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## Monasticism as an Interreligious Meeting Point: A Comparison of Swami Abhishiktananda and Francis Acharya

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### The Uniqueness of Indian Monastic Tradition

India is a unique land, standing out among the cultures of the world in many ways. A characteristic feature is that it has the most ancient and unbroken monastic traditions in the world. The realization that the world is an ephemeral place is the wellspring of Indian monasticism, whether Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist, or any other. Beyond the shared conviction that the world is shifting and faithless, Indian monastic traditions vary greatly on the nature of the ultimate spiritual goal. For instance, major Hindu traditions teach that there is an enduring reality, Brahman, underlying the world, whereas the Buddha did not teach about a stable reality, but simply the extinction of desire.

A prominent monastic tradition is that of *Advaita Vedanta*, which stresses a unity that underlies all reality. Immersing oneself in the experience of that unity, the *Advaitic* aspirant may lose his/her sense of self. With no individual identity, no social, familial, or religious responsibilities are contingent upon the aspirant. In fact, such responsibilities might hinder the monk by reinforcing a sense of individuality. Hence, the accomplished monk is to wander freely across the countryside, with no ties to institutions or individuals.

There has been a fascination in the West with Indian spirituality for centuries. Notable examples were the scholars and adventure seekers of the Victorian era, who were attracted by the seemingly exotic nature of the Orient. Later, a flood of youths, disenchanted with Christianity, flooded into India in the 1960s and 1970s. Today there is a high degree of interest in Buddhism from a variety of Westerners, from successful professionals to those rebelling against mainstream society.

Two outstanding westerners who turned to the East were Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux, 1910-1973) and Francis Acharya (Jean Mahieu, 1912-2002). They did not reject Christianity in their passion for Eastern religions, but instead adhered to Christianity while plunging deeply into Hindu spirituality with an integrating mind. Further, they had strong Catholic upbringings and were both monks and priests. Abhishiktananda had entered the Benedictine monastery, St Anne's Abbey in Kergonan, France, at age nineteen and moved to India eighteen years later. Acharya had entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Scour Mont in Chimay, Belgium, at age twenty-three and settled in India twenty years later.

### Bridging East and West at Shantivanam

The European monasticism which Abhishiktananda and Acharya originally followed is very different from Advaitic monasticism. The Rule of St. Benedict, upon which most European monasticism is based, is rooted in the events of Christ's life and death, not in a metaphysical belief in unity. The Benedictine monk attempts to mortify his self-will by submitting to the will of the religious superior, the Abbot. In this way the monk imitates Christ, who mortified his self-will in submission to the Father through his death on the cross.<sup>1</sup> Thus, unlike the Advaitin, the Benedictine does not seek to extinguish his/her individuality, but simply to master his/her self-will. Further, rather than breaking personal and institutional ties, the Benedictine binds himself/herself by a vow of stability to a particular monastery and seeks God through submission to the Abbot.

In spite of the vast differences between Benedictine monasticism and Hindu forms of monasticism, Acharya and Abhishiktananda developed deep appreciation for certain Hindu values. An important moment for Acharya came in 1931, while he was known as "Jean Mahieu" and was a student at Polytechnic School in London. Gandhi was making his famous trip to England and appeared before world dignitaries in the clothing of an Indian peasant. Mahieu was impressed by this "indifference to the luxury and pomp of the empire" which contributed to his fascination with India.<sup>2</sup> Abhishiktananda, when he was known as "Henri Le Saux," read about India as a monk at

St. Anne's.<sup>3</sup> He judged many Hindu beliefs to be "warped and distorted", but wrote that there is "a gem hidden under a bushel". This gem is Indian monasticism which expresses "dissatisfaction" with the world that is "the very source of monasticism, its very heart".<sup>4</sup>

Admiring Hindu monasticism, Abhishiktananda hoped to integrate it with Christian faith. He journeyed to India in 1948 and joined another French priest, Jules Monchanin. Together they founded Saccidananda Ashram, near Trichinopoly in 1951. They integrated the Rule of Benedict with Indian monasticism by wearing orange robes, walking barefoot, eating vegetarian meals, practising silence, praying at sunrise, midday, and sunset, using Sanskrit and Tamil in their prayers, reading Hindu scriptures for *lectio divina*, etc. Also, they balanced the solitary nature of *sannyāsa* with the communal nature of the Rule of Benedict by having monks reside in solitary huts, although meeting daily for prayers and meals.<sup>5</sup> Saccidananda Ashram, also known as Shantivanam, was one of the first Christian ashrams and remains a prominent institution today.

The spiritual vision which guided the efforts of Abhishiktananda and Monchanin had its roots in the earliest days of Christianity. In the second century, St. Justin Martyr had written that Socrates and other Greek philosophers had gained glimpses of the Word of God. The universe had been created by the Word, so seeds or traces of it can be discerned through philosophical reflection. In the nineteenth century, the famous Brahmin convert to Catholicism, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, extended this reasoning to argue that the sages of Hinduism had known the Word. He wrote that they had correctly perceived God as *sat-cit-ānanda*, as being-consciousness-bliss, and he composed a famous Christian hymn, *Vande Saccidanandam*.

Abhishiktananda and Monchanin continued this tradition by attempting to bring Indian customs and values to their full flourishing in the light of Christ. They attempted to accomplish this completion not through the conversion of individuals to Catholicism, but rather in their own persons by having Hinduism and Christian faith encounter each other in their hearts. As they wrote in *An Indian Benedictine Monastery*, published in 1951, "It will be during their silent hours of recollection face to face with the Lord, that these votaries, so deeply at once Christian and Indian in their mind and heart, will find, slowly and gradually, under the illumination of the Spirit of Knowledge, the hidden divine meeting of their ancestral wisdom and will feel in themselves – so to say – the Christian germination of the seeds sown by the Logos on the fertile Indian soil".<sup>6</sup>

Francis Acharya, still as Jean Mahieu in Europe, read *An Indian Benedictine Ashram* soon after its publication.<sup>7</sup> He had long desired to become involved in the foundation of a contemplative institution in India. In fact, his decision to join Scourmont Abbey in 1935 may have been due, in part, to the fact that Abbot Le Bail had tentative plans to establish a monastery in India.<sup>8</sup> After reading *Benedictine Ashram*, Acharya recognized his opportunity and gained the necessary permission to join Abhishiktananda and Monchanin in 1955. He would come to consider his time at Shantivanam in 1955 and 1956 as an "Indian novitiate".<sup>9</sup>

### **Branching Out from Shantivanam**

India is a vast land, and within a year of their respective arrivals, Abhishiktananda and Acharya would have experiences which would draw them away from Shantivanam. The key experience which led Abhishiktananda to a path different from Shantivanam was his encounter with Ramana Maharshi in 1949. Ramana Maharshi was a contemporary adept of Advaita who was very popular in India, and who was also a Seer of some controversy in the West. Many people were greatly enchanted by the man, and spent hours sitting silently in his presence, long hours, in sessions of *darshan*.

Abhishiktananda visited Ramana Maharshi's ashram six months after his arrival in India in order to better understand Hindu monasticism. When he sat in the session for *darshan* he was captivated by a charisma that had attracted so many others. Abhishiktananda wrote, "The invisible halo of this sage had been perceived by something deeper in me than any words.... I discerned the unique Sage of the eternal India ... it was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. My dreams also included attempts – always in vain – to incorporate in my previous mental structures without shattering them, these powerful new experiences which my contact with the Maharshi had brought to birth; new as they were, their hold on me was already too strong for it ever to be possible for me to disown them".<sup>10</sup>

This encounter inspired a new respect for Advaita, for he came to value not only the asceticism of Hindu monks but also Advaitic beliefs and meditative practices as well. By 1952 he began a series of stays at the sacred mountain of Arunacala where Ramana's ashram is located. There he meditated deeply on the Upanishads and lived like the Hindu monks on the mountainside. His stays at Arunacala were the start of deep forays into Hinduism, which involved long periods of time away from Shantivanam, and eventually led to his settling in the Himalayas in 1948.<sup>11</sup>

Francis Acharya's providential meeting was not with a Hindu sage, but rather with the Bishop Rene Feuga of Mysore in 1955. Acharya was visiting Raimundo Panikkar, who introduced Acharya to Bishop Feuga. Acharya's strong interest was in monastic community life and he shared with the bishop his interest. Acharya was frustrated with Shantivanam, for he was concluding that it had little chance of growing as a community, for it had minimal connection to the surrounding Christian community and hence little chance of inspiring others to join.<sup>12</sup> Bishop Feuga stated that Kerala would be a good place to found a monastery, given the flourishing Christian communities there. The bishop offered to take Acharya to Kerala to attend the hundredth anniversary celebration of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, where he could meet prominent Christian leaders. Acharya attended not only the celebration of the Carmelites, but remained through Christmas, visiting many Christian families and institutions.<sup>13</sup>

Acharya's experiences in Kerala were deeply meaningful to him. In Europe he had developed a love for the Eastern Fathers, who were very close to the foundations of the Church and of monasticism.<sup>14</sup> In Kerala he felt close to the Eastern Fathers, for he was encountering the Syrian liturgy, which had been celebrated continuously in India since the earliest days of Church history. As his aunt states, "He seemed to have found among these simple people, in this sacred drama celebrated with splendour and dignity, the fervour and faith of the eastern Fathers, still living, that he knew only through his reading.... This community liturgy, bearing adoration and praise, eastern in origin and Indianized so long ago, corresponded very closely to his dream of returning to the monastic sources".<sup>15</sup> In the wake of these experiences, Acharya gained a new direction, a desire to found an Indian monastery which would make the Syrian liturgy a main focus. His plans led to the foundation of the now well-known Kurisumala Ashram in 1958 in the hills of Kerala.

### A Liturgical Encounter with Hinduism

Acharya's fascination with the Syrian liturgy was an extension of his love of the early Christian Church. Yet, his fascination with this Rite also expressed his interest in Hinduism. He believed that there are affinities between the Syrian Rites and Hinduism, making the latter a potential point of encounter between religions. A main reason for the affinities is that both Rites originated on Asian soil. Further, the version celebrated in Kerala had been influenced by the Indian environment for over fifteen-hundred years.

One of the most evident affinities is the cosmic praise of the Godhead. Acharya pointed out that there is a longstanding belief in the Christianity, going back to St. Justin Martyr that the knowledge of God is available to all peoples simply through the contemplation of nature. Since the experience of the Godhead through nature is an explicit theme in many Hindu texts, it seemed reasonable to Acharya that aspects of Hindu worship could legitimately be incorporated into Christian worship. More than being legitimate, such incorporation could enhance Christian worship by deepening its cosmic aspect.<sup>16</sup>

Acharya's most distinctive contributions in this area were the institution of the *Bharatiya Puja* at Kurisumala in 1972 and the publication of the multi-volume *Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit* in the 1980s. The *Bharatiya Puja* or Indian Mass is the product of the effort of a large number of individuals and institutions, and involved Episcopal supervision in its development. "Well rooted in the Bible and in the apostolic tradition of worship, it assumes the riches of the Indian cultural heritage and is clothed in its garb.... The soberness of gestures and movements, the times of silence, together with the simple yet very rich symbolism of worship with water, flowers, incense and light, helps to give it a distinctive contemplative quality with simplicity and beauty".<sup>17</sup> Acharya instituted the *Bharatiya Puja* at Kurisumala in place of the daily Syrian mass they had been celebrating.<sup>18</sup>

*Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit* is a translation and adaptation of the ancient Syrian *Penquitho*, of which Acharya had recovered a copy in Mosul. Much of India's Syrian heritage had been lost due to the latinization of the preceding centuries. To help renew the Syrian tradition, Acharya translated the *Penquitho* in order to expand the range of prayers available in the liturgy of the hours. He subtitled the work *The Prayer of the Asian Churches*, hoping that he was developing a breviary which would be especially suitable for prayer in Asia. To that end he incorporated material from Hindu texts which, he believed, would enhance the Christian experience of prayer. His selections were not whimsical choices but were based upon extensive reading and meditation, as well as upon group experiments and discussions at the monastery.<sup>19</sup>

A brief examination of a passage from the *Bharatiya Puja* will illustrate the spiritual environment which Acharya created at Kurisumala. The following is from the Offertory:

*An offering of light on the tray of the sky.  
An offering of flowers on the tray of the earth.  
An offering of love on the tray of life  
An offering of life on the tray of Golgotha.*<sup>20</sup>

This Christian prayer is influenced by the classic texts, the Upanishads, in manner and style. The Upanishads, meaning "correspondences," show relationships between different portions of the cosmos, and between the cosmos and the human being. In a similar manner, the prayer above juxtaposes images of cosmic and human worship, and juxtaposes these with Christ's self-offering upon the cross.

One might wonder what the fruit of these efforts is. Acharya hoped to deepen the experience of prayer by drawing the "seeds" of the Word planted in Hinduism into Christian liturgy. He probably did not intend this deepening to be an intellectual knowledge that could be easily related, but rather a greater and more thorough conversion of the individual and the community to God.

### **Advaitic Meditation and Christianity**

In his first years in India, Abhishiktananda experienced deep bond between Christian monasticism and Advaitic contemplation, just as Acharya experienced harmony between Christian liturgy and certain Hindu prayers. The teachings of Ramana Maharshi called Abhishiktananda to renounce his sense of individuality, of "I," but so had his monastic formation in Europe. As a young postulant in 1928, long before he had much knowledge of India, he had written "I like to have things of my own, to have things which in some sense complete my 'I, but in the monastery I have to feel that none of the things that I use belongs to me".<sup>21</sup> Thus, he wrote in 1952, three years after his initial encounter with Ramana, "Deep contacts with Hindu thought, books and people; even before I came here, they had already made a mark on me, a hidden spiritual sympathy, this sense of the Unity, of the ONE, of God at the source of by being, of the fading out of this 'ego' as soon as you penetrate into the interior of yourself".<sup>22</sup>

Although Abhishiktananda found deep affinity between Benedictine and Advaitic monasticisms, his joy over this affinity was quickly overshadowed by a profound tension between the two. The classic Advaitic aspirant, as discussed above, renounces all responsibilities because one's worldly roles can hinder the renunciation of one's sense of self. Indeed, Abhishiktananda's liturgical responsibilities as a Catholic priest drew him from the peace of Advaita. Referring to himself in the third person he wrote in 1952, "total solitariness [*kevala*] is agonizing for anyone who has experienced it. He has felt that truth is only found at the summit ... where the subject and the object of knowledge, love, enjoyment, are transcended. But he cannot remain in this *kevala*. His own mind, and still more his body pull him constantly downwards, into the midst of the 'dispensation'. And his Christian 'role', his role as priest also; his Mass, especially his breviary, so involved in the world of appearance, of *māya*"? Hence, whereas Acharya found harmony and overlap between Hinduism and Christian liturgy, Abhishiktananda found discord. This tension would soon come to Sear Abhishiktananda personally and would eclipse the harmony.

Abhishiktananda wrestled with this tension from 1952 until peace dawned in the final months of his life in 1973.<sup>24</sup> He often attempted to develop theological syntheses between Advaita and Christianity in the hope of thereby reducing the tension. For instance, he speculated that Advaita takes one to the mystery of the Son, who dwells within oneself, and that Christian faith can carry one from the experience of the indwelling of the Son to an experience of the eternal exchange of love between the Father and the Son. As he wrote in his diary in the 1950s, "To meditate on Christ is to meditate on the *atman*, one's own *aham* [I]. Christ is in all truth my *aham*".<sup>25</sup> "The interior of Christ is my interior together with the interior of God, of the divine Father.... The merging, the deepening of my interior, of my *aham* into the interior of Christ, then of the Father".<sup>26</sup>

Although Abhishiktananda struggled hard to develop theological resolutions of Advaita and Christianity, he continued to feel tension between the two. As he confessed in his diary in 1958, after six years of struggle, "How often I dream of being set free to follow freely the advaitin gale, violent, devastating, that carries me off.... I endeavour to hang on, reading, the liturgy, reflection, etc.; and after a quarter of an hour, or at most after a day, all the scaffolding that I have put up in trying to support my faith collapses like a house of cards".<sup>27</sup> The problem with theological synthesis, Abhishiktananda realized, is that Christian theology is formulated at the level of the intellect, whilst Advaita calls one beyond that level. Since Advaita is beyond the intellect, intellectual formulations are incapable of truly addressing Advaita. Hence, he concluded in his diary in 1971 that "the *dharma*s [religious systems] are contradictory to one another. Mutual dialogue between them can never be anything but superficial".<sup>28</sup>

Although Abhishiktananda experienced deep tension, he did not lose faith in interreligious encounter. Far from this, he wrote that one should plunge deeply into both traditions and value the resulting tension, "This is the moment simply to allow ourselves to be invaded by the experience - by the two experiences, if you will - and also, with those who will share in this unsettling experience, to secure the foundations of a later, intellectual dialogue".<sup>29</sup> Referring to his 1968 book, *Sagesse Hindoue Mystique Chrétienne*, which was an attempt to theologially synthesize the two traditions, he wrote, "In *Sagesse* I attempted a meditative approach within the framework of classical theology. The last chapter shows that the problem remains unsolved. The best course is ... to hold on even under extreme tension to these two forms of a unique 'faith' until the dawn appears".<sup>30</sup>

## Evaluation

The experiences of Francis Acharya and Swami Abhishiktananda were very different from each other. Acharya experienced deep harmony between Christian liturgy and Hinduism, whereas Abhishiktananda experienced severe tension between the two. This difference is attributable to the disparity between their respective approaches. Acharya remained well within the original plan of Shantivanam, in which Christian faith was the dominant, organizing focus. For instance, he drew Hindu texts into the liturgy insofar as they supported it. However, Abhishiktananda departed from the original strategy by valuing Advaita for its own sake, apart from any direct relationship to Christianity. By plunging into it in a single-minded manner he naturally experienced strain from the disparities between the two traditions.

In spite of the vast differences between Acharya and Abhishiktananda, their lives demonstrate that monasticism can be a powerful site of encounter between religions. Although Abhishiktananda experienced tension, his experiences were no less of an encounter between religions than Acharya's. His life illustrated the serious issues that lie between Christianity and Hinduism, whereas Acharya showed significant areas of overlap. Moreover, the tension he experienced did not lead him to devalue Advaita or interreligious encounter, but rather he regarded the tension itself a valuable experience, which one should embrace and plunge into. Although monasticism can be a powerful site of encounter between religions, I suspect that the resulting advancement does not consist of intellectual insights that can be shared in an academic setting. Rather, it consists of growth towards the monastic goal of *theosis*, the divine transformation of the human being. The fruits are progress in meditation, in "new understanding of life resulting in conversion – conversion in the search for new values, with its accompaniments of self control and freedom, peace and joy, patience and all goodness".<sup>31</sup>

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Adalbert de Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Charles Philippi, *Cistercian Studies*, no. 5.1, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1979, 236.
- <sup>2</sup> Marthe Mahieu-De Praetere, *Kurisumala: Francis Mahieu Acharya, A Pioneer of Christian Monasticism in India*, *Cistercian Studies*, no. 214, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2008, 22, 73.
- <sup>3</sup> James Stuart, *Swâmi Abhishiktânanda: His Life Told through His Letters*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1989, 12-13.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, *A Benedictine Ashram*, rev. ed., Isle of Man, Times Press, 1964, 27.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 56, 60, 67-68, 75-76, 84.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.
- <sup>7</sup> Mahieu-De Praetere, *Kurisumala*, 92-93.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>10</sup> Abhishiktananda, *The Secret of Arunâchala*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1979.
- <sup>11</sup> For the experiences at Arunacala see *Ibid.*, 9-79; *Idem.*, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktananda (Dom H. Le Saux)*, ed. Raimon Panikkar, trans. David Fleming and James Stuart, Delhi: ISPCK, 1998; Stuart, *Swâmi Abhishiktânanda*, 60-89, 96-99.
- <sup>12</sup> Mahieu-De Praetere, *Kurisumala*, 129, 136, 141.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-42.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 82, 98.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.
- <sup>16</sup> Francis Acharya, trans. and ed., *Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit: The Prayer of the Asian Churches*, vol. 1, Kerala: Kurisumala Ashram, 1983, 9-13.
- <sup>17</sup> Kurisumala Ashram, *Bharatiya Pooja*, Vagamon: Kurisumala Ashram, n.d., 14-15.
- <sup>18</sup> Mahieu-De Praetere, *Kurisumala Ashram*, 261-63.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-15, 259-61, 311-15. Robert Taft defends Acharya's innovation thus: "The changes do no violence to the structure, nature, or genius of these offices, or to the Eastern liturgical spirit. Eastern liturgical books, especially of the Divine Office, are not rigid *editions typicae* but anthologies of material to be used with a certain freedom." Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), 246.
- <sup>20</sup> Kurisumala Ashram, *Bharatiya Pooja*, 37.
- <sup>21</sup> Abhishiktananda to novice-master, 12 April 1928, in Stuart, *Swâmi Abhishiktânanda*, 3.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Abhishiktananda to J. Lemarié, 10 February 1952, p. 59. See also *ibid.*, 29 April 1953, pp. 68-69.
- <sup>23</sup> "[Kevala]" is the editor's interpolation. Abhishiktananda, diary entry, 14 September 1952, *Ascent*, 55. See also Abhishiktananda to J. Lemarié, 10 February 1952, in Stuart, *Swâmi Abhishiktânanda*, 59; *ibid.*, 10 November 1954, p. 83.
- <sup>24</sup> Stuart recounts this dawning peace in *Swâmi Abhishiktânanda*, 348-59.
- <sup>25</sup> Abhishiktananda, diary entry, 28 July 1955, p. 109.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 July 1955, p. 106.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 May 1968, 213-14.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 December 1971, 335. See also *ibid.*, 23 October 1970, p. 322; *ibid.*, 18 November; *ibid.*, 20 May 1971, pp. 326-27; *ibid.*, 11 December 1971, p. 333; Abhishiktananda to Sr. Térèse de Jésus, 18 March 1970, in Stuart, *Swâmi Abhishiktânanda*, 258; *ibid.*, Abhishiktananda to Odette Baumer-Despeigne, 20 October 1971, p. 285; *ibid.*, Abhishiktananda to Marc Chaduc, 21 January 1973, p. 318.
- <sup>29</sup> Abhishiktananda, letter, 2 September 1972, in Jacques Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions*, trans.

Robert R. Barr, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, 75.

<sup>30</sup> *Abhishiktananda to Odette Baumer-Despeigne, 5 December 1970, in Stuart, Swâmi Abhishiktânanda, 268. See also Dupuis, Jesus Christ, 75, 81-82; Panikkar, ed., Ascent, by Abhishiktananda, xviii.*

<sup>31</sup> Francis Acharya, *Meditation: Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, Bharananganam, Kerala: Seraphic Press, 2005, 16.

Ref.: *Third Millennium XI* (2008) 2, pp. 76-87.