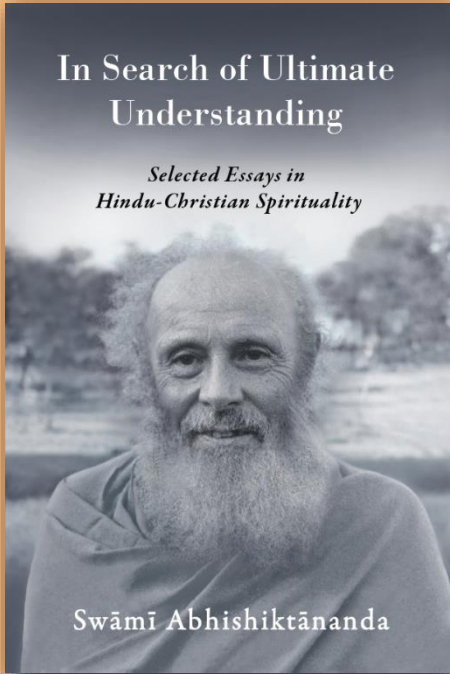


Swami Abhishiktananda, *In Search of Ultimate Understanding: Selected Essays in Hindu-Christian Spirituality*. Edited by Swami Atmananda Udasin. Translated by James Stuart. Introduction by Jacques Dupuis. Delhi: ISPCK, 2023. Originally published in French as *Int eriorit e et r ev elation. Essais th eologiques* (Sisteron: Pr esence, 1982).



Sw am i Abhishikt ananda (1910-1973) was one of the most fascinating spiritual figures of the twentieth century and a bridge-builder between Christian and Hindu traditions. His deep immersion in Ved anta and his passionate longing to realize the Self led to a profound spiritual awakening that inspired many in India as well as in the West to recognize the perennial Truth across all religious borders.

Yet, the struggle to integrate and find compatibility between his Christian faith and the truth of Advaita that he experienced was the epicentre of his life, right from his first stays in the caves of the sacred mountain of Arun chala. This found its first expression in *Guh antara*, a collection of profound theological essays inspired by his spiritual experiences in the caves of Arun chala. Many other such essays were subsequently written during his life in India until 1973, the year of his Mah asam adhi,

but remained unpublished for various reasons until their first publication in French in 1982.

**The unique value of these theological essays written between 1952 and 1973 — now available in English for the first time — lies in the fact that they are based on the Sw am i’s dual spiritual experience, Christian and Advaitic, and reflect the synthesis constantly sought by the author but never found. They offer a new and unique insight into the development of Sw am i Abhishikt ananda’s theological thought.** They were not only the outcome of his spiritual experience but also of his past religious conditioning. This collection, therefore, makes it possible to identify the important stages in the evolution of his thought and to understand them in their true context.

Sw am i Abhishikt ananda had great mystical insights ever since he met the Indian sage Shr i Ramana Maharshi and started living on the sacred mountain Arun chala. However, as he tried to reconcile his own faith with the truth that he recognised in Advaita, he experienced an inner conflict that would be present for the rest of his life, and which he was only able to overcome at the time of his profound spiritual awakening in Rishikesh in July 1973.

One cannot but notice the enormous gap between his broad and liberated view at the end of his life and his first theological synthesis in the mid-sixties, born of his contemplative experience in the Arun chala caves and the teachings of Shr i Ramana Maharshi. The early theological vision of Sw am i Abhishikt ananda was actually based on the so-called “fulfillment theology” in the line of Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, John Nicol Farquhar and Pierre Johanns. This theology was part of the spirit of his time and he had taken it for granted: the convergence of all religions of mankind towards

their fullness in the Revelation of Christ. Moreover, Swāmī Abhishiktānanda saw in the deep wisdom of Hinduism, a preparation and a stepping stone for the Christian Revelation. He would even dream “of a Christian India because [he thought that then] only will India find its spiritual fulfilment. Hinduism will merge into Christianity without losing the least of its positive values; there its contradictions will be resolved, its symbols will attain to truth, and perhaps they will even remain with a deeper meaning.”<sup>1</sup>

However, this was only a painful and limited episode in Swāmī Abhishiktānanda’s life, which haunted him for almost twenty years. Already by the late sixties and the early seventies, his understanding of the relation between Christian faith and Vedānta would change dramatically, and he was no longer satisfied with the theory of Christ and the Trinity being the fulfillment of Hinduism.

Eventually, instead of trying to place himself in relation with any category, Swāmī Abhishiktānanda endeavored to go far beyond, to disappear into the bottomless depths of India’s spiritual legacy. He realized more and more that the Truth lies beyond concepts, myths and symbols, and eventually gave up completely his theological and comparative approach to religions. As he wrote in January 1973: “We have to descend into the ultimate depths to recognize that there is no common denominator at the level of *nāmarūpa*<sup>2</sup>. So we should accept *nāmarūpa* of the most varied kinds (...) No comparisons, but we should penetrate to the depth of each one’s mystery, and accept the relativity of all formulations. Take off from each of them, as from a springboard, towards the bottomless ocean.”<sup>3</sup>

Towards the end of his life, his ever-deepening meditation on the Upanishads, and his meeting and close association with his true disciple Marc (Swāmī Ajātānanda), accelerated an inner process of surrender which culminated in a devastating advaitic experience in Rishikesh, in July 1973. There and then, his deep insight of the early fifties became evidently true: “One simply is. And this fundamental experience is, at the same time, that of the unique and single existence.”<sup>4</sup> His final spiritual awakening which is itself beyond any discursive description is the essential and primary key to understand his real message and the relevance of his spiritual itinerary.

In the dazzling light of his deep awakening to the Self, all previous theological and Christological concepts literally exploded in what can be called a trans-religious experience. In this falling apart of all intellectual notions, a new luminous awareness emerged which led him to a deeper knowledge of Christ in the light of his own non-dual experience.

In a long letter to his close friend Murray Rogers, he mentioned the profound shift which occurred in him:

“...I am interested in no Christo-logy at all... What I discover above all in Christ is ‘I AM’... It is this I AM experience which really matters. Christ is this very mystery ‘that I AM’, and in this experience and existential knowledge, all Christo-logy has disintegrated... The discovery of Christ’s I AM is the ruin of any Christian theology, for all notions are burnt within the fire of experience.”<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly enough, throughout his search, his theological reflection, limited as it was by his own traditional formation, always remained incomplete and provisional, without leading to any synthesis. But a depth was reached which is far beyond any particular theological language and cuts across all

religious boundaries. Indeed, the realization of the non-dual Truth to which the Upanishads point transcends the plurality of all religions. Said Swāmī Abhishiktānanda:

“The Upanishadic experience has nothing to do with any religion whatever, and still less is it a matter of mere logic or epistemology. It is of a different order altogether. It is the ultimate awakening of the human spirit, with which religions are now being confronted, as they were confronted in the past with the categories, first of mythical, and later of logical thought<sup>6</sup>.”

For Swāmī Abhishiktānanda, if Hindu-Christian dialogue and, more generally, interreligious dialogue is to occur, it can only be fruitful if it is carried out at the deepest level of interiority, from the non-dual experience which transcends the plurality of particular religions. As long as religions remain on the conceptual level, their approach remains relative and they cannot reach the immediate and ultimate experience of Being nor can they truly meet each other. A real and effective meeting can only take place from one’s own depth, where communion is already present. A true dialogue is therefore a recognition of that most intimate and ever-present Beingness which makes one blind to any notion of “otherness” revealing thus the onliness of the Self amidst the inexhaustible differences of appearances.

*(Excerpts from the Editor’s Note)*

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<sup>1</sup> *Ascent*, 28 (entry: 31 March 1952).

<sup>2</sup> Lit. “name and form”, the external manifestation of reality.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Marc Chaduc (26 January 1973), in J. Stuart, *His Life Told through his Letters*, 284.

<sup>4</sup> *Ascent*, 52 (entry: 24 July 1952).

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Murray Rogers (2 September 1973), in J. Stuart, *His Life Told through his Letters*, 310-11.

<sup>6</sup> *The Further Shore* (1975; repr., Delhi: ISPCK, 1984), 108.

## **New Edition:**

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