

# ABHISHIKTANANDA SOCIETY

Brotherhood House, 7 Court Lane, Delhi 110 054

OCCASIONAL BULLETIN No. 14

December 1992

It is always a great joy to be here (at Uttarkashi). It is like another world, another birth, as we say in India. Here the Upanishads open up to ever greater depths. I realise that no cursory reading of the Upanishads (any more than of the Bible) can reveal their secret. We are so conditioned by our western mentality! It is easy to say that we must make our souls and our minds virginally empty. But to go on from that to actually doing so! It means quite a different angle of vision. And we have to attain this angle of vision, not conceptually, but existentially....

The Ganges is roaring quite close to me here. It sings a ground bass which sets the key for everything. And in its harmonics all that can be sung is sung. Above all the OM, which has hardly left me since my retreat at Gangotri last year.

Abhishiktananda

(Letter of 24.7.65 in *His Life told through his Letters*)

## ANNOUNCEMENT

It has been decided to enlarge the present Bulletin and to give it a new name: **SETU, Bulletin of the Abhishiktananda Society**. SETU means 'bridge' in the sense of the Upanishads and of Abhishiktananda who wanted to be a bridge between the spiritual traditions of Hinduism and Christianity. It will contain articles on interreligious dialogue and the spiritual paths of different traditions, each time centered on a topic related to Swami Abhishiktananda's ideas and ideals. While drawing its inspiration from his person and insights, its scope will not be restricted to fostering his memory.

Contributions in the form of articles, book reviews or news are welcome. The first issue of SETU is planned to come out in 1993, the centenary year of the World Parliament of Religions, dedicated to interreligious dialogue, and the 20th anniversary of Swamiji's mahāsamādhi.

We regret that owing to various reasons no Bulletin could come out in 1991.

### The Rajpur Experience: Seminar on Saiva and Christian Mysticism

Swami Abhishiktananda's spirit was everywhere — in his room, where he often stayed, in the meditation and prayer sessions, at the unravelling of the Christian and Shaiva traditions and at the sharing of spiritual experiences and views. When the country all around us was burning with the flames of intolerance, fear and suspicion, here at the Christian Retreat and Study Centre, under the aegis of the Abhishiktananda Society and its tireless chairperson Bettina Bäumer, we were exploring new avenues of understanding and searching for the Universal Truth which is beyond dogmas and religions.

The humility, graciousness and dignity of the participants with such diverse backgrounds (Swiss, Austrian, Belgian, Italian, Polish, British, South and North Indian) led me to perceive the impact of a selfless quest for the supreme. As one progresses on the path of self-realisation a spontaneous, unfettered compassion and contentment emerges. We were all fellow travellers who had one goal and could strike a sympathetic chord in each others' hearts even though we were following different traditions.

The papers which revealed the Christian mystical experiences concentrated by and large on the wisdom and living divinity of great saints like Meister Eckhart, St John of the Cross, St Ignatius Loyola, Julian of Norwich and the Beguin community. These presentations brought home to me the knowledge that the mystical experience, which may be a revelation, a divine vision or spiritual illumination is really common to both Christianity and Hinduism. The papers on Saiva Siddhānta, and Kashmir Saivism were philosophical in content with an exegesis of the great Saiva scriptures. This spurred me to explore these texts more deeply.

Away from the noise and pollution of Delhi, surrounded by the beauty of the hills, the old trees, the clear starry sky, and the full moon of Kartik Purnima, the experience was ineffable and enchanting, as if all the woes of the world had dissolved. I offer my 'praṇām' to all who made this possible.

Sarla Kumar, New Delhi

### REVIEW by Serge Deséy

André Gozier: *Le père Henri Le Saux. A la rencontre de l'hindouïsme* (Coll. Religions en dialogue), Paris, Centurion, 1989, 167 pp.

This book by André Gozier, Prior of the Benedictine Abbaye Sainte-Marie in Paris, can be commended for causing the spiritual journey of Fr Henri Le Saux (1910-1973)/ Swami Abhishiktananda to be better known in French-speaking circles. It has however provoked some lively debates among the friends of Fr Le Saux, and more widely, among people involved in inter-religious dialogue. We recall, for example, the criticisms expressed in the papers and the ensuing discussions during a colloquy organized by the "Association Henri Le Saux" at the Sorbonne in December 1989, shortly after the book appeared.

The reader will certainly be puzzled on perusing this study, which is too hasty and also contains many contradictions and inconsistencies. It is obvious that we cannot speak usefully about Fr Le Saux' writings and evaluate his message and spiritual experience, unless we have sufficiently mastered a range of such basic topics as the written sources, the Indian environment, the categories of Indian philosophy (especially those of Advaita-Vedānta), and of course Christian theology and mysticism, both western and eastern.

In general we have to recognize that Henri Le Saux does not always express himself in precise and theologically accurate language. Specialists are well aware of this: the terms that he uses fluctuate between the standard usage of theologians and their ordinary secular meanings. However, the language of Fr Le Saux and his vocabulary ("éclaté", exploded, cp. Preface, p.13) are addressed to the general educated public, and have no other aim than to express an experience, a praxis, and to open a dialogue.

Consequently, we should not take his expressions and his style of writing for what they are not intended to be. But if any would undertake — a task that must certainly be done — to evaluate critically the theological significance of the thought of Henri Le Saux in its wholeness, then it is essential to use a rigorous methodology and to be familiar with the history of dogma and with contemporary hermeneutics. These three dimensions of criticism are sadly lacking in the present essay.

Apart from this, it seems clear that A. Gozier has in one way understood H. Le Saux, even without having known him and without knowing India, but very likely on the basis of his own spiritual experience as a Benedictine monk. This he shows in several passages. In support of this view, one gladly recalls several very positive assessments by the author:

"(Henri Le Saux made) the break-through from the self to the Self, realizing the true Easter" (p.102);

"Henri Le Saux was a prophet, for he saw what was at stake" (p.119); "H.L.S. is one of those men who brings light to one's life; a great monk, a prophet of Hindu-Christian dialogue, a pioneer of inculturation" (p.120);

"H.L.S. son of St Benedict, will do honour to the memory of his Father" (p.120);

"as a true prophet, he had possessed the courage to speak and to act. People will recognize the correctness of his intuition, his gift of perceptiveness" (p.121);

on the poems of H.L.S. in *Souvenirs d' Arunachala* and *La montée au fond du coeur* "they sometimes have a flavour similar to that of Péguy or Claudel" (p.124);

on p. 130 the author compares a poem of H.L.S. to strophe 34 of the *Spiritual Canticle* of St John of the Cross.

Apart from that, the book contains several sections of great value, in addition to the remarkable Preface by Dom Pierre Miquel, Abbot of Ligugé, in which he compares the spiritual stature of Henri Le Saux with that of Charles de Foucauld, Teilhard de Chardin and St John of the Cross.

The section which the author devotes to the meaning of Christian monasticism (pp. 44-51) is without any doubt one of the best in his book. Here we recognize Dom Gozier's deep personal interest in the monastic way of life and his detailed knowledge, to which his earlier publications bear witness. He was indeed bound to make clear from the beginning the spiritual foundations and the directing principles of life which would guide Fr Le Saux from start to finish of his course, showing at the same time the various possible ways of applying the Benedictine spirit. The author notes very truly (pp. 59-60): "We would like to affirm Dom Le Saux's fidelity .. to his Benedictine vocation, at least if

we accept an updated concept of fidelity, which is not repetitive, but creatively inventive, a homogeneous development taking its start from the initial datum." Nevertheless we should note that the importance which Gozier gives to *Ermities* (pp. 43-60), when all is said and done, seems somewhat disproportionate in the light of Le Saux's fundamental experience.

In the same way we have greatly appreciated the comparison which Dom Gozier makes between Fr Le Saux's spirituality and the *Philokalia* of the Neptic Fathers (pp. 139-140). In addition, the distinction which he puts forward between three forms (not exclusive) of Christian spiritual experience is very relevant and thought-provoking, as they are practically identical with the three traditional *mārgas* of Hindu spirituality. Finally, the profound perception added to the lyrical tone of pp. 143-144 perfectly express the author's sympathy with Abhishikta-nanda's experience. And then, for his own part, he three times quotes that magnificent line from the Bhagavad Gītā (xi, 12): "As if the light of a thousand suns should rise..." (p.144).

However, at other times A. Gozier seems to be saying the exact opposite. This I attribute to a certain obsession with orthodoxy, with the conceptual, with the "croyable disponible" (P. Ricoeur), with rational synthesis, from which he has not entirely detached himself, although he may sometimes give the impression that he has. He has probably not realized all the implications of the hermeneutical approach in theology which apply to religious dialogue, even though he quotes (p. 121) the excellent study by C. Geffre (*Le christianisme au risque de l'interprétation*, Paris, 1983).

It remains to be said that his judgments at points where Henri Le Saux has bared his heart in his Journal (which even so was not intended for publication) are unacceptable. He complains about the "selections" which were chosen in *La montée au fond du coeur* (cp. pp. 100-101), but in the end does he not show that the team which did this long and difficult work was perfectly right?

All things considered, and despite the positive aspects that have been mentioned, it has to be recognized that we are dealing with a "work" of iconoclasm, whose overstatements and indeed inaccuracies we must now attempt to correct.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Due to limitations of space, we can only quote here some examples and not the exhaustive list given by Serge Desey.

pp. 28-29. Mme Koechlin's account of the ashram, dated 30 December 1980, is frankly of very minor relevance, inasmuch as the Shantivanam Ashram after 1968, when it came under the leadership of Fr Bede Griffiths, is quite unlike what it was during the earlier years (1950-1968).

pp. 31-33. These pages on the subject of the "guru" do very little to explain the fundamental relationship which bound Swamiji to his disciple Marc Chaduc. A. Gozier also gives it little importance when he deals with the end of the Journal (pp. 100-102), and does not bring out its decisive significance in the experience of illumination on 14 July 1973 (pp. 138-139). Should this grave omission be attributed to the author's insufficient knowledge of his sources?

pp. 34-35. "very inadequately prepared to set foot on Indian soil... (...) Better prepared, he would have suffered less." But what better preparation could he have had than a sincere search for God, "a profound love" for India, and "an intense intellectual sympathy for (its) thought"? (Letter to J. Monchanin, 18 August 1947)

p. 34. "he does not seem to have been thoroughly acquainted with the works of John of the Cross or with those of the Rheno-Flemish mystics." This assertion is totally unfounded. Similarly, one wonders on what grounds A. Gozier can allege (p. 114), quoting B. Griffiths (?) that "Henri le Saux never studied Eckhart, Suso, Ruysbroeck," and that "he did not compare the Christian mystical tradition with the rich traditions of India"? On the contrary, it is quite certain that he read them — in any case, Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, Hadewich of Antwerp, St. John of the Cross, etc... (See in this connection, the catalogue *Fonds Swami Abhishiktananda*, Delhi, Brotherhood House, 1990). For all that, when further on we read his note 19 on p. 136, we may well wonder if the author himself should not have drawn more profit from his knowledge of the Rheno-Flemish mystics...

p. 38. Three times (see also pp. 132 and 134) A. Gozier criticizes Henri le Saux for not having taken sufficient note of the semantic evolution of Indian philosophical concepts (e.g., *ātman* and *brahman*). It is true that the Upanishads — to speak only of the principal ones — do not yield a consistent metaphysics and should be studied in the context of the historical evolution of ideas. But can Le Saux be blamed for not being an Indologist? Personally I see no difficulty in Swamiji's global

approach, even if he uses a system of interpretation which is that of Sankara's Advaita-Vedānta.

However, Le Saux was not really interested in the formal and systematic study of Vedāntin philosophy; his aim was to go to the very source of mystical experience. Accordingly the only valid method at the intellectual level that is demanded by the ultimate meaning of the questions raised, will be apophatic. A. Gozier seems however to have understood the status of Le Saux's language, since he himself writes: "Words have been uttered, but only to be denied and sent back to the silence from which they emerge." and again, "The understanding has to be blind, the memory free from every concept capable of translation in human terms... *neti neti*... concepts create idols" (pp. 143-144).

pp. 57-58. A. Gozier has an astounding reflection upon the mediating function of rites, which would be excluded after a certain stage in Hindu mystical experience, while for Christianity it would be essential, in view of the principle of incarnation which governs the latter (p. 58). Then Gozier extends this same line of thought to the Church, when he says that in the writings of Le Saux "it does not enter the foreground of his thought" (p. 58). In answer, it must be said at once that the liturgy of contemplatives is sober. Spontaneous gestures are often all that remains of it. A. Gozier is not unaware of this interior liturgy, since later on he describes the mysticism of awakening or transcendence in these terms: "there is a blotting out of sensible symbols... direct contact of the spirit with the reality that wells up from within, otherwise the liturgy will kill the mystical experience which it would bring to birth" (pp. 141-142).

Another stereotype in the same style: "the whole principle of incarnation is entirely alien to the Hindu point of view" (p. 58). This ought to be nuanced. Hinduism has a very deep sense of the divine immanence and has expressed it within a perspective that is proper to itself. It follows from this that the mediating function of rites is as fundamental as it is in Christian anthropology, and that the human body has been regarded with great respect and honour — which contrasts with the negative attitude on this matter which long prevailed in the Christian West.

p. 88, Note 23. In four lines the author sums up his perception of certain complex notions which are variously interpreted in different

schools of Hindu thought, such as, God as Absolute Being, illusion, and the illusory status of creatures; and then concludes that in Christianity, "the status of creatures cannot be transcended," and that "if it is true that the Christian is deified, one can never say that he becomes God in the strict sense through identification." Here again A. Gozier reveals his very vague knowledge of Indian philosophy. In Śankara's non-dualist Vedānta, for example, the idea of *māyā* (cosmic illusion) is not essentially distinct from that of *avidyā*, or "ignorance". The world is, of course, a reality in itself, but it is illusion compared with the ultimate Reality, in which it participates and without which it is nothing. Illusion is in fact the ignorance of one who takes the world for the supreme Reality. The author unfortunately confuses illusion *qua* unreality with the illusory dimension of what is manifested.

If the author will forgive me, Indian philosophy is highly complex and cannot be reduced to vague clichés and a few generally accepted ideas. We do not have to look far to find the real obstacle to inter-religious dialogue... Besides, one might equally apply similar improper criteria to the reading of most of our Christian mystics...

p. 133: A. Gozier's reflection on the nature of Fr Le Saux's ecstatic experience — the author is presumably referring to the experience which took place on 14 July 1973 at Rishikesh, and which Le Saux himself thereafter called "the discovery of the Grail" — is both cursory and superficial. In this subtle and difficult sphere — for who can really speak of it except the one who has himself had the experience? — the various traditions and spiritual schools in India do offer some criteria for discernment, which moreover have much in common with those found in Christian mystical traditions. But his manner of raising the question, and the absence of definite references (cp. "Vedantists consider that...") strike me as a derisory exercise.

In any case, the specific and permanent condition of one liberated during this life (*jivan-mukta*) is better expressed by the term "*sahaja-samādhi*"; this has been used especially by the great contemporary saints of India, such as Sri Ramana Maharshi, in order to characterize the condition of transcendental and non-dual consciousness of the Awakened one, condition of pure divine spontaneity in the context of this world.

P. 134. Gozier notes: "His gurus have bequeathed to him a unilateral

view." The realized master or the saint is always simply the pure reflection, the living and complete manifestation of the mystical tradition which has carried him along, whether it be Christian or Hindu. At the same time, the saint is beyond the particularities of such and such a "spirituality". The author says very truly:

"Mystical experience is an ever renewed dispossession of the self, in order to allow the Self(God) to appear. It is not a matter of working on forms, pictures, concepts, images..." (p. 141). It is all more surprising that he blames Dom Le Saux for "insufficient nuances", even though he had sat at the feet of "distinguished Vedantists" (p. 134).

NEWS

In June 1991 the Centro Le Saux, Milan, organised a summer seminar on Swamiji at Aosta (detailed report awaited).

\*\*\*

Mme Odette Baumer has been giving a number of talks and seminars on Abhishikatananda and also on Fr Monchanin in France, Belgium and Italy in the years 1991 and 1992. She has also become a member of the Swiss group of AIM for inter-monastic dialogue.

\*\*\*

The Austrian group of the "Friends of Abhishikatananda" has so far organised two "meditation weeks" in the Austrian mountains, in Summer 1991 and in July 1992. The last one was on the topic "Sakti and Pneuma", and it was for the first time held in Puregg, a meditation centre in the mountains near Salzburg founded by Br. David Steindl-Rast. It is hoped that this tradition will continue and that Puregg with its beautiful Zendo in an old stable will remain a fixed place for such retreats.

The main purpose is to create a spiritual atmosphere in which a meeting between Indian and Christian spirituality can take place in each one of us.

\*\*\*

In August 1991 the President visited the Brussels group Henri Le Saux and gave a talk on her personal memories of Swamiji.

\*\*\*

November 1991 saw one of the worst communal riots in the ancient

city of Varanasi since Independence. It was a sign of hope that on the Christmas after these events a small interreligious gathering could take place at Nityanand Ashram, Sarnath, on the topic of peace and brotherhood between followers of the various religions present in Varanasi. Buddhists, Jains, Hindus, Muslims and Christians shared their concern about the politically motivated polarisation of religions, and expressed a desire to strengthen the forces of peace. Such meetings should take place more frequently and plans are already in hand for a similar meeting this year.

#### New Publications:

Selection from Abhishiktananda's writings:

M.M. Davy: *Père Henri Le Saux, Ecrits*, Paris, Albin Michel (Collection "Spiritualités vivantes"), 1991.

Important Studies of Abhishiktananda:

*Christ et Vedanta: L'expérience d'Henry Le Saux en Inde. Question del' Albin Michel*, No. 85, 1991 (containing contributions by Marc de Smedt, Philippe de Briey, R. Panikkar and Alain Chapellier).

"Swami Abhishiktananda, or the Spiritual Experience of a Hindu-Christian monk", by Jacques Dupuis in chapter 3 of *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (Orbis Books, 1991).

"Enveloped by Mystery": The Spiritual Journey of Henri Le Saux/ Abhishiktananda by James Wiseman, *Eglise et Théologie*, Ottawa (St Paul's University), Vol. 23 (1992, p. 241).

#### OBITUARIES by Bettina Bäumer

Swami Lakshman Joo of Kashmir

Great saints shun publicity and preserve the purity of their spiritual reality in secret. This may be the reason why the passing away of one of the greatest spiritual masters in a century has remained almost hidden and unnoticed. On 27th September 1991 Swami Lakshman Joo (also known as Ishvar Svarupji in spiritual circles, and as Pandit Lakshman Joo Raina among scholars) attained mahāsamādhi at New Delhi, far from his Ashram in Kashmir. He was the last living Acharya of the tradition of Kashmir Śaivism and a successor of the great philosopher

and mystic Abhinavagupta (10th-11th cent.). For many decades he has been guiding seekers on the spiritual path and teaching the Śaiva scriptures. (For a longer obituary, see *The Mountain Path*, Sri Ramana-sramam, to be published in 1993.)

#### Dr Krishna Sivaraman

With great sorrow we learnt about the passing away of a friend, teacher and well-wisher of many of us: Dr K. Sivaraman, Professor of Hindu Studies at Concordia University, Montreal, left us on 30th October 1991 at the age of 69. He was a rare combination of a scholar, philosopher, a deeply religious person and a wonderful human being. He was by tradition a Śaiva Siddhāntin from Tamil Nadu. For many years he was teaching philosophy at B.H.U. From there he received a call to Canada and became Professor at McMaster University, Hamilton, where he was teaching until his retirement. As the first Hindu he was called to start the chair of Hindu Studies at Concordia University, Montreal. Dr Sivaraman combined a deep faith in his own tradition with a sincere openness to other religions. He was actively involved in Hindu-Christian dialogue and took part in many inter-religious seminars and conferences. Conversations with him on philosophical and religious topics were always inspiring and lively.

I had invited him to our Seminar on Śaiva and Christian mysticism in Rajpur and he showed great interest to take part. His health did not allow him to travel and he had to undergo brain surgery about the same time. In his letter written in hospital he regretted his inability, but outlined the topic on which he wanted to speak. It was also his last letter written to me. There he also remembered Swami Abhishiktananda and his "pro-sannyāsa predilections". He wrote about him: "The few minutes of conversation that I had with him nearly two decades ago at Birla Hostel (B.H.U.) convinced me of Abhishiktananda's profound insight into the heart of Hindu ascetic tradition and how close it was to the Śaiva re-orientation in the light of the doctrine of grace." He ended that very letter asking for my prayers. He had already overcome any sectarian feelings: "Your heartfelt prayer to Christ and to Śiva-Śakti (they are the same to me) for my successful recovery to resume my work will be of help." We will never forget his kindness, his openness, his intelligence and at the same time simplicity. May his spirit show us the way

to a more sincere, open, philosophically sound and spiritually deep dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity.

Donations received since December 1990

Our thanks to: Ms Dawn Hughes, Fr M.M. Balaguer, Fr P. Rade, Be-  
thune, Sr M. Pascaline Goff (twice), Fr G.B. Braund, Mme C. De  
Greef, Prof. E. Fasana (twice), Mme R. Lefebure, Prof. Milena Pavan,  
Fr R. Dujarrier, Mrs Sue Delaney, Fr R. Stephens, Br Alberic, Mr  
Martin Heath, Mr S.K. De, Fr John Belloni, Mrs A.M. Stokes, Prof.  
James E. Royster, Fr R.C. Llewelyn, Dr P.K. Rath, Fr J. Mattam, Ms  
Kathleen Smith, Sr Barbara, Major (retd.) T. Rayappa Reddy, Fr Hal  
Weidner, Fr Nicola Manca.

N.B.

We are always interested to hear of any activities connected with the  
work of Swami Abhishiktananda and we request the existing Centres in  
Milan, Brussels, Paris and elsewhere to inform us about their activities.  
We can then give them wider publicity through the Bulletin in its new  
form.