual influence. If on the one hand we find this so-called fundamentalist attitude to religion, on the other we have -- mainly in the West -- a kind of religious supermarket where one can “pick and choose” from any religious tradition according to one’s personal likings.”
Swami Abhishiktananda’s Diary is most relevant in this present, often confused, situation. It allows us, so to say, a look into a laboratory of spiritual alchemy. It allows us to witness the process of a deep inner transformation. After spending 19 years in a strict Benedictine monastery in France, Henri Le Saux comes in contact with Indian spirituality, immerses himself in the land, the culture, and the people of Tamil Nadu, and, most important, meets Sri Ramana Maharshi in whom he saw the archetypal Eši of India. This meeting had such a deep impact on him that it brought him under the ineradicable spell of advaita as not a philosophy but as an experience. “The ideal which is most profoundly mine – the one to which unconsciously everything in me is referred – is that of Ramana. Such a perfect example of Vedanta – and this ideal of Ramana would not have been able to root itself at such a depth in my psyche if it had not encountered such a call as already expressed and aggregated in an awakening.” (July 2, 1971, p. 328). In his own inner Self started what Panikkar calls the “intra-religious dialogue” – with all its doubts, struggles and insights. “From now on, I have tasted too much of advaita to be able to recover the Gregorian peace of a Christian monk. Engaged in the experience of the archetypal Eshī, I tasted too much of that Gregorian peace not to be anguished in the midst of my advaita.” (September 27, 1953, p. 74). He is taking both traditions, the Hindu and the Christian, seriously in all their implications, and yet in the very encounter they become relativized and, ultimately, transcended. In 1953 he is in the middle of this process when he writes: “Beneath the human wrappings there is something more vastly deeper in both of these attachments which torment me and tear me apart. Beyond the final boundary where the two oceans (Hinduism and Christianity) mix their waters dangerously and disturbingly together.

What compass can hereafter give direction to one who is standing right at the Pole? Where is the East and where is the West? Where does the sun rise and where does it set in a six month day and a six month night? He has transcended all directions, so it is with one who has penetrated to the Self.” (September 27, 1953, p. 74). It is a process which helps him to deepen both experiences and to discover convergences at the level of the Self, of the ultimate ‘I’, ātman. He discovered that the self-identity of any religious tradition and therefore of the believers, is very much bound to the archetypes in which this religion has developed and expressed itself.

“…Loyalty to a tradition is a psychological/mythical means of living in loyalty to oneself – for the deepest aspect of one’s being, of the psyche, is necessarily lived under the archetypes of the ‘tripod’ of Christ, of the earlier time. And a sudden discovery risks making everything explode with bits that would break up and be lost all over the solar system or the Milky Way.

Dogmas have the value of upāya, including the fundamental dogmas of the divinity of Christ and of his trinitarian pre-existence. They are all ‘detours’ which prepare for the ‘awakening’. Not so much detours, as tracks going round the mountain, which climb up in a spiral toward the peak.” (July 2, 1971, p. 328–329).

In Vedānta he found a wonderful terminology to describe the limitations that religions impose upon the Absolute; they are all nīma-rūpa, human identifications with particular names and forms. In the light of experience, the different expressions lose their importance. “We take our verbalizations much too seriously. They are not decisive either for reality or for our experiences.” (June 11, 1972, p. 356). This is so because “Concepts are dualistic and therefore falsify everything that they claim to express about what is beyond dīvāndas. The dīvāndas: Man/God in Jesus to start with; the dīvāndas: sin/virtue, salvation/damnation. When NācKate asks Yama ‘what is beyond religious law and religion (dharma/ahārma), beyond made and not made [kṛita/akṛita], etc., Nāma simply answers with OMI! Truth cannot be formulated, at least at the Luminous apex where all its splendor is concentrated.” (April 2, 1972, p. 342).

It is not an anti-intellectualistic attitude which makes Swamiji criticize all formulations and dogmas. He was too much aware of theology and philosophy, as the Diary itself witnesses. But he wants to stress again and again that all concepts, even the most sublime theological concepts of any tradition, are bound to the culture and historical situation from which they spring; they have their real meaning only at a certain level of consciousness, otherwise they are misleading. Seen from outside the tradition they will be misunderstood. It is therefore not a question of
finding better concepts and more developed theologies; but of getting at the very source of these concepts. In the light of the advaitic experience, which for Swamiji was the source of religion, all formulations explode.

"Christianity and advaita:

Neither opposition nor incompatibility -- two different levels. Advaita is not something that conflicts with anything else at all. It is not a philosophy -- but an existential experience [anubhava]. The whole formulation of Christianity is valid in its own order, the order of manifestation [vyāvahārika], and so provisional, and not of the Absolute [pāramārtika]. The Christian-darśana [perception] is no doubt opposed to the Vedantic darśana, but this merely at the doctrinal level. No formulation, not even that of advaita, can claim to be pāramārtika." (October 23, 1970, p. 322)

But the very condition for rejecting the formulas of religions is the disappearance of the ego who would otherwise assume a false position: "So long as I have not disappeared, it is vain and dangerous to speak so much about advaita." (p. 323)

Therefore his problem with the concept of God. For several millennia humanity, has, on the whole, expressed its religious perception around the archetype God [theos] (which little by little took the place of the much less definite archetype 'gods' [theoi], the culmination of the religious evolution of the neolithic era of humanity.

The archetype theos functions less and less well, at our end of the neolithic era, as a way of expressing, focusing, grounding, etc., the religious sense (a convenient term, even if questionable) of modern people. The modern atheist [a-theos] is only opposed to the archetype theos, and not to the mystery that is expressed through theos, except insofar as the official theios (theists) have done all they could to mix up the mystery and the archetype." (November 24, 1970, p. 323)

Ultimately, the theoretical and practical conflicts between religious traditions get resolved only in the light of an illuminating experience. Abhishiktananda uses the speaking simile of the light of the sun and stumps of candles when he emerges from a transforming experience which brought him to the verge of death in 1972: "I have a feeling that either I have nothing any longer to do here; what or that I have nothing more to bear witness to except the fullness of light. All the nāmarūpas, Hindu as well as Christian, are stumps of candle that we light at high noon -- while the sun is at its zenith!

That purusha of glory [tejas] is to be found. I am he! [So 'ham asmi].

When the tejas is too strong, even the awakening, even sight disappears -- how much more attentiveness to things!

It is deep sleep [sushupti], or else it is death -- or else the cutting of the knots of the heart, the great death. It is the reaching of the sun, in the sahastrāra. It is the reuniting of the two purushas, that of the right eye and that of the sun. And it is only ONE!

It is being carried off to the place of the self, where one is oneself, pure light, supreme light [param jyoti] -- pure being "sati sampanna" (immerged in being) -- pure sun [ādiya], pure life, prāna." (June 10, 1972, p. 355)

In this light he can find wonderful correspondences between the Upanishads and the Gospel, without denying their difference: "The Gospel is centred on a person, The Upanishad, on an experience." (p. 354)

His sadguru remained Christ, but: "Christ loses nothing of his true greatness when he is freed from the false forms of greatness with which myths and theological reflection have decked him out. Jesus is the marvellous epiphany of the mystery of Man, of the Purusha, the mystery of every human being; as were the Buddha and Ramana and so many others. He is the mystery of the Purusha who is seeking himself in the cosmos. His epiphany is strongly marked by the time and place of his appearance in the flesh." (January 2, 1973, p. 367)

He now recognizes the same mystery under the different names and forms in which it has been worshipped: "I recognize this mystery, which I have always adored under the symbol of Christ, in the myths of Nārāyanā, Prajāpati, Shiva, Purusha, Krishna, Rāma, etc. This same mystery." (247.71, p. 332)

Finally, it is "This staggering discovery, new each time, after the manner of a dream, always the same and always new! -- that what I had
projected outside myself into a sphere that was divine, eternal etc., and had defined, loved, and so on, is the mystery of my own self, being at sa evah purusa so ham, so ham asmi! That person yonder (in the sun) - I am he! (Isa Up 16) (22.7.71, p. 331)

In this in perspective we can say, “May something of that awakening ever be experienced by everyone who takes up this Diary, starting from what he or she already knows” (p. x)

Swami Abhishiktananda’s Diary is above all a document of the authentic experience of one who has spiritually moved “in both worlds, the East and the West”, as his favourite Kesirikta of the Rigveda (X:136) says, because he has been “moved by the Wind”, by Vayu, by the Spirit, from within, to discover “the hidden connection” which only the inner vision can reveal.

Life out of Death

by Susan Visvanathan

The Staines’ brutal murder by arson in obscure Bapinda must be seen as a sacrificial moment in the history of India. The slaughter of innocents has been frequent here - Untouchables, tribals, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians. The great Indian force of Bharat is under pressure. This is both a spiritual moment, as well as a political one. Spiritual, because Hinduism can survive only by the incandescent force of Ahimsa - that has been the core of advaita as well as of pantheistic forms of Indian faith. The treachery of murderous politics is not what Hinduism is about; for India has always had place for every form of faith. It is interesting that the question of conversion brings us to the problem of the juxtaposition of Hinduism and Christianity to tribal religions.

It is from this vantage point that I wish to discuss the excerpts from Dom Henri Le Saux’s diary published recently. What would he have said to the death of the Staines, a man and two boys, in the jungles of Orissa?

Henri Le Saux or Abhishiktananda came to India in 1948 in search of Ramana Maharshi. He had been interred in the duties of monastic life for ten years since the Nazi invasion of Brittany. He spent those years in meditation and in dreaming of coming to India, where the great battle of Ahimsa had been won and had borne fruit in freedom for its people.

Central to the core of Abhishiktananda’s life in India was the idea of personal transformation. He felt himself changed as he wanted to live out himself, the spiritual life and dreams of the Indian people. The eucharist and advaita would go hand in hand - he saw no dualism, no tension, no antagonism, no polarity, though of course he did experience these existentially. The two ways, however, were transcended in the life of Atman, where they came to a state beyond dualities.

This experience was metanoia, the biblical word which means transformation - it was conversion. The nature of conversion was brought about by his steadfast love for Jesus and the meetings of the paths of Maharshi Ramana, the great saint of India at Tiruvannamalai, and his own guru at Tapovanam. What Henri Le Saux experienced was the depth and dignity of love - so great that his very essence was submerged in the Godhead. He understood that God appears in everything, in everyone, and that the insignificance of our desires, the pettiness of our illusions were extinguished in the understanding that comes when we look at and understand one another.

This may be described, as Fr. T.K. John once said, as the great nakedness of being, typical of the saints, perhaps best illustrated in Francis of Assisi.

Abhishiktananda has truly an understanding of the Shivalingam as a space of power and creativity, juxtaposed by pain and asceticism. The Crucifixion has been a startling metaphor of the transcendence of physical pain; for Henri Le Saux, the silence of advaita, the smile of Ramana (who also knew how to suffer), the anguish of the cross, all merged into a moment of reckoning.

Understanding brings faith, empathy and fearlessness. It is this which has made Abhishiktananda’s life so beautiful to witness, because in the realms he had reached darkness and light became comforting
spaces. He had learnt to love and encompass even that which is so dangerous — death.

Yet it is not necrophilia that we confront in this moment of Hindu-Christian surrender: The samadhi is the moment of perfect recognition that the world is add the world will be, without end. The apocalyptic moment is a personal one and over and over again. Yet, as we stand at this collective moment of dread, of extinction, the diaries of Henri Le Saux show the fearlessness of a man, who was only a man in the face of God.

Henri Le Saux knew that conversion was not about money and statistics — it was about living one's life in the totality of the moment, being a visible sign of the experience of God. Whether this God is male or female, anthropomorphic or not, Hindu or Christian or Jew, in the bliss of the recognition of being, it was insignificant.

This intimacy of experience is what appears in Dom Henri Le Saux's diary. It predisposes love, compassion, equality! Advaita after all is the absolute understanding of joy in the other.

Each one of us makes a choice about receiving God in one way or another. Not receiving God — to be an atheist — is also a valid way for Le Saux; but he describes the "other" way as beautiful, as transforming the world and seeing it luminous. The abyss too is central to this world — you cannot understand the ascent without the depths. One must travel these paths of deprivation, or horror, of the valley of the shadow of death, to know that another space of "being" exists. The ontology of evil brings us to the understanding of what being is.

Implicated in the silence of being witnesses, the great nation of India must now realize the call of advaita — it may have religious names, identities, each different from the other, but it looks at the other and is transformed by its pain — dalits, tribals, Hindus of various classes and castes who have been killed or raped, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians. It is at this moment of gazing that the world shows us the pain of being mute witnesses. Is it the path of action or of renunciation that we must take? Abhi-shikshananda's way is to look, to imagine, to feel, to be, that which many of us have stopped doing, caught as we are in the whirlpool of daily tasks.

The death of Staines and his sons is as brutal as the deaths brought about by corruption, malice, inefficiency, hatred, irresponsibility: but this is a moment not of withdrawal but of knowing that each one of us has to act, to re-act to that which is sundering India.

In that sense, the diaries are about conversion, and about Hindu-Christian relations. This book is a welcome companion to James Stuart's Letters of Abhishiktananda, and makes us recollect metanoia more forcefully. Conversion is not after all like warfare. Conversion is something which happens to oneself, it is not something you do to somebody else. The right to propagate or disseminate one's ideas is a constitutional right, but to count heads is a worldly game about power and numbers. Abhishiktananda's world as captured in his diaries is about the right and the freedom to think, to live, to breathe, to be, and to be alone if needed be. Clearly we need to learn that metanoia is an individual moment of recognition. Can the Church give up its temporal power to be like Jesus who loved the lilies of the field and let them be?

In this way, the spirit of Staines who worked among the lepers would rest amongst us as the spirit of action, action without reward. The death of his children we mourn with the death of children everywhere who will not grow to tell stories.

The Unity of Religions

by Karan Singh

The assumption that we are allowed to practise only one religion, and that the great world religions are mutually exclusive, is a quaint notion that will surely become as obsolete as the concept that we should know only one language. The great religions of the world, when taken together, constitute a tremendous reservoir of spiritual and philosophical wisdom, and there is really no good reason why we should confine ourselves only to one of them.

In fact, in Nepal, to take an example, there are many people who practise both Hinduism and Buddhism; while in Japan, the well-known saying goes that people are often born into the Shinto tradition, get married as Christians, and die as Buddhists.
In this connection, it must be reiterated that the Hindu-Christian interaction over the past century has been an extremely interesting one. This is highlighted in a remarkable book entitled *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, which is the spiritual diary of Swami Abhishiktananda (1910-1973). A Benedictine monk, born in France as Henri Le Saux, he came to India in 1948 and stayed there until his passing away in 1973.

He was profoundly impressed by Hinduism, particularly by the advaita philosophy of the Upanishads. In the great seer, Sri Ramana Maharshi, he found his Guru, and though he remained a Catholic till the end of his life, his remarkable spiritual experiences testify to the fact that theological differences evaporate when spiritual realisation dawns.

Though Hinduism and Christianity have profound theological differences - Hinduism believes in multiple lives until one attains liberation, for example, while Christianity postulates only one life on earth - at a deeper level, such theological differences become insignificant.

As is well known, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa had no theological problem when, in the course of his amazing *sadhana*, he encountered Jesus Christ. For Abhishiktananda too, his experience of the all-pervasive Brahman was overwhelming even while he held on to his belief in Jesus Christ as a unique saviour.

Indeed, the dichotomy between a vast impersonal consciousness and devotion to a personal deity is one that is to be found to a lesser or greater degree within every religious tradition. In Hinduism, the two have always been sought to be harmonised. This is particularly the case in the Upanishads, which are the high watermark of Hindu philosophy. The Ishavasya Upanishad is an outstanding text on the synthesis between the One and the Many; while in the Shvetashvatara Upanishad; Shiva is clearly linked with the advaitic consciousness.

It is not possible here to enter into a long debate regarding the advaita (unitary) and dvaita (dual) consciousness of the Divine. Let it suffice to say that, at the point when spiritual realisation is achieved, such theoretical differences would seem to disappear, that, certainly, is the testimony of saints and mystics belonging to all the world's great religious traditions.

The main point to be noted in this discussion, however, is that spiritual realisation cannot take place simply on the intellectual or theoretical plane. It is only when one dives into the depths of the heart - the hridaya-guhnyaam, as the Upanishads have it - that one can hope to transcend verbalisation and enter the actual experience.

Let us always remember that the spiritual transmutation is an eternal and ongoing process. As Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi says in his great Masnavi: "Wherever I look there are torches and candles, Wherever I turn there is tumult and shouting. For the World today is heavy and in travail; Seeking to give birth to the eternal world."

It is this interface between the everyday world and the eternal world that is at the core of spiritual striving. The great religions of the world provide an outer structure and a systematic paradigm within which the quest can be undertaken; but in the final analysis, the inner spirit is free to follow "the dictates of the heart". This is what the Hindu-Christian monk Swami Abhishiktananda reveals in his moving and deeply reflective *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*.

(Courtesy: The Times of India, New Delhi; May 8, 1999, p. 12.)

**BOOK REVIEWS**


The title under review is a collection of lectures, talks and homilies given by Donald Nicholl the well known ecumenical theologian on different occasions. Taking into account the relevance of the ideas present in this compendium Adrian Hastings took the trouble of editing this work for the benefit of a wider readership.

Part II of the book depicts his preoccupation with theological issues vis-a-vis his concern to interpret some of the important events of the recent European history in such a way that it makes sense to a questioning mind. The scars left behind by the World Wars, Nazi Germany etc., form the backdrop of some of the reflections. In the lecture on "Is there a
locus classicus for theology" he lays great emphasis on taking into account the background in which a particular theology has been developed. Besides he also argues that theology should not be divorced from life, lest it becomes sterile.

The second part commences with a Good Friday meditation cast in a deeply personal mould. The autobiographical tinge is evident in this section and his extensive travels also form the backdrop of these thought-provoking reflections. Part III focuses on Christianity in dialogue with other faiths as the Western scholars and thinkers began to discover the spiritual treasures hidden in the religions of the Orient. He was convinced that other religions have a positive role to play in today's world. However, his inter-faith concerns had never weakened his deep attachment to Jesus Christ, as clarified in a letter to Hastings (Introduction, p. xvii).

One may wonder how the diverse topics are woven together. Thematically it may look to be a strange mix of ideas. In fact, the person of Nicholl and his rich as well as varied experiences (anubhava) run as a thread that knits together the variety of topics. They have the flavour of the discourses rendered by many a spiritual master of the East. And yet it may be admitted that there are loose-ends, if strict standards of coherence for a serious book are applied on the present work.

For the readers of Setu the book has some special significance as a short chapter is dedicated to Swami Abhishiktananda and the relevance of his life for the future. He contends: "... the time has come to show that Abhishiktananda's message is a message for all human beings, not for just monks and nuns."

Originally written as ‘Foreword’ to James Stuart’s book, Swami Abhishiktananda - His Life told through his Letters, he reckons that Swamiji was a ‘spiritual adventurer who was unusually pure in heart’. Jesus’ admonition to Peter that he would be taken to places where the latter would not like to go, came to be true in the life of Le Saux. The essential spirit of interior adventure that guided Swamiji helped him transcend a culturally-conditioned Christianity as well as a culturally-conditioned Hinduism.

Though very brief, the last chapter on ‘Inter-Faith’ is like the icing of the cake. Written in 1995 it sums up the developments that are fast catching on at the close of the millennium, to blend together religious and spiritual experience of humankind as brought forth by various traditions.

The book, I am afraid, does not make for easy reading in places where the author has used words, phrases, etc., from classical as well as other languages. Rendering them in English side by side, would have been very helpful for non-scholarly readers. Yet, the present work is valuable on account of its personal depth, breadth of scholarship and wide range of concerns undertaken.

Anthony Ponuthur, SVD


For many reasons I am not the most appropriate person to introduce our readers to this study of Swami Abhishiktananda. But it might take long to find the qualified person to do that and our readers might miss the opportunity to know about this book which in many ways is ‘different’.

So far most of the studies of the French-Indian mystic have been by his disciples or at least by people who knew him personally and were generally themselves engaged in a venture similar to that of Abhishiktananda. Most of them also come from people whose interests are theology, religious studies or comparative religion, and are published from centres of Christian inspiration.

This book is published by an distinguished academic centre whose secular credentials are beyond any doubt, and yet deals in depth with the spiritual and theological journey of Swamiji. Dr. Visvanathan, who teaches Gender and Cultural Studies at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharal Nehru University, did not belong to the small circle of Swamiji's friends or acquaintances but had access to the monk of Gyanau through his writings and her contacts with his circle of friends. Her professional competence is sociology. In 1983 she published a scholarly cultural study of the Yakoba Christians of Kerala (Chennai, OUP). Some
other areas of interest for her have been pluralism, dialogue, comparative religion, C.F. Andrews, Martin Buber, Simone Weil, even Joan of Arc...

She brings to this study a breadth of philosophical and theological concerns, which one does not easily find in other authors on Abhishiktananda and a technical discourse which without bypassing the mystical and theological vocabulary approaches it from a fresh perspective. Sociology may seem to be an odd discipline to study the mystical life. She herself calls the study an ethnographic exercise, I am not sure what content she gives to the word, but she explains it herself: “Sociology made it difficult to understand the mystical in terms of believing, experiencing or interiorising. However when semiotics entered Anthropology, through linguistics and semiotics, the way towards the analyses of ‘believing’ became clear. Roland Barthes proved that everything was a narrative form and could be interpreted as such. It is this perspective that allows me to engage in an analysis of the writings of a mystic, little known but important, called Henri Le Saux, renamed in India as Abhishiktananda” (p. 15).

The book has five chapters. The first deals with “Missiological Styles and the Problem of Dialogue,” a straightforward historical survey from William Carey to Abhishiktananda with a stopover at Krishna Pillai, the 19th century Tamil Christian poet. The second chapter is almost an autonomous study of the Jewish mystic compatriot and contemporary of Abhishiktananda, Simone Weil (1909-1943) who died at half his age. Readers may be puzzled about this apparent digression, but the last chapter shows points of convergence between the two mystics.

The third chapter deals mostly with the earlier part of the life of Swamiji in India, stressing his fascination with Ramana Maharshi. We are offered good insights from the comparison of the two mystics. The chapter comments also on the more mature theological work of Swamiji, Saccidananda. The fourth chapter deals with the later part of Abhishiktananda’s life and gives special attention to The Further Shore, his book on sannyasa, and his relation with his disciple Meru. The last chapter is a shorter conclusion on language and mysticism which, by definition, involves speech and silence. Appropriately one of the central texts here is Abhishiktananda’s Prayer.

This is a dense book, a meditation which is at the same time an interpretation. Definitely it is not an introduction to the thought of Swamiji. There is much which I, innocent of sociology, was unable to follow. Many insights however will open the way for a deeper understanding of the monk of dialogue. Hopefully competent scholars will study this monograph and make its insights available to a wider circle.

G. Gispert-Sauch, SJ

From: Vidyajyoti, September 1999, pp. 702 - 703.

OBITUARIES

Agnes Kunze: Sharing a life with the lepers
(12.4.1923 – 14.11.1998)

by Bettina Bäumer

She was not the typical social worker but a multifaceted personality who devoted all her gifts for uplifting the ex-leprosy patients ostracised from society. Among all her gifts the greatest was perhaps that she was able to give a sense of human dignity, of recognition of often hidden capacities in those who seemed to be totally incapacitated. And this counts more than building up big institutions.

Agnes Kunze was born in Munich in 1923 and grew up with the horrors of war and its aftermath. Seeing the misery of after-war she gave up her studies of egytology to become a social worker. From the beginning her approach was not one of “doing good”, but one of sharing life with the “lost cases” of society, and in this way giving them new hope and a sense of purpose. When her task was finished, she decided to move to those who were more miserable. With only a ticket for the ship to Bombay and 1000 DM in her pocket she came to India in 1961. Since she was determined to work for lepers she was given a piece of land at the outskirts of Dehra Dun, just below the cemetery, and a first group of 30 ex-leprosy patients started living together, determined to give up begging. The K.K.M. Colony was born which should later develop into a Society comprising five centers in North India. The ex-beggars started spinning and weaving and earning their own livelihood. Agnes’ artistic creativity
inspired them to produce beautiful handwoven products whose export developed into a regular business.

Called "Sisterji" by her people in the beginning, and later "Mataji", Agnes was a point of reference and a nodal point in a vast net of friendships.

After a fracture and a series of operations she lost one leg and spent 16 years in a wheelchair. This did not diminish her indomitable spirit, her dedication to her people, her sense of humour, her deep spirituality.

Agnes was a poet, she also wrote small dramas and prose, and her letters to her friends in Germany are a lively reflection of her experience of India, of her suffering with the downtrodden, without any sense of superiority or condescendence. With all her deep knowledge and subtle spirituality, Agnes retained the original roughness of her Bavarian nature, which was in a way fitting to her new environment. Her poems reveal the mystic in her which remained hidden to many.

Her friendship with Swami Abhishiktananda began when they met at the Parish Church of Dehra Dun, where Swamiji had been thrown out by the priest, because he was a sadhu. Distressed about this ignorant attitude they went to a tea shop to share a cup of tea. And their friendship and mutual understanding lasted till the end.

Agnes was a social worker, a poetess, a mystic, a businesswoman and, much more, a strong and independent woman (beyond any feminism), all rolled in one. She loved life, with all its troubles, and yet she was so well prepared for death, for "the angel of the other shore", to take her to the further shore which she experienced already on this side. Therefore we are reproducing her "Happy Song of Death."

In the end, her death, which came on 14th November 1998, proved that nothing matters but Love.

My happy song of Death

When I am dying
Let me once again see the light of the sun
perhaps even between heaven and earth
a rainbow and at night the constellation of the Great Bear,

about to depart.

When I am dying
let me once again listen to a flute concert
and if it is morning
to the singing of the birds in the Philkani tree
the cooing of the doves
and the call of the Koyal:
Come along!

When I am dying
let me once again taste fresh water
sweet melons and mangoes
and of the festive table the wine
shortly before the farewell.

When I am dying
let me once again smell the jasmine
and if it is evening
the fragrance of withering roses
in magical gardens
or on the cemetery wall.

When I am dying
let me once again feel comforting hands
by day and by night,
warm in my hands
and cooling on my hot forehead
hands which bless and which give me the bread for the journey.

Let me once again
when I am dying
see hear taste smell and feel
all the lights and colours,
all the sounds, all the fragrances
and all the embraces of this beloved world
loved and embraced -- now and in the hour of our death. Amen.

Agnes Kunze
Marie-Madeleine Davy: Scholar of Mysticism

Marie - Madeleine Davy, great French scholar of mysticism and medieval Christian thought, passed away in Paris on 1st November 1998. Hers was an unifying effort of writing and lecturing about mysticism. Author of a number of books and editor of some important series on Spirituality in French, Marie - Madeleine became fascinated by Swami Abhishiktananda, whom she called "the ferryman between two shores". Without having known him personally, she entered deeply in his thought and experience. The result was her book: 

Henri Le Saux: Le passeur entre deux rives. For some time she was president of the Association Henri Le Saux in France and lectured on Swamiji. Apart from her scholarly books on William of St.Thierry, Romanesque Symbolism and others, she also wrote on her personal spiritual experience, as e.g. L'homme interieur et ses metamorphoses (The Inner Man and His Metamorphoses). Her contribution to French spiritual literature is significant.

CORRESPONDENCE

Extract of a letter to Bettina Bäumer dated 9 September 1998 from Christian Hackbarth-Johnson, doctoral student of the University of Munich, working on Swami Abhishiktananda (Title: Interreligiose Existenz).

Mr. Hackbarth-Johnson gives an account of his visit in Chartres to Fr. Lemarié and to Kergonan.

Dear Bettina,

visiting Brittany was an important inspiration for my work. More important than the documents, which I could see or copy (nothing really new) was seeing the land, experiencing the Benedictine spirituality in Kergonan and meeting people. Joseph Lemarié was very friendly. He showed me all the documents he has. He still has the manuscripts of Abhishiktananda’s lectures on church history from 1946/47. I would have loved to take a deeper look at them, but unfortunately there was only little time, which I used for interviewing Canon Lemarié. One nice anecdote he told me when I asked for information on funding A.’s ship fare. Lemarié had painted a painting showing a begging Indian monk, which was placed in the shop of A.’s family in St. Briac over a basket where people could put in money. The painting still exists and is in the family’s property. I was very happy that he gave me one of his last copies of “Les yeux de lumière,” which I was not able to get in Germany, not even from a library. His book with the letters Swamiji wrote to him will only come out in December, so I could not get one.

Chartres, in spite of its fame, was not a big spiritual impression for me. Too touristy. Probably one would have to stay longer to spend more time discovering the Cathedral. But it seemed to me that it is not the buildings, but the spirituality that is lived at a place (or not), which gives a place its magic. That became clearer to me in Kergonan, which impressed me much more. There was a presence in the church, during Office and Mass, which comes through the spiritual practice which is lived there. And it seemed to me this was even more intensive the less guests there were from outside. At Sunday Mass, which was crowded, there was too much disturbing energy. I felt very comfortable with the atmosphere in the monasteries. For the first time I could understand the spiritual power that was able to Christianize Europe. A life of simplicity, structured by Gregorian office which in its beauty and restraint is so transparent to the divine mystery.

I regret that there was no time to speak to the Abbot, Dom le Gall, but I was impressed by his way of blessing everybody personally after completion and his vibrating voice full of overtones while singing. I met the novice-master, Fr. Xavier Perrin, who spoke German. And one very friendly elder monk who still knew Abhishiktananda. My French is not very good which restricted my communication often quite a bit. That was a pity especially with Fr. Gelineau, who is the Abbey’s specialist on Abhi-shiktananda and is also participant of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue movement. He showed me the file with all the material the monastery has gathered on Swamiji, which was not too much. It was moving to see a little book on him showing the main periods of his life illustrated with photos. Also to see the 150 pages big size, hand-written Chronique of the exile during war, illustrated again by photos and paint-
ings. Of course it was not possible to read it. Again I had only little time
and I used it to do as much work as possible relevant to my focus of re-
search. I wanted to find out which books on India A. had had at hand in
the monastery’s library. I was not allowed to go in the library (it was
basically just a weekend that I spent here), but Fr. Gelineau brought me
everything I was asking for to read in the public area of the monastery.
And in fact there were quite a few very old indological books as well as a
series of little booklets called “Xavariana” published monthly in the 20s
and 30s, which gave valid informations on many aspects of Indian spiri-
tuality. For example the issue of October 1928, “Figures Indiennes -- Sri
Ramakrishna Paramahamsa” written by Edmond de Coqu, SJ (a mission-
ary of Bengal), gave quite a sympathetic view of the saint.

But as authentically as they live their Benedictine spirituality in St.
Anne de Kergonan, they do not hold up the memory of their Indian
brother very much. In their bookshop which has thousands of books,
there was not one of Henri Le Saux. Sure, his spirituality has moved far
off of the one that is lived there. And of course they are holding and
promoting a more straight-line Christian theology. They seem to still
consider his books “misleading”, not fitting in their way of spirituality.
It really dawned on me at the Gospel reading of August 22. It was Mt 23,
1-12, a pericope that has a radical critique on all religious institutions and
so also on the structure of their order. “Do not let yourself be called
Master or Father or Teacher, because one only is your Father...” I felt
such a high energy in the churchroom which culminated at the contradicti-
ness of this reading. I thought, wow, if they take it seriously what was
read there, they would have to stop it and go away. But, of course,
they didn’t. And it seemed to me that this was justified only by the en-
ergy that they generate or bring down from above in their ritual (I could
see the myth of the Holy Grail in this Mass), which indeed was very
high.

All in all my stay there brought me in contact with the early Henri
Le Saux. Now I have some understanding of the photos showing this
shaven young man in the black habit, who later turned into this long-
haired bearded Sannyasi. In Kergonan I could see intensively the value of
the monastic service to mankind. This total orientation on the mystery
which transcends all forms (but of course needs forms as well). A
deep integration of Vedanta, of the insights of Swamiji would only be
supporting, deepening, not mis- but in-leading. (To me this classification
of occident and orient is not so obvious any more, especially if one has to
do with the highest levels. If one has tasted it in one form it should also
be perceptible in another form).

It was a special gift to meet Sr. Marie-Therese Le Saux in St. Michel
de Kergonan, just 500 m away from St. Anne. She is very friendly and
has a very lively temperament. Loving her brother deeply she was happy
that I chose to write about him. Through the bars of the nursery she
showed me her photo album, especially one photo showing herself at the
feet of her brother just before he left. She wrote above it: “Guru and
Disciple”. She allowed me to read the letters that he wrote to her which
are full of charm and humor.

It was divine guidance that we also met there Marie-Noel and
Hubert Soutaine who were just visiting the place. Marie-Noel is the niece
of Raymond Mace, this friend of Swamiji from his Seminary time, with
whom he corresponded until his passing away in 1973. Swamiji had his
last supper in Brittany in their house. (Next day early morning he would
use the opportunity to get a free ride on a truck which was arranged by
the Maces). As my daughter had become sick the Soutaines invited us to
spend the night in their place. The next day we left for Rennes and had to
return to Germany one week earlier than planned. So unfortunately I was
not able to see Swamiji’s home in St. Briac and meet Mme Montagnon
(who was just recovering from a severe sickness) and Mme Le Fur, two
of Swamiji’s sisters. I hope I can make this visit in 1999 and so come
after the invitation to stay with the Soutaines who live close to Rennes
and are in constant contact with the Le Saux family. They requested me
to meet Raphael Salen in Paris on our way from one station to the other.
He happened to be there and it was a pleasure meeting him.

For your pilgrimage to the Himalayan seat of Shiva I wish you many
blessings, love, Christian
PUBLICATIONS


NEWS

Dr. Anand Amaladas, S.J., Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, Satya Nilayam, Chennai, has held the “Radhakrishnan Endowment Lectures” at Madras Christian College on 2nd March 1999 on: “Swami Abhishiktananda’s Encounter with Vedânta”.

Satya Nilayam, the Jesuit Faculty of Philosophy, Chennai, now affiliated to the University of Madras, has included Swami Abhishiktananda as one of the authors in the syllabus, in the paper on Vedânta.

On March 29, 1999, a public Book Discussion was held at India International Centre, New Delhi, on Swamiji’s Diary (see detailed report and excerpts of contributions).

Bettina Bömer was invited by the French speaking Swiss group of DIM (Monastic Interreligious Dialogue) to the Cisterian Monastery of La Mairiegune in Fribourg to speak on Abhishiktananda and to give meditations on the Kajha Upaniṣad in June 1999. This group is not only monastic but also ecumenical and a lively dialogue is carried out by them since some years.

Bettina Bömer was invited by the North American Board of MID to their Workshop for Contact Persons at the Benedict Centre, Schuyler, Nebraska, from July 7 – 10, 1999 to speak on “Abhishiktananda and the Challenge of Hindu -- Christian Experience.” Swami Nityananda Giri of Sri Gâñânamanda Thapovanam, Trivikrîthir, was the only Hindu present in this meeting of monastics. He spoke very impressively on his Guru Sri Gnanananda and on Swami Abhishiktananda.

The yearly Meditation-Week in Puregg, in the Austrian mountains, from August 6 – 12, was this year on the theme “Discovering the Centre”, on the basis of the Vijñâna Bhairava, an ancient mystical text of the Kashmir Śaiva tradition. The simple and silent atmosphere of the “House of Silence” with the mountains all around and the experience of the solar eclipse on 11th August made this retreat memorable.

The Abhishiktananda Society is organising a third Interreligious Retreat Seminar in Sarnath, Varanasi, in December 1999 on the topic: Śûnya -- Parâya -- Plekâma -- Void and Fullness in the Buddhist, Hindu and Christian Traditions (for invited participants only). A detailed report will follow in the next issue of SETU.

Donations to the Society received since April 1998

We are thankful for donations received from the following friends: J.A. Hashmi, M. Royster, Rev. Malcom Ross, Paul T. Harris, Glen Freissser, Chris Moore, Douglas and Norvane Vest, S.K. De, Christiane Beer, Noel Cleary, Sr Sara Grant, Christian Hackbarth, Sharon Jeanne Smith, Fr. John W. Groff Jr., Ms. S. Delane, Noél King, Prof. Fairy v. Lilienfeld, DIM Switzerland.

Donations towards the cost of printing and postage of SETU are welcome. Cheques should be issued in the name of Abhishiktananda Society.