

**THE CHURCH OF ABHISHIKTĀNANDA
(HENRI LE SAUX)**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation concerns the contribution of Abhishiktānanda / Henri Le Saux OSB, to the modern Catholic ecclesiology. The dissertation frames this contribution within the life of Abhishiktānanda and the more general process in the Church of his day. The main contribution of this dissertation lies in having chosen ecclesiology as the angle of observation. While there are an increasing number of studies on Abhishiktānanda's theology, a work focusing on his thoughts on the Church does not yet exist. The perspective chosen for this thesis has been fruitful. Abhishiktānanda's ecclesiology is clearly monastic in character. The *nouvelle théologie* and Vatican II, together with his monastic vocation, were the main sources of Abhishiktānanda's ecclesiology. At the end of his life, Abhishiktānanda was able to incorporate all these influences, and elaborate a synthesis, where monastic spirituality and theology merged in short, dense thoughts about the Church. His ecclesiology is well-founded not only in the theological work before the Council, but also in Vatican II's documents.

DECLARATION AND COPYRIGHT

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by myself and that the research reported therein has been conducted by myself unless otherwise indicated.

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PREFACE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DEDICATION

It has been a long journey that led me to this thesis. Along the way, I learned a lot, and this is the only thing that matters. I dedicate this thesis to Andrew Hass, in memory of a nice and friendly breakfast in Chicago, a couple of days before the election of the first black president of the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In November 2008, Marcello Pera published a book called *Why We Must Call Ourselves Christian*,¹ where he argued that Europe should stay true to its Christian roots; the preface was written by Benedict XVI. Pera is the pope's old friend, Italian senator and philosopher. In 2004, Pera and then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger coauthored a book about Europe titled *Without Roots*²; Pera is one of the leading examples of a peculiar phenomenon on the European cultural right today, a self-professed atheist who nevertheless supports a revival of the Christian identity of the Old Continent on the grounds that it's the only way to defend Europe's liberal values. Liberalism is in crisis because it has been dechristianized—this is the thesis of Pera's book. Born from within the heart of the Christian tradition, liberalism has lost its roots or has betrayed its roots; it thought it could get rid of the Christian foundation which supported its progenitors. That is why, according to Pera—if we must call ourselves not just liberals, but true liberals—we must ourselves be Christians. If we want to save liberalism from itself, we must open our eyes. “Neither Locke nor the fathers of liberalism had ethical positions consistent with the current course. They believed in God, in the natural law, the inalienable rights of the person. Now that the parable has reached the lowest point, not only God is dead, any

¹ Marcello Pera, *Why We Must Call Ourselves Christian*, Letter-Preface by His Holiness Benedict XVI, (Milano: Mondadori, 2008).

² Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedetto XVI) and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: Europe, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, (Milano: Mondadori, 2005). (American edition: New York: Basic Books, 2006).

comfort or assistance that religion can bring, personal independence is gone, and everything is really allowed.”³

Interreligious Dialogue or Intercultural Dialogue

After Pera’s introduction and before his Chapter I (Liberalism, Secular Equation and Christian Concern), Benedict XVI’s preface states that this book by Marcello Pera is “of paramount importance in this time in Europe and in the world.” He adds that “liberalism—without ceasing to be liberalism, but, on the contrary, in order to be faithful to itself—can link itself to a doctrine of the good, in particular that of Christianity, which is in fact genetically linked to liberalism.” Thus, there is a “liberal-Christian foundation” of Europe. However, the preface is especially important because it speaks of the value of interreligious dialogue. “An interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the term is not possible, while you urge intercultural dialogue that develops the cultural consequences of the religious option which lies beneath. While a true dialogue is not possible about this basic option without putting one’s own faith into parentheses, it’s important in public exchange to explore the cultural consequences of these religious options. Here, dialogue and mutual correction and enrichment are both possible and necessary.” Benedict XVI’s first sentence in the quote above - “an interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the term is not possible” - is the key. The roots of this conclusion may be argued from the content of Pera’s book. Based on the assumption that the interlocutors are available to review and also to refute the truths with which they begin the discussion, religions, and especially monotheistic religions, have already been proven to have their own truths and their own criteria to sustain them. Therefore, to avoid the trap of relativism, with all

³ Pera, *Why We Must Call Ourselves Christian*, 149-150.

religions on the same level, the dialogue is not possible on the theological side. The dialogue concerns not the core of dogma but the cultural consequences—in particular those of ethics. To wit, those rights that are granted or denied to the human being, social habits that are permitted or prohibited, forms of relationships allowed or disallowed, and political institutions recommended or prohibited. This intercultural dialogue among religions can be dialogue in the strict sense and may lead parties to review their initial positions, to correct, integrate and reject them without necessarily entering into a formal discussion of their core dogma. The moral heritage of humankind is inalienable and non-negotiable, and it is the important common ground for dialogue. In other words, Benedict is saying that the purpose of interreligious dialogue is to promote peace and justice, rather than to look for theological synthesis that would necessarily involve presenting and defending the truths of faith, and therefore the truth of Catholicism. Benedict seems to ask how the relationship with Hinduism in terms of theological exploration – i.e., how the Upanishads - might inform new approaches to Christology. The interreligious dialogue cannot aim at something that brings into question the truths of faith, but finds a consensus regarding ways to implement practical strategies for promoting peace and achieving justice. In fact, it is urgent to pursue an “intercultural dialogue that develops the cultural consequences of the religious option which lies beneath.” We must therefore address these consequences “in public exchange...here, dialogue and mutual correction and enrichment are both possible and necessary.” The main point of the preface is that the intercultural dialogue replaces the interreligious dialogue because the dialogue between members of different religions cannot access the theological level. Indeed, interreligious dialogue today is impossible; it must depend not on the core dogma but on the cultural

consequences of religions. In short, yes to the dialogue on the consequences of their beliefs; no to the dialogue on different theologies.

The statement of Benedict XVI (the preface is not signed *Joseph Ratzinger*, but rather *Benedictus PP. XVI*. The person who agrees with the argument made by Pera is not a professor of theology, but more importantly, the pontiff) is quite important because it would seem to undercut 50 years of official dialogues with other faiths sponsored by the Catholic Church, not to mention the theological vision of *Nostrae Aetate*, the document of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) on relations with non-Christian religions. It would increase pessimism and be also a little bit demoralizing for the Church's experts engaged in the theoretical development and practical implementation of interreligious dialogue, and a bad signal to the outside world about the Church's commitment to good working relationships with other religions. This position is nothing new for Benedict; he has never been a fan of interreligious dialogue as it has been construed since Vatican II, and especially under John Paul II. This point will be addressed later (see Conclusions). His statement may probably better be contextualized in the hermeneutics of Vatican II and the problems which also affect the process of its reception, a process involving the understanding and explaining of the event and the decisions it produced. According to Benedict, there are two interpretations of the Council, often in direct opposition with each other: one he identified as "the hermeneutics of discontinuity," and the other one he claims has borne fruit, "the hermeneutics of reform in continuity." The hermeneutics of discontinuity asserts that historically Vatican II was a rupture: a break with a preconciliar and postconciliar Church. The hermeneutics of reform in continuity assumes that the fashionable distinction between "pre-Vatican II" and "post-Vatican II" is of dubitable

theological and historic basis. A Council is a link in a chain, and can never break the continuity in the actions of the Spirit. Continuity implies continuation. Once the statement of Benedict XVI is understood in the context of the hermeneutics of continuity, it signals a change of prospective in the Church that not only may impact the meaning and the value of the interreligious dialogue at large, but also seems to downgrade and condemn to irrelevance the legacy of the life and work of its leading figures.

Henri Le Saux - Abhishiktānanda

One of the leading figures of the interreligious dialogue is *Swami Abhishiktānanda*—born Henri Le Saux, OSB (1910-1973). Exactly 60 years before the publication of Pera’s *Why We Must Call Ourselves Christian*, Le Saux arrived in India after a journey by ship from Marseilles. He would never leave India. Le Saux was the first of eight children born into a pious bourgeois family in St. Briac, on the northern coast of Brittany. He had spent the first 38 years of his life in the rarefied atmosphere of a monastery in Brittany, reading Patristic books, and remained deeply influenced by the exclusivist theology⁴ that had marked the period after Vatican I. He then followed his intuition to go to India. He had imagined a life as a missionary, bringing Christ only as a Christian monk could bring Him, by prayer and example. A few years after his arrival, he wrote that Christianity has brought Hinduism to the fulfillment.⁵ Le Saux spent his first ten years in India in the southern state of Tamil Nadu founding a Benedictine ashram with Fr Jules Monchanin (1895-1957). During those years, he studied Sanskrit, Tamil, and English (adding to his knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin). In addition, he encountered several masters of

⁴ “Exclusivism,” that is, the view that God can truly be known only through the Judeo-Christian revelation.

⁵ A form of inclusivism, a “fulfillment theology” of religions, presents Christianity as completing and fulfilling in Christ the aspirations of other religions.

Advaita Vedanta (the two most significant being Sri Rama[^]a Maharshi and Sri Gnānānanda and adopted the Indian monastic ideal of *samnyāsa* (signified in the name Abhishiktānanda, or “Bliss of the Anointed One [Christ]”), all the while remaining a practicing Roman Catholic priest and Benedictine monk.

After the premature death of Monchanin, Le Saux—Abhishiktānanda—spent another decade between his Saccidananda Ashram and a small hermitage on the Himalayas. When English Benedictine Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) assumed responsibility for the ashram in 1968, Abhishiktānanda moved to his hermitage in the north near Uttarkashi along the Ganges, from where he would continue to travel throughout India until the end of his life. While he never gave up his commitment to a contemplative vocation, Abhishiktānanda was in increasing demand as a partner in dialogue, a retreat leader, and a spokesperson for liturgical reform in the Indian Church. In the decade before Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate*, he organized and participated in a number of groups, primarily with other Christians, which explored the potential dialogue with Hindu spiritualities. This brought him into contact with younger theologians whose lives and thought he would influence. In 1969, he played an influential role in the Catholic Church's All-India Seminar in Bangalore, contributing a book-length memorandum on how the Indian Church should be renewed through contact with Hindu sources, through liturgical reform (enculturation), and through contemplation. He died at Indore in December 1973 of heart failure. Between his childhood and his final days lies a remarkable pilgrimage that took Abhishiktānanda deep into the spiritual treasure-hold of one of the world’s primordial traditions. He learnt the Hindu tradition on an experiential basis though still remained Christian.

Abhishiktānanda wrote in 1974 that “one who knows several mental (or religious or spiritual) languages is incapable of absolutizing any formulation whatever—of the gospel, of the Upanishads,⁶ of Buddhism, etc. He can only bear witness to an experience—about which he can only stammer.”⁷ The various “languages” that Abhishiktānanda learned not only were linguistic; he meant religious traditions, and spiritual paths. He was unable to “absolutize” any of these languages, or any doctrinal formulations, even that of Christianity. The multiple “languages” he spoke, the multiple experiences and the variety of spiritual practices he lived all caused him to understand the relativity of the religious experience.⁸ Discussing the experience and writings of Abhishiktānanda, Trapnell establishes an interesting link with Raimon Panikkar. Panikkar helps us to understand the distinction between relativity and relativism—concepts important in the discussion of Abhishiktānanda’s religious experience. This distinction “is employed as a theoretical tool for approaching multiple, contrasting viewpoints on ultimate questions, such as different religious traditions. It serves to establish a stance toward the multiplicity that is not merely tolerant but responsive, not merely agnostic but attentive, not merely inclusivist but pluralist.”⁹ By “relativism,” Panikkar means the “claim that all thoughts, statements, truth-claims, and

⁶ Hindu sacred texts, regarded as the completions of the Vedas.

⁷ Abhishiktānanda, *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, Introduction et notes de Raimon Panikkar, (Paris: OEIL, 1986). Translated as *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, tr. David Fleming and James Stuart. (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 380.

⁸ This paragraph is based on Judson B. Trapnell, “Panikkar, Abhishiktānanda, and the Distinction between Relativism and Relativity in Interreligious Discourse.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41, no.3-4 (2004), 431-453).

⁹ Panikkar’s particular understanding of pluralism is unconventional. See the writings of Raimon Panikkar: “The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel—A Meditation on Non-Violence,” *Cross Currents* 29 (Summer, 1979): 197-230; “Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge,” in *Religious Pluralism* ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 97-115; “The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments in Christie Self-Consciousness,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 89-116; and, most recently, “Self-Critical Dialogue,” in *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*, ed. Joseph Pradhu (Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books, 1996), 227-291.

thus viewpoints are relative, a position that undercuts any affirmation of an absolute reality or any universal truth—including, as is axiomatically declared of this position, its own self-presentation as a valid theory.”¹⁰ When Pannikkar speaks of relativism, he often uses the adjective “agnostic” suggesting that there is a reluctance to confess to any absolutes. How, then, would Panikkar define relativity in relationship to relativism? “Relativism destroys itself when affirming that all is relative and thus also the very affirmation of relativism. Relativity, on the other hand, asserts that any human affirmation, and thus any truth, is relative to its very own parameters and that there can be no absolute truth, for truth is essentially relational.”¹¹ He suggests that relativity is the “abiding nature of reality, both human and divine.”¹² The point that marks the distinction is the preposition “to” added to “relative.” This shifts the statement that “there can be no absolute truth” from a metaphysical assertion to an epistemological observation that truth never stands independently of a particular relationship between knower and known; it is “essentially relational” in the sense that truth is always dependent upon and thus specific to the relationship from which it emerges.¹³ This strong sense of relativity, however, does not require the metaphysical conclusion that “there is no absolute.” This would imply that truth never stands alone; that truth is always relational, always dependent, as Panikkar would say, upon the “relationship from which it emerges.” This does not necessarily lead to a conclusion that “there is no absolute,” in Panikkar’s way of thinking.

¹⁰ Trapnell, “Panikkar, Abhishikatananda,” 431-453.

¹¹ Raimon Panikkar, “The Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic Confidence in Reality?” in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 127. Panikkar is drawing upon the Latin roots of the term “absolute,” which suggest “freedom or disengagement from,” followed by a series of objects (free or disengaged from imperfection, relation, dependence, condition), all of which contradict his notion of what truth is (see the O.E.D.).

¹² Trapnell, “Panikkar, Abhishikatananda,” 431-453.

¹³ Trapnell, “Panikkar, Abhishikatananda,” 431-453.

Abhishiktānanda would concur when he speaks of the experience “about which he can only stammer.”¹⁴

While on retreat in 1956, Abhishiktānanda had a powerful meditative experience that greatly influenced his own understanding of relativity. He neither spoke nor read nor said mass, but meditated with his guru for three weeks. In the Hindu guru, Sri Gnānānanda, Abhishiktānanda found the “first man before whom I have been willing to prostrate,” and from that experience came the essay, “*Esseulement*.” In this essay, Abhishiktānanda takes his experience of isolation and solitude (*Esseulement*) to its profound conclusion: that in isolation one becomes disenchanted with everything that is not absolute, including how one feels about religious doctrine and religious practice.

“Their relativity as regards time, space, human beings, etc., appears in such a bright light that intelligence, athirst for absolute truth, can no longer find satisfaction in them, nor can desire, athirst for absolute good, take any pleasure in them. The most essential elements of the faith lose their flavor of truth. Even the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation can no longer speak to the soul. The soul is absolutely compelled to lose the triune God and the God-Man as it has conceived them, and to allow itself to be swallowed up in the abyss of Being, of the Godhead beyond all conceiving which attracts it irresistibly.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Abhishiktānanda, *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1948-1973*, 380.

¹⁵ Abhishiktānanda, *Interiorité et Révélation: Essais Théologiques*, ed. M. M. Davy. (Sisteron, Presence, 1982), 128, emphasis in original (typescript, tr. James Stuart, p. 1). See also idem, *Ascent*, p. 138. One recognizes here the skepticism regarding all concepts and names for God found in both Christian (e.g., apophatic theology of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius) and Hindu (e.g., Upanishadic teaching of *neti-neti*) traditions. For an example of Abhishiktānanda's explicit acknowledgment of these sources, see his *Sagesse Hindoue Mystique Chrétienne: du Védanta à la Trinité* (Paris, Centurion, 1965). Revised as

Profound as this experience was and as relativistic as the ensuing essay would seem, Abhishiktānanda continued to be a priest and to express the doctrines and practices of the Christian faith, even as he explored the depth of the divine in the Hindu faith. As his life ebbed following a heart attack in July of 1973, he became more convinced than ever that it is only when we converse with others at the deepest levels that we discover that there “is no common denominator at the level of namarupa (names and forms). So we should accept namarupa of the most varied kinds....No comparisons, but we should penetrate to the depths of each one’s mystery, and accept the relativity of all formulations.”¹⁶ In other words, when we probe the “ultimate depths of the self” with others, we are able to be in dialogue at the deepest of levels, to “live it,” irrespective of the relativistic faith tradition from which we come. Panikkar would concur. To him such dialogue is ‘intrareligious’ and it moves beyond “the limitations of rational and emotional discourse to deal with the whole person.”¹⁷ Abhishiktānanda was able to sum up the discussion of the relativity of religion in the title of his book, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the Cave of the Heart*. In this book, he reinforces the notion that even while practicing a faith that has become relativized and unsatisfying, one can communicate with others at the deepest levels. “Only in the cave of the heart can true dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism take place: contact at any other level can never be more than superficial and fleeting...The time has come for Christians and Hindus to recognize in

Saccidānanda: a Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974, 2nd revised edition, 1984), 1-15.

¹⁶ Abhishiktānanda, *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 2nd ed. 1995, ed. James Stuart, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989), 318.

¹⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

each other the gifts of the Spirit, and for that both must go silently down to the depths of their own being, to ‘the place where the glory dwelleth.’”¹⁸

The Subject of This Dissertation

There is now burgeoning interest in the life and work of this obscure but quite extraordinary monk. Recent studies have focused primarily on his life and his theology of interreligious dialogue. As for his life, Shirley du Boulay’s, *The Cave of the Heart* (2005) is the second biography to appear, following James Stuart’s *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His Life Told through His Letters* (1989). As well as Stuart’s work, there are various articles, memoirs, tributes and the like, written by friends and acquaintances of Abhishiktānanda. Then too, there are the excerpts from his journal, edited by his friend and internationally renowned scholar, Raimon Panikkar, and published as *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (1998). As far as his theology is concerned, a doctoral thesis by Emmanuel Vattakuzhy, later published as *Indian Christian Samnyāsa and Swami Abhishiktānanda*, deals with the issue of renunciation and Abhishiktānanda’s choice to become a *samnyāsa*. It compares this choice with that of Christian monasticism. The book points out that for Abhishiktānanda, contemplation was more important than other “activities” of religious life. A doctoral thesis by Antony Kalliath was later published as *The Word in the Cave*. Another important doctoral thesis is *Abhishiktānanda’s Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience* by John Glenn Friesen that focuses on Abhishiktānanda’s understanding and experience of *advaita*. The bibliography lists many other studies. When Abhishiktānanda is studied as a theologian of the interreligious dialogue, the most frequent criticism is that he takes a subjectivist point of view and that

¹⁸ *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point—Within the Cave of the Heart* (Bombay and Bangalore: CISRS, 1969, reprinted with author’s revisions, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976), note by translator (Sara Grant), p. vii.

he wanted to build a theology based on experience. He underwent an overwhelming mystical experience while on retreat on the mountain of Arunāchala, soon after his arrival in India. Following that retreat, he tried to find the way to offer a theological interpretation and expression of his experience and a reconsideration of his Catholic faith. His audience was mainly Christian. Abhishiktānanda enjoyed the awakening of the self at the deepest level and found in the Upanishads a simple, lucid exemplar of such awareness. However, the path to the integration of his Christian faith with his beloved Upanishads happened over decades and not without an emotional torment well documented in his diaries. He tried to interpret his Christian beliefs in terms of *advaita*. He made the important observation that “*advaita*” means “not-two,” and that it does not mean “only one.” In other words, *advaita* is not monism. This allows a distinction between God and created reality while yet affirming their unity.¹⁹ All said, Dupuis concludes his study on Abhishiktānanda’s theology of *advaita* by asserting that his experience “poses more problems than it solves. The way in which he experienced the encounter between Hindu *advaita* and Christian doctrine seems to pose more than one dilemma: between mystical apophaticism and theological cataphaticism; between a unity that abolishes distinctions and an interpersonal communion that deepens in direct proportion to the distinctions themselves; between history conceived as an epiphenomenon of relative value and history invested with ontological density.”²⁰

¹⁹ John Glenn Friesen, “Abhishiktānanda’s Non-monistic Advaitic Experience” (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2001)

²⁰ Jacques Dupuis, “Il Pensiero Teologico di Le Saux. Linee per un Dialogo Interreligioso,” *Vita Monastica* LIX, no. 231 (2005): 94-128. Translation is my own.

This dissertation will focus on another object of Abhishiktānanda's theology: the Church. After he went through a mystical experience on the mountain of Arunāchala, he started thinking he might have to leave the Church. However, he never abandoned her. Although this condition of inner torment persisted, the witnesses closest to him repeated with monotonous certainty that he never lost his faith and never abandoned his Church. This conclusion is widely supported by autobiographical evidence. In later years, pondering his journey between the two traditions, Abhishiktānanda admits that "Whether I want it or not, I am deeply attached to Christ Jesus and therefore to the *koinonia* of the Church."²¹ Abhishiktānanda was a member of the Church, and he believed he had an experience to offer as a gift to the Church. He says it when he wrote in his diaries, "If I am the bearer of a message, as people tell me, then what is this message? You can bear witness only to your own experience."²² Thus, it can be said that the mystical experience that he began to live almost immediately upon his arrival in India changed the direction of his motion. Abhishiktānanda maintained his missionary vocation but no longer tried to bring Christ to India; rather he started bringing India to the Church. He encourages his colleagues to search the Hindu scriptures for that which can "enrich the diadem of the Church" and says that he wants to see the "riches of Hindu traditions" integrated into the Church; "in all possible aspects—liturgical, ascetical, theological, and the like."²³ Abhishiktānanda was aware that it "represented an ideal recognized so far only by a tiny minority of the Christian community...either as concerns the ideal of contemplative and monastic life or the integration of Hindu values on spirituality, liturgy and theology."²⁴

²¹ Swami Abhishiktānanda: *His life told through his letters* 23.7.71, 331-2.

²² *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1948-1973*, 321.

²³ *The Church in India: An Essay in Christian Self-criticism* (Madras: CLS, 1969, reprinted 1971), 55.

²⁴ *All India Seminar: The Church in India Today*, (New Delhi: CBCI Centre, 1969), 79.

He saw himself as a man on the margins of the Church. “Beyond, always beyond,” Abhishiktānanda used to say and that took him to realms that made some Christians doubt his commitment to Christianity. Just as he could share with his friend, Roger Murray, the tension he experienced between Christianity and *advaita*, so he was cautious to express publicly and share thoughts that were, at the time, unacceptable to many. Therefore, it makes complete sense that he addressed the issue of the role of contemplation in the Church. He wondered if there is “any place in Catholic Christianity...for people who have gone beyond name and form.”²⁵ Nevertheless, he had always felt himself to be part of the Church and remained in the Church, at his bedside, when he was near death, there were “the local priests, the superior and the bishop, priests European, Indian priests.”²⁶ This shows that even up until his last minute, he was considered to be and was part of the Church.

Abhishiktānanda knew that there was a place in the Church for monks and hermits, contemplatives and acosmics, *swamii e i sadhu*. They have their task to accomplish. In fact, “it is necessary that there are Christian monks at Gangotri to collect the OM that arises from the Ganges and the mountains, and to collect at its source, in order to sing it in the name of Christ through the Spirit in the Church...and it is necessary that there are monks deeply human, in cities and in rural areas where people live—to collect the OM that rises from cars and trains...to collect it, purify it and give it fulfillment in the silence of their soul. Since the task of the monk is to bring everything from time to eternity, from

²⁵ Quoted in Shirley Du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 203.

²⁶ Du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart*, 240.

becoming to being, from outside to inside.”²⁷ Obviously, Abhishiktānanda’s own way is not for everyone. As Panikkar notes “how would it be if everybody in the Church was an acosmic *sadhu*...? ‘Thank God’ ...the Holy Spirit seems to have particular care that this can never happen.”²⁸ However, this thought simply expresses the existence of a multitude of gifts in the Church. It does not undermine the value of the experience of Abhishiktānanda and the significance of his example. The quest about a place in Catholic Christianity for contemplatives was not only a personal issue. At stake was much more than just the role of contemplation in the Church. The point is that Abhishiktānanda had been trying to relate the Hindu-Christian dialogue to an ecclesiology that is monastic in character. He realized that only a contemplative Church would have been able to engage herself in a real interreligious dialogue. In fact, since “it is above all in the mystery of *samnyāsa* that India and the Church will meet, will discover themselves in the most secret and hidden parts of their hearts, in the place where they are each most truly themselves, in the mystery of their origin in which every outward manifestation is rooted and from which time unfolds itself,”²⁹ the implication is that the Church needs to change its self-understanding in order to assume a more adequate posture open to a true dialogue with Hinduism. Ecclesiology proceeds from dialogue, not vice versa. This concept is clear in Abhishiktānanda. It is not that the Church has a mission of work in the world, but it is the reality of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that is already at work in the world that includes the Church’s mission. Abhishiktānanda began to interpret the Church

²⁷ *Mountain of the Lord: Pilgrimage to Gangotri* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1966). Reprinted in *Guru and Disciple* (London: ISPCK, 1974). Revised by the author as *Une messe aux sources du Gange* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1967), 32.

²⁸ Raimon Panikkar, “A Letter to Abhishiktānanda,” *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 3, no. 3 (1982): 448.

²⁹ *Guru and Disciple*, containing *A Sage from the East—Sri Gnānānanda* and *The Mountain of the Lord* (London, ISPCK, 1974). A new translation of *A Sage from the East—Sri Gnānānanda* was published as *Guru and Disciple* (London, ISPCK, 1990), 162

as a symbol, “Whether I like it or not, I am deeply attached to Christ Jesus and therefore to the *koinonia* of the Church.” Then he added, “It is in him that the ‘mystery,’ has been revealed to me ever since my awakening to myself and to the world. It is in his *image*, his *symbol*, that I know God and that I know myself and the world of human beings. Since I awoke here [in India] to new depths in myself (depths of the Self, of the *Âtman*), this symbol was marvelously developed.”³⁰ Clearly, from all the above, he was especially wary of a tendency he perceived in the Church to absolutize its symbols. All the same, he recognized that the symbols, the *namarupa*, of the Church do have their rightful role, that there are “some great places—Sinai, Jordan, Tabor,” and that “because we are flesh, we have great need of flesh and of place, precisely in order to release the total mystery of the flesh.”³¹ He considered it a great virtue of the Eastern religions that they could teach the Church both “to recognize as *namarupa* all that previously we considered to be most sacred” and yet to recognize the value of these “names and forms.” Those who learn this lesson from the East “have discovered another level of truth,” in which “we find ourselves once more Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, for each one has his own line of development, marked out already from his mother’s lap. But, we also have the “smile.” Not a smile which looks down condescendingly from above, still less a smile of mockery, but one which is simply an opening out, like the flower unfolding its petals.”³²

³⁰ *Swami Abhishiktānanda*, 23.7.71, 331-2.

³¹ *Swami Abhishiktānanda*, 9.10.73, 354.

³² *Swami Abhishiktānanda* 26.1.73, 319-20.

Abhishiktānanda and Theology

For the first two decades after his death, Abhishiktānanda was considered a spiritual author rather than a theologian. Those close to Abhishiktānanda acknowledge that neither his gift nor his legacy was primarily theological. Murray Rogers, an Anglican priest who founded the ecumenical Jyotiniketan Ashram in Uttar Pradesh in 1954, one frequently visited by Abhishiktānanda, thinks that he had a painful sense of inferiority since his book *Guhāntara* was rejected by the censor in Paris. Though well-versed in theology and philosophy, he felt nervous with learned people; he was overwhelmed by them. Rogers describes the nature of Abhishiktānanda's writings in this way: "More than once he used to say that all his writing was autobiographical, not intellectual thought or theology but personal experience. It is not therefore any new theology for which he will be remembered but the lived experience of a new life, a new way of being human, a new way of relationships between cultures, religions and peoples."³³ Nevertheless, he wanted to publish *Guhāntara*. He says that there were risks to be taken, and that the book was intended to invite the reader to participate in the dazzling illuminations (*éblouissements*) of the research.³⁴ He felt the urgency to show how a contemplative Church might establish a real Hindu-Christian dialogue. However, the perception on Abhishiktānanda's theological works has been changing in the last decades, thanks in particular to the Abhishiktānanda Society, which for nearly thirty years has been working to promote the publication of Abhishiktānanda's writings and to make available, for the first time, his spiritual diary and the articles and essays that had not been published during his lifetime. The original French version of the spiritual diary was published in 1984 and eventually in

³³ Judson B. Trapnell, "Abhishiktānanda's Contemplative Vocation and Contemporary India," *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection* 67, no. 3 (March 2003): 161-179.

³⁴ Draft Introduction to *Guhāntara* (unpublished), p. 3.

English in 1996. Over the years, the Society has also preserved a special library consisting of Abhishiktānanda's personal books as well as his papers and manuscripts. This resource has been much appreciated by scholars from around the world who have an interest in Abhishiktānanda and, more generally, in Hindu–Christian spirituality. Much academic work continues to take place making use of these archives, despite the passing of so many decades. ISPCK has always been the publisher of the English titles; however, whilst ISPCK remains the publisher of the current English titles of Abhishiktānanda; moving forward, the task of publishing his writings in English is increasingly taken up by the Delhi Brotherhood Society and the task of promoting his writings abroad by DIM/MID (*Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique*/Monastic Interreligious Dialogue) in all languages except for the English language and Indian languages. All said, new re-editions and translations into new languages can definitely be expected in the future and a continued commitment to the distribution of Abhishiktānanda's books in India and abroad.³⁵

As far as the Abhishiktānanda Society has been making available Abhishiktānanda's entire works, the perception about him has changed. In general terms, he was not a systematic theologian. He never tried to articulate any set of first principles on which to base his theological findings. Many of his books are composed of spiritual meditations linked together. Although he made forays into many areas, he never composed a treatise on any of the standard theological disciplines. However, he wrote twelve books, many articles, and thousands of letters. His theological insights extend from Christology to

³⁵ Atmananda Udasin, "The Abhishiktānanda Society Comes to a Successful Conclusion after Thirty Years of Contribution in Hindu-Christian Dialogue (1978-2008): A Letter from the President," *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, <http://www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=832>.

ecclesiology, from Trinity to Soteriology. He was taken seriously by such authoritative theologians as Dupois and Panikkar. For all that, Abhishiktānanda's work possesses a remarkable inner coherence, his insights bring the mark of mature theological mind, and he is increasingly taken seriously as a companion for theological discourses. Finally, spirituality is, for a monk, the highest expression of the theological discourse.

The Content of This Work

This work consists in six chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion. The six chapters present in this sequence:

Chapter one is about the gradual estrangement of the Church from the world and her difficult relationship with modernity; it also tells about the efforts of a few theologians who, in the decades prior to Vatican II, tried to develop a theology that reopens a dialogue between the Church and modernity. Surprisingly, they find the key by looking at the past, the sources of the Church, and reinterpreting these sources in the light of the current situation.

Chapter two focuses on a particular aspect of the *Ressourcement Theology* (French, "return to the sources"): the ecclesiology. In the decades before Vatican II, Catholic ecclesiology experienced a major shift in emphasis from the Church as a monarchical structure organized under the primacy of the pope to the union of collegial bishops to the Church as the people of God, where a greater role is left for the laity in the ministry. These changes in theology are mirrored by the major documents that came from Vatican II.

Chapter three tells the story of the first part of Henry Le Saux's life, from birth to end of his first decade in India. Born in 1910, Le Saux became a monk, spent 19 years in a

monastery in Britain, then moved to India and found an ashram with Jules Monchanin. This is an ashram led under the rule of St Benedict. Since he moved to India, Le Saux was known as Swami Abhishiktānanda or Abhishiktānanda (Lit. 'the bliss of the annointed one of the Lord'). In addition to the foundation of the ashram, he lived very intense spiritual experiences, which led him to review his understanding of Hinduism and Christian theology.

Chapter four sketches the second and final part of Abhishiktānanda's life, totally spent in India. During this period, he lived two lives: the first is the busy life of the monk belonging to an ecumenical community, the Indian Church, and participating in seminars, retreats, and conferences. The second is that life of the hermit spending long periods alone in a hut on the slopes of the Himalayas. He was able to merge these two lives very well and they were the basis for his spiritual thoughts and theological works.

Chapter five marks the beginning of the study on Abhishiktānanda's ecclesiology. The primary source of his ecclesiology was his monastic vocation. He interpreted his vocation as coenobitical as well as hermitic. He was faithful to the Rule of St Benedict and at the same time embodied the ideal of the Fathers of the Desert, which he reinterpreted in terms of *samnyāsa*. He spoke of the need of the Church to rediscover her roots, and assigned to the monks the role of contemplative soul of the Church.

Chapter six discusses the other two sources of Abhishiktānanda's ecclesiology: Patristic theology and Vatican II. On both, he built a dense ecclesiology full of charm and sophistication, which echoes the ecclesiology of Vatican II, and recovers some of the best insights on the Church of the monastic tradition. At the very end, he was able to find a final synthesis. He obviously located this synthesis in the context of Indian reality.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the recent developments of interreligious dialogue from the perspective of the Catholic Church, and offers an evaluation on Abhishiktānanda's legacy and the main contribution of this dissertation and possible further research.

Conclusion

Sixty years ago, Abhishiktānanda arrived in India. Before his death, he proclaimed that all religious truths are relative and that the dialogue between religions can only take place in the common depth beyond symbols, in the “ultimate depths of the self.” Therefore, the Church has to turn to her contemplative character in order to assume the correct posture and engage a real interreligious dialogue. Now Benedict XVI assumes that an interreligious dialogue “in the strict sense of the term is not possible” because it is not possible to have a dialogue at the level of religious truth. It is still too early to assimilate the implications of the statements of Benedict XVI. However, his statement seems to suggest that the life and works of Abhishiktānanda can be studied neither in themselves nor within the broader context of history, Church, and theology of his time. The significance of his thought, and therefore also of his ecclesiology, must be also assessed if seen primarily in the light of Vatican II and of the long and still acting process of its reception.

CHAPTER ONE: AD FONTES

Introduction

The relationship between the Roman Catholic Church ('Church' or 'Catholic Church') and the modern world was not good in the nineteenth century. At the conclusion of Vatican I, the Church perceived herself as being in a hostile world. Urbanization, industrialization and a labor force were new phenomena for the Church, and quite disturbing. The rise of the democratic political system, the creation of nations, and the invasion of Rome by the Italian state threatened the values and the physical survival of the Church. Then, in the twentieth century, things deteriorated further when the Church found support and attention from the authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe, alleviating her anxiety. However, these authoritarian regimes also challenged the primacy of the Church when they tried to shape the option of a national church, a church that first and foremost belongs to the nation rather than to the Catholic (universal) Church. It is only after the World War II that the Church began to embrace modernity, accept the democratic political system, and deal with industrialization. She also started to renew her doctrine in order to open a dialogue with the world.

At the beginning, the renewal of the doctrine was the shared objective of a group of Catholic theologians that adopted a systemic openness to dialogue with the contemporary world and not surprisingly concentrated their attention on the relationship between Church and history. For these thinkers, doing *theology* meant doing *history*. They clearly saw the danger of doctrinal captivity that the Church's refusal to engage seriously with

history implied and the need to adopt a more friendly approach to history. The Church's teaching was not fixed for eternity, they argued, but had changed over time; assent to its doctrine must come from a new historical study of Christian texts. The study of history was not only a way to open a dialogue with the world of their time, but also the gateway to return to early Christianity, the Fathers, and Church history for inspiration. This movement to return to the sources (*ressourcement*) was essential in order to offer biblical, patristic, and liturgical contributions to the Church and guarantee the renewal of Catholic thought that the post-War world demanded. These theologians were trying to build bridges between Christianity's ancient truths and the contemporary world. They argued that the neo-Scholastic theology seemed very ill-equipped to face the challenge presented by a newly secularized society. Therefore, these theologians reacted against the dominance of neo-Scholasticism and its manuals of theology, criticism and pessimism of the world by the Church, and a defensive attitude towards modernity. The years from 1940 to 1960 marked a time of hope for a fundamental reform of the Church. In this period, as a generation of young Protestant theologians was working on the enormous inheritance left by giants such as Barth, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Niebuhr, and Tillich,³⁶ authors such as Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, and Marie Dominique Chenu were working in the shadows on the theology of the first six centuries of the Patristic and medieval Church. They were part of that great Catholic theology renewal movement, which anticipated, announced, and enervated the Second Vatican Council.³⁷ France was

³⁶ Gary Dorrien, "The Golden Years of Welfare Capitalism," in *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*. Edited by Gregory Baum, (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 98.

³⁷ For the Second Vatican Council, the revelation is primarily the living and personal self-revelation of the Trinitarian God (*Dei Verbum* 2-6) in history. This self-revelation is expressed in Scripture: only Scripture is the word of God (DV 8); in this sense, "Magisterium of the Church is not above but serves the Word of God" (DV 10). However, the Spirit inspires tradition that is—from the Latin—the "Transmission" of the revelation; this tradition clarifies and actualizes the revelation (DV 8). The self-revelation of God is uttered,

the undisputed center of theological activity during this fertile epoch and so the French theological revival of those years boasted some of the greatest names in twentieth century Catholic scholarship: the aforementioned de Lubac, Congar, and Chenu, also Jean Daniélou, and Louis Bouyer may be added.

The Rise of the Modernity

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church found itself immersed in an unexpected social phenomenon: the shift from a rural to an industrial civilization. Born in Britain, industrialization waited to cross the British Channel until the nineteenth century and—along with its attributes, urbanization and mass labor—invaded continental Europe between the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Industrialization is a fairly recent phenomenon in continental Europe and Southern Europe, where it did not arrive until early in the twentieth century. Even more recently (in the 1950s), it has witnessed the final demise of rural Western Europe. In general, it has been difficult for the Catholic Church to align itself with industrialization, likely because historically, the Church had developed itself in the medieval rural settings. Hence, the movement towards industrialization has been particularly hard for the Church. The rural church was able to overcome the first challenges that came with modernity—the enlightenment and liberalism—and to recover somewhat from the latter, i.e.,

written and incarnated (DV 1-5, 26): it is the reality that simultaneously saves and reveals, that is written under the special inspiration of the Holy Spirit which reveals itself personally. All of this makes it inappropriate to speak of the revelation like a body of revealed propositions contained in the Bible and/or in other sources. And so, during the course of history, the transmission of the revelation, that is, Tradition in the singular passes through traditions (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 14-17; *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* 5-6). Tradition—that is, teaching, and therefore not individual traditions or particular teachings and practices—plays a critical role in the interpretation and actualization of the revelation contained in the Scriptures. Tradition and Scripture are united in their origin (DV 9), which is the self-revelation of God. Tradition is an essential means by which to understand revelation, while Scriptures have their specific aim in judging and reforming traditions.

socialism. However, the changes brought about through industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of a labor force, were too large to be ignored. Thus, around the end of the nineteenth century, the Church began a dialogue with the major forces that were transforming the social landscape in Europe. At first slowly, then with greater determination, the Catholic Church began to develop its own interpretation of the social, political and economic industrial world—the time of *Rerum Novarum*. These ideas were gradually condensed into what has been called “the social doctrine of the Church,” which grew out of the Church’s response to industrialization, urbanization and a labor force. The first countries to react to industrialization were Germany and France—von Ketteler and von Nell-Breuning, Maritain and Simon - then the conversation regarding the new realities of social work, industrialization and urbanization climaxed with the Second Vatican Council, whose work was focused purposefully on harmonizing the Church with the modern world.

In general, Catholicism has experienced great suffering because of the rise of new social realities related to employment, industrialization and urbanization. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Catholic institution came face to face with the historic leap from a rural to an industrial civilization. From the end of the Roman Empire onwards, the Church had flourished in rural civilization, so it had a special harmony within such settings. Rural civilization and the Church have influenced each other, forged an economy and created a constellation of religious and cultural institutions. The rural church had been developed in the Middle Ages, first around monasteries and then parishes. Displaced Christians were fleeing to the countryside from cities greatly reduced in size. Walls thrown up, invasions and sacks changed the landscape, and the cities were

fortified castle-like compounds built to defend their estates. It was in the rural countryside that monasticism was born. In this arena, the Church claimed to be the symbolic legacy and the only heir to the Roman Empire. It was also in the countryside that the papacy encountered the French-German empire, conceived the structure of parishes (twelfth century), and developed the popular religion composed of devotions, saints, rituals, and so on, all of which cemented the alliance between the clergy and peasants. Finally, the rural countryside bred the political-religious ideal, which eventually formed theological and philosophical scholarship. In short, rural civilization was very congenial to a church that was to advocate world order and peace among men.

However, the transition from rural to industrial civilization was not the only source of problems for the Church. From 1870 and going forward, for the first time in twelve centuries, the Church was no longer a political power. The entrance of the Italian army into Rome closed the era—more than a thousand years long—of the temporal power of the popes. For the first time since the Middle Ages, the pope was a “guest” in foreign territory. He had to be pope in a new way and without the support of political independence. It was not only the pope, but rather the whole Church that lived in Italy as a guest in an era that seemed to have lost interest in Christianity. During the nineteenth century, the principles and ideas of the French Revolution were gradually penetrating institutions as well as popular culture. The bourgeois liberals, borne with the revolution, did not look at the Church as a point of intellectual reference. States and societies were secularized, and ready to take up anticlerical positions. Freedom of religion was allowed and the Catholic faith was lumped together with others, and the state guaranteed access to all of them. All citizens, regardless of the faith they professed, were equal before the law.

The bourgeois state no longer needed the legitimacy of religion, as had happened to the empires. The élites looked without interest at the *Magisterium* of the Church. It was considered “backward.” The Church inadvertently encouraged this trend by condemning any attempt to modernize theology, Catholic culture and her own institutional structures. The relationship between church and empire, between religious and civil power, which had evolved in the Middle Ages and had survived until the turn of the twentieth century, was broken. Certainly, in her early centuries, the Church had experienced the season of marginality and persecution. However, since Constantine’s time, she had been identified with the state, and had become the state religion. Not even the Reformation had changed her status. But the Industrial Revolution on the one hand, and the French revolution on the other, had created a bubble around the Church. World War I put an end to the last Christian empires, the Austrian and Russian. The Church, accustomed to dealing with kings and talking to the passive masses, found herself without interlocutors.

The Church in the Twentieth Century

The conditions that emerged in the twentieth century made the situation even more complicated. Communism swallowed the Russian Orthodox Church, and nationalism created the phenomenon of national churches—religious communities that put patriotism above the unity of or loyalty to the Catholic (universal) Church. In addition, liberal democracies imposed the principle of consent that undermined the more traditional one of authority. Together, these three changes represented a huge challenge to the Church. We begin with the latter. How is it possible to reconcile truth with majority opinion? If the Church is the repository of truth, it receives its authority by divine right; the Church is antithetical to democracy. The hierarchy of the Church is the consequence of the truth of

which she is the custodian. This perhaps explains the confrontation with the bourgeois, the never ending nostalgia for the old Catholic state and the direct relationship between pope and emperor, and also the fascination for authoritarian regimes. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Church, and more generally Catholics, found unpredictable harmonies with Mussolini (Italy), Franco (Spain), Horthy (Hungary), and Pétain (France). Yet, despite these harmonies, after World War II, she developed a deeper understanding of the democratic system and found the way to accommodate democracy and the Christian message. She backed and justified the development of Catholic political parties, accepted completely and unconditionally the rules of liberal democracies, and made democracy the political system able to accommodate the Christian message. More difficult for the Catholic Church was to deal with the phenomenon of national churches, which—in the words of Jean Daniel—were composed of “supporters of the Church that, with the primacy of the nation over papacy and religion, saw themselves dragged towards a form of national pagan worship.”³⁸ Here, the choice of the Church was either: to count politically, allowing herself to be attracted by the sirens of the nationalist right, the Action Française, and fascism, while taking the risk to lose her Semitic and Oriental roots; or to protect her roots and run the risk of becoming a footnote in history. Again, the solution was found gradually, with compromises on both options. In the end, the choice was for a world (over national) church, which reaffirms her universal character. For the complete duration of the twentieth century, the fight against Communism and its atheistic option was without interruption.

The Church’s rejection of modernity during the nineteenth century is thus replaced by a

³⁸ Andrea Riccardi, *Intransigenza e Modernità*, (Bari: Laterza, 1996), 30.

careful adjustment of the Church in the next century. The Syllabus of Pius IX (1864) was the manifesto of the Church in a society in which she felt alien. There was no room for reconciliation between progress—liberalism and modernity—on the one hand, and Church and Catholicism on the other. The Church chose the opposition. The Catholic intransigent opposition to modernity matched the equally uncompromising Anglican Church, which chose to adapt to modernity. With the spread of modernity, liberalism, and bourgeois society, the Church made a voluntary and knowing decision to join the opposition in Italy, France, and Germany. She opposed the state in France and the project of political unity in Italy. She opposed socialism. The Church adopted a long-term strategy, which was aimed primarily at reconstructing her internal composition in the face of external threats. It was designed to give weight to the institution, to centralize the chain of command to Rome, and to avoid the fragmentation that would have been produced by national churches. The intransigence was the tool that laid the foundation to the papal dogma of infallibility (1870) and established a direct relationship between the top and the bottom of the Catholic community. Once she found herself a church among the churches, a religion among religions, Catholicism did not like the situation and made the choice to favor the defense of her identity and doctrinal autonomy. The intransigence is based upon certain fundamental and indisputable principles: the Catholic priesthood, for example. It is a primary and indisputable character of Catholic identity. This means that only the Church can discuss it; she does not accept outside influences. It is the Church that establishes what is essential or not; and inside the Church, it is the Pope who is the final authority.

In the twentieth century, with great perplexity and major delays, the Church began a dialogue with the liberal democracies, and opened a door to modernity. Above all, she discovered new missionary directions. These directions follow, with millimeter accuracy, those of the European empires (the exception being North America). Christian missionaries and Western colonialism go hand in hand. It is the idea that military power can be transformed into a political institution and then into a civilization. The Church spread in North America, and it was the first major Catholic community outside of Europe. She spread in South America, which would become the most Catholic continent in the world. The Church is in Africa: in Rwanda, Burundi, The Congo, and Angola. More difficult is the situation in Asia, where the Church is historically present only in the Philippines. Specifically, she is marginal or even absent in China, India, and the rest of the continent. Asia did not become Christian. This is the 2,000-year experience of the Catholic Church. Even those areas where Islam predominated, such as in the Southern Mediterranean, in the Middle East, and in large parts of Africa, the conversion to Christianity did not occur. This raised a problem for the Church since it had to deal with the issue of cohabitation with people who decided to cling to their faiths—those who had not converted. Despite these limitations, the twentieth century was the period when the Church became transformed from a continental subject to a global one. She experienced the birth of new ecclesiastical experiences, encountered new cultures and religions, reached beyond the limits of her previous world. She opened a reflection on what became known as the third world that led up to the council. Above all, the spread of Christianity posed the problem of how to reconcile the cultural differences of the Southern with the Northern Hemisphere. The Catholic Church was a worldwide institution in which

resources, management, and universities were located in the North; while the new social realities, the new Catholicism was growing up in the South. Within this bifurcation lay the problem of how to reconcile Catholic universalism with the needs of acculturation. Catholic expansion was a product of European power, but then became a patrimony for the Church to safeguard and complement. The integration between the Catholic North and South started with the recognition that it is the North, especially Europe, which showed signs of advanced secularization and de-Christianization. It was previously mentioned that the Church finally accepted the political arena proposed by bourgeois democracies, while at the same time, it protected with anger and without hesitation, the doctrinal and institutional autonomy from secularist claims to put all religions on an equal footing. She has done a lot of hard work, and in part has failed in her attempt to replace the rural with the urban classes. In 1954, Pius XII ordered a recall of all worker-priests and required them to leave their work and unions; Catholicism definitively lost contact with the working class—in France in particular and in Europe in general. (“We have lost the working class,” said his predecessor, Pius XI.) However, it was mainly on the grounds of secularization that the Church was challenged to develop new social models and anthropological references. To borrow an expression from Marcel Gauchet, a world outside the religious, and specifically the Catholic influence, was reassembled.³⁹ The urban world, along with the rural one, was assimilating new values and attitudes, developing new habits, and detaching itself from the Church. The practice of religion was cooling off and ethics became more personalized. The Church was no longer able to impose her principles, the masses perceived themselves as Christian, but then voted for

³⁹ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, with a foreword by Charles Taylor, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

the introduction of divorce and abortion in their laws. The Church recorded the steady reduction of her influence in society, and sometimes reacted angrily, claiming a record of undeniable truth; sometimes—as will happen with the council—it accepted the reality and developed new forms of participation in the world.

La Nouvelle Théologie

The twentieth century was a period of difficult adjustment for the Church as she made a move to modernity. This was marked by moments of crisis and moments of harmony, and each took a toll on doctrine. The fundamental question for the Church as she faced modernity was the following: “How can we reconcile the truth with the no truth?” How could the Church mix with other religions? How could she accept being put on the same plane as a state, a public morality, or a bourgeois class? Was it possible that Christianity, once the axis of European civilization had declined to become a secondary concern, a marginal presence? Emile Poulat explains the problem well, in his book *Église Contre Bourgeoisie*: modernity imposes its own domain where the domain of the Church once rested.⁴⁰ How did the Church need to deal with these modern forms of the world? In the early decades of the twentieth century, two theological movements attempted to answer this question. While the one side propagated a strict *division* between faith and the world, the other side attempted to build a bridge between the two. A first answer to the question of the way the Church dealt with modernity was represented by an attempt to preserve a strict division between nature and grace and, thereby, of Church and world. In the course of these efforts at separation, there was “the development of a sort of separate society” in the Catholic Church, “since, looked at in terms of the history of mentalities, the neo-

⁴⁰ Emile Poulat, *Église Contre Bourgeoisie*, (Paris, Berg International, 2006).

Scholastic movement represents an attempt to preserve the religious and cultural identity of Catholicism in the modern, pluralistic world.” Neo-Scholasticism, “which was received in terms of the whole Church at Vatican I [1869/70; *Ulrich Engel*] was about making classical scholasticism fruitful for the question of modernity. This theology sought to read that which is new with the eyes of the old.”⁴¹ Neo-Scholasticism was rooted ultimately in the Council of Trent (1545-1563); this first council of modern times had attempted to separate itself from modernity. The price paid by the Church for this was, in the meantime, too high: “Theology and history found themselves at the beginning of the twentieth century in a sort of ghetto mentality, which implied a certain separation from other Christian churches, from society, and from their cultural and intellectual milieu.” The latter ecclesiastical position relied, in contrast, on *dialogue* with the modern world.⁴²

In the years following World War II,⁴³ it became clear that within the French culture there was a growing indifference to the Church as well as a loss of participation from large segments of the working class. When Henri Godin, a French priest involved with the Young Christian Workers movement, proposed France as a mission field in his book *La France, Pays de Mission*,⁴⁴ he unleashed a flurry of discussion and activity upon the French Catholic Church. What he proposed was a reconquest of the proletariat in which the priests left the parochial and the bishops and took up work in mission. He proposed

⁴¹ Ulrich Engel, “The Question of Modernity in Theology,” E Spaces, <http://espaces-online.net/IMG/pdf/UE07.pdf>

⁴² Engel, *The Question of Modernity in Theology*

⁴³ This paragraph and the following one are based on Marcellino D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition.” *Communio* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1991).

⁴⁴ Henri Godin and Yves Daniel, *La France, Pays de Mission?* (Paris: Cerf, 1943). [For an English translation with commentary, see Maisie Ward, *France Pagan: The Mission of Abbé Godin* (London, Sheed & Ward, 1949)].

that priests experience the everyday life of the working classes—in places such as car factories—working like them and sharing their life experience. It became immediately apparent that the Church had failed to reach society on a prophetic level; being in mission would return the Church to its roots.

Yves Congar called it an historic event: “The man and the book were truly providential and prophetic...Very quickly, this work led to a new awareness of the situation of the world and of the relation of the Church to the world.”⁴⁵ Words like *incarnation*, *presence*, *engagement*, and *adaptation* were being reintroduced in the theology and the language of the Church. The Church, which had retreated from its principles and values, was being called to bold new initiatives and a revival of Catholic life. Congar remarked, “Anyone who did not live through the years 1946 and 1947 in the history of French Catholicism has missed one of the finest moments in the life of the Church.”⁴⁶ Jean Daniélou, a Lyons Jesuit who taught at l’Institut Catholique of Paris was one who responded to the call for a new theology, a theology that could meet the challenges in post-war France. He wrote an article in 1946 which some regarded as a call to arms to create a newly relevant theology, a sort of “manifesto” of “*la nouvelle théologie*,” one that is not “scholastic” in scope, but understandable to the people of God. Scholasticism in the form of neo-Thomism is “a stranger to these [contemporary] categories ...mired” as it is “in the immobile world of Greek thought.”⁴⁷ It cannot offer contemporary Christians spiritual or doctrinal

⁴⁵ Yves Congar, *Vraie et Fausse Réforme dans l'Eglise* (Paris: Cerf, 1950), 48.

⁴⁶ D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology”

⁴⁷ Jean Daniélou. “Les Orientations Présentes de la Pensée Religieuse,” *Études* 249 (1946): 1-21. Henri De Lubac, *Mémoire Sur L'occasion De Mes Écrits*, (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1989), 247, observes that though Daniélou's article was “quite intelligent (and quite innocent),” it was nevertheless “a little too journalistic (even in the opinion of the author).” This, however, does not prevent this essay from being a valuable testimony to the discontent many French Catholic thinkers were feeling with the theological status quo in the 40s.

nourishment. Danielou called it “a rupture between theology and life... Theoretical speculation, separated from action and uninvolved in life, has seen its day.” He called for a theology “entirely engaged in the building up of the body of Christ.”⁴⁸ Others, particularly the Dominican theologians of Le Saulchoir, had a similar call. Marie-Dominique Chenu, the Regent of Studies at Le Saulchoir from 1932 to 1942, put it best. “Before all else, to be a theologian really means not to be cut off from the daily, concrete life of the Church.”⁴⁹ It was time to fill in the chasm that had been dug between theology and spirituality. “It is no longer possible to disassociate, as was done too much in times past, theology and spirituality. The first was placed upon a speculative and timeless plane; the second too often consisted only of practical counsels separated from the vision of man which justified it.”⁵⁰

The “Ressourcement”

The main question for these theologians was how to break out of the neo-scholastic intellectual mindset and begin developing a theology that would truly meet the challenges of their age. “Their common instinct was a paradox: in order to go forward in theology, one first had to go backward.”⁵¹ It became obvious that theologians were being called to develop a new theology - one that was more responsive to the spiritual needs of twentieth century Christians - based on the achievements of an old one. Etienne Gilson said, “If theological progress is sometimes necessary, it is never possible unless you go back to

⁴⁸ Daniélou. “Les Orientations Présentes de la Pensée Religieuse,” 1-21. De Lubac, *Mémoire*, 247.

⁴⁹ Marie-Dominique Chenu, “A conversation with Père Chenu,” *Dominicana* 50 (1965): 141.

⁵⁰ Jean Daniélou, “Les Orientations Présentes de la Pensée Religieuse,” 1-21. De Lubac, *Mémoire*, 247.

⁵¹ D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology”.

the beginning and start over.”⁵² The term *ressourcement* was coined for this new theology. For the theologians who used this term, Chenu, Danielou, Gilson, Peguy, and others, there was a return to the “forms and categories of ancient Christianity...a spiritual and intellectual communion with Christianity in its most vital moments as transmitted to us in its classic text, a communion that would nourish, invigorate, and rejuvenate twentieth century Catholicism.”⁵³ Quite specifically, what these thinkers did was to look to the old to find answers for the new. In undertaking this task, the theologians looked to the Fathers’ writings to provide a way to “mediate the past to the present in a nourishing, life-giving way.”⁵⁴ Labourdette called the Fathers, “sources, not in the restricted sense of which literary history understands the term, but in the sense of wellsprings which are always springing up to overflowing.”⁵⁵ The aim of this theological project was to reconnect contemporary Christianity directly with the patristic tradition. To this end, Lubac and Danielou created a series of books, *Sources Chretiennes*,⁵⁶ in French, which reintroduced the Church to the classic patristic texts, newly translated with the goal “to provide a number of readers a direct access to these ‘sources’ always overflowing with spiritual life and theological doctrine, which are the Fathers of the Church.”⁵⁷ Included in these texts were the works of the Greek Fathers, many of which had been neglected in the Western Church.

⁵² Étienne Gilson, review of *Augustine et théologie moderne* and *Le Mystère du surnaturel*, by H. de Lubac, in *La Croix* (18-19 July 1965); quoted by É. Gilson, *Letters of Étienne Gilson to Henri de Lubac*, trans. by Mary Emily Hamilton (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 179.

⁵³ D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology.”

⁵⁴ D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology.”

⁵⁵ L. Labourdette, O.P., “La théologie et Ses Sources: Réponse aux Etudes Critiques de la *Revue Thomiste*,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 33 (Summer 1946): 395.

⁵⁶ *Sources Chrétiennes: Collection dirigée par H. de Lubac, S.J. et J. Daniélou, S.J.* has put out over 320 volumes since it was inaugurated in 1941. In D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology.”

⁵⁷ J. Daniélou, “Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse,” *Études* 249 (1946): 1-21.

Together with the love of the Fathers, these theologians devoted themselves to the medievals, especially St. Thomas. In fact, they had a sense that the Thomism of the manuals was not the Thomism of St. Thomas. The writers of *Sources Chretiennes* believed that teachings of St. Thomas were not the Thomas of the rigid, scholastic theology that maintains his name. Committed to a critical re-investigation of the Scholastic tradition, several theologians gradually made it clear that St. Thomas had not introduced a new method of theology that was radically different from that of the Fathers. To quote de Lubac, their object was to search and return “to the real Saint Thomas.”⁵⁸

The passion and commitment undertaken by the theologians of Fourvière and Le Saulchoir to proceed with the historical study of the Fathers and "the real St. Thomas," was intended as a support to the contemporary Church. In fact, what they were seeking through their study of Christian origins was to be reconnected with the "spirit" and the "principles" of tradition. They did not share any slavish desire to return to the theology of the Fathers, but to use the words of the Fathers to lend food for thought so that energized Christians could “solve their problems in a fully contemporary, yet entirely traditional way.”⁵⁹ They believed that the tradition was, ultimately, a source of inspiration for the Church, a spiritual and intellectual resource. They were confident that, through the *ressourcement*, the Church would have found strength, energy, and inspiration to address the problems of her time. The return to origins, then, was actually a return to tradition, in order to drink in the sources of Christianity and rediscover the meaning of a dialogue with the contemporary time without fear of losing her soul. Congar pointed out that, "to return to the origins, the 're-source,' as we say today, is to think with the situation in

⁵⁸ De Lubac in É. Gilson, *Letters of Étienne Gilson to Henri de Lubac*, 35 n.7.

⁵⁹ D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology”

which we are currently engaged in light and spirit of all that an integral tradition to impart us a sense of the Church. For these theologians, each new historical period is a new beginning for the Church”⁶⁰. In every era, the Church needs to renew itself while remaining faithful to her tradition. The tradition is extremely fertile. It was expected that new ideas, new practices, and new pastoral initiatives would evolve from the study of the sources. For the *ressourcement* theologians, “each new historical period finds the Church once more at the beginning.”⁶¹ New growth was expected from the old roots. On the contrary, the obsessive insistence with the neo-Scholastic theology had petrified the Church. Above all, the neo-Scholastic had cut out of the Church from its origins, and had rendered her fragile and vulnerable.

The Influence of the Orthodox Theology

Countering the modern intellectualism of the neo-Thomist establishment, the nouvelle theologians were convinced that a *ressourcement* of the Church Fathers and of medieval theology would point the way to a return to mystery. In this capacity, these theologians benefited from the work of a group of Russian emigrants in France, members of the Exarchate of Metropolitan Evlogy. Members of this group of expatriates were Paul Evdokimov, Mother Maria (Liza Pilenko), Metropolitan Evlogy, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, and other leading figures of the “Russian Paris” such as Nicolas Berdiaev, Basil Zenkovsky, Nicolas Afanasiev, George Feodotov, Constantine Mochulsky, Ilya Fundaminsky, Frs. Lev Gillet, Kyprian Kern and Dimitri Klepinin. Born in St, Petersburg, Russia, in 1910, Paul Evdokimov left Russia in 1921, spent a brief period in

⁶⁰ Yves Congar, *Vraie, et Fausse Réforme dans l'Eglise*, 337.

⁶¹ In the opening paragraph in his Commentary on Eve on le Jaillissement, Péguy writes "Tout le jaillissement dans le germe, tout l'ordre dans l'épi" ("All the fecundity is in the seed, all the order in the fruit.") This concept of *jaillissement* is frequently used by the *ressourcement* theologians. See Alexander Dru, *Péguy* (New York: Harper, 1956), 47.

Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), and in 1923, moved to France.⁶² He was an observer at Vatican II and became an important voice for the Eastern Church in the West. His research was extensive, including the study of the historical contributions of Russian theologians, the Eastern Church's understanding of the Mother of God and of the Holy Spirit, the theology of icons, prayer, and liturgical services. He also studied the significance of the Fathers and monasticism for modern society, and particularly, the vocation of all the baptized and the ways in which holiness finds distinctive models and forms in modern life. The work of his teachers and friends, Frs. Bulgakov and Afanasiev, Professors Kartashev, Olivier Clément and Nikos Nissiotis, all are present in his writing along with his own singular sense of being a person of prayer, a "liturgical being," a witness to Christ in both the world and the Church. Preaching at the funeral service for Paul Evdokimov, Fr. Lev Gillet said that he was one who worshiped in spirit and truth. Having known him for nearly 40 years, Fr. Lev said he was more at ease in the invisible realities of the Kingdom, while at the same time diligent, effective, and enormously solicitous for those around him. Olivier Clément called him a "go-between," an intermediary connecting the Church and the world. In his essays, one finds a critique of Sartre, De Beauvoir, and Camus presented with respect and discernment. He proposed that a chair of atheism be set up in every theological school, so profound were the questions modern thinkers put to the community of faith. He listened to and used the

⁶² Devoutly Russian Orthodox, he was committed to ecumenism and believed that the emigration of orthodox people from the Eastern bloc countries to the West, of which he was a part, was a valuable part of the ecumenical meeting of Eastern and Western Christianity. Although he was a layman, not a priest or a monk, he was in the first graduating class of the St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris, a student of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. He later became a professor at the same Institute and wrote many well-regarded books on theology. During the Nazi occupation, Evdokimov also worked with the resistance to hide people pursued by the Gestapo. For almost a decade after the war, he directed hostels for the care of the poor, refugees, and distressed people. As a theologian with experience in pastoral and service work, he eventually taught at St. Sergius, L'Institut Catholique and the Ecumenical Center in Bossey.

insights of the leading thinkers of his time, as well as those of his teachers Berdiaev and Bulgakov, and a wide range of others including Nicolas Cabasilas, Therese of Lisieux, Simone Weil and Jung. No modern theologian has so ably explored the problem of human evil, despite a supposed good and just God. His image of God is of one who suffers along with us, who empties himself in love to become one of us, who shares with us an unconditional or foolish love that could only come from prayer and loving service to the suffering. Paul Evdokimov also talked in his writings of how the face of the person before us becomes an icon of Christ. His moving memoirs of the years he spent directing houses of hospitality capture this, as do the recollections of many who knew him, among them Fr. Lev Gillet, Olivier Clément, Christos Yannaras, Nikos Nissiotis and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel. Evdokimov's words sum it all up: "It appears that a new spirituality is dawning. It aspires not to leave the world to evil, but to let the spiritual element in the creature come forth. A person who loves and is totally detached, naked to the touch of the eternal, escapes the contrived conflict between the spiritual and the material. His love of God is humanized and becomes love for all creatures in God." According to Evdokimov, "everything is grace ...because God has condescended to the human and has carried it away into the abyss of the Trinity. The types of traditional holiness are characterized by the heroic style of the desert, the monastery. By taking a certain distance from the world, this holiness is stretched toward heaven, vertically, like the spire of a cathedral. Nowadays, the axis of holiness has moved, drawing nearer to the world. In all its appearances, its type is less striking, its achievement is hidden from the eyes of the world, but it is the result of a struggle that is no less real. Being

faithful to the call of the Lord, in the conditions of this world, makes grace penetrate to its very root, where human life is lived”.⁶³

Paul Evdokimov, despite being Orthodox, has had a profound influence on the Catholic Church through his input in discussions at Vatican II. He is also in the same “school of thought” of Florensky and Bulgakov—although, of course, not always limited to the past in his own theological interaction. His influence may be found in the writings of many Catholic theologians. It is important to note that the *ressourcement* advocated by these thinkers was not ultimately a work of scholarship but rather a work of religious revitalization. Indeed, in their writings, the word “source” only secondarily refers to a historical document; the primary meaning of the term is a dynamic source of spiritual life that never becomes dry. As Evdokimov wrote, “The church is essentially communion with the mystery of divine life and progressive transfiguration of humanity and the cosmos in the image of the Risen Christ.”⁶⁴ The facts and words of Scripture, the rites of the liturgy, the creeds of the Church, the decrees and ordinances of the councils, the teaching of the Fathers, Doctors of the Church, and great spiritual and mystical masters, all of these bodies of tradition are, for them, the sources, since they are channels of the one, incomparable Source that is the mystery of Christ. The ultimate goal of the renewal is not, then, a more accurate historical understanding of Christian origins, but rather, in Congar's words, “a recentering in the person of Christ and in his paschal mystery.” “Thanks to their acute sense of the inexhaustible fullness of the Christian mystery, they steadfastly refused to identify that mystery with any of its past expressions or

⁶³ Paul Evdokimov and Anthony P. Gythiel, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 92.

⁶⁴ Paul Evdokimov, *La Novità dello Spirito*, (Milano: Ed Ancora, 1980), 106. Translation is my own.

embodiments.”⁶⁵ Their faith in what they saw as the “utter uniqueness and perpetual relevance of Christianity”⁶⁶ helped them to resist the temptation to deform the gospel by conforming it to the modern world.

Chenu, following the precepts of Charlier and Draguet, asserted that, beginning in the seventeenth century, dogmatic theology was cut off from the sources of positive theology. Rational constructs had overcome a more positive theology that was centered in the history of salvation. Since the seventeenth century, theologians were preoccupied with rational constructs, and closed, clear systems; as a consequence, the sense of God’s transcendent mystery, which Chenu and others felt was central to the Christian faith, had been lost to an excessive preoccupation with dogma. Western theology had become impoverished, devoid of its sense of mystery. Daniélou noted that “the loss of a sense of God’s transcendent mystery by a rationalistic theology”⁶⁷ was the very thing that Kierkegaard had objected to. God had been made an object, and in establishing the theology of *ressourcement*, Daniélou, de Lubac, and others were calling the believer back to an understanding of the transcendent and unfathomable mystery of God. “The existential ethos of the mid-twentieth century helped spark a rediscovery of the Church’s traditional teaching that God is the Supreme Subject, the Person *par excellence*, whose self-revelation in Scripture is intelligible but never fully comprehensible.”⁶⁸

Conclusion

⁶⁵ D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology”

⁶⁶ D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology”

⁶⁷ D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology”

⁶⁸ D'Ambrosio, “Ressourcement, Theology”

La nouvelle théologie was probably the most important 20th century movement in Roman Catholic thought. It provided the theological impetus and context for the Second Vatican Council. It was based on *ressourcement* which meant a return to earlier sources, traditions and symbols of the early Church. It was a pillar of *ressourcement* theology that before becoming established masters, theologians had first to become careful disciples. In other words, theology can only be "original" when it goes back to the sources, to the "origins" of Christian life and thought, and not when it is different. Congar, citing Werner Förster, asserts, "Only a profound understanding of the tradition can guide one to discern the useful elements in modernity, to select them with certainty, to adapt them with tact." He stresses the fact that it is not just a superficial knowledge of historical theology but rather a real *ressourcement*, which has as its objective the appropriation of the very spirit of the tradition, is the necessary prelude to a hermeneutically successful *aggiornamento*.⁶⁹ According to Avery Dulles, S.J., "For Congar, tradition is a real, living self-communication of God. Its content is the whole Christian reality disclosed in Jesus Christ, including the implicit contents of that disclosure. The Holy Spirit is the transcendent subject of tradition; the whole Church is its bearer. Thus tradition is an essentially social and ecclesial reality; its locus is the Church as a communion."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *Aggiornamento*, an Italian word made popular by commentators on the Second Vatican Council, was, of course, not employed by our French theologians writing in the 1940s and 1950s. During this period, the most common French term employed to designate the reappropriation of the Christian tradition in a radically new historical context was "*adaptation*." Whatever the terminology, we are here dealing with the fundamental hermeneutical problem of application. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975), 274.

⁷⁰ Avery Dulles, S.J., Foreword to, *The Meaning of Tradition*, by Yves Congar OP, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004; first edition New York: Hawthorn, 1964).

CHAPTER TWO: THE CHURCH AND VATICAN II

Introduction

In the decades leading up to the Second Vatican Council, one of the main concerns of the movement of *nouvelle théologie* was ecclesiology. Thanks to the work of Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and others, Catholic ecclesiology experienced significant changes and moved from a vision of the Church as a perfect society, which was a model elaborated by St. Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) and remained more or less standard among Catholics for well over two centuries, to a vision of participation in the Church's life. Yves Congar was one of the main architects of a major renewal in Roman Catholic ecclesiology in twentieth century. His vision of an ecclesiology of communion that regards the Church as sacrament of Christ has led to a profound transformation of the Roman Catholic Church, its relationship with other churches and the world. Henri De Lubac's recovery of the rich theological vision of the Fathers - in particular that of St Augustine - on the intrinsic relationship between Church and Eucharist allows an ecclesiology based on Eucharist and on the sacramental order of reality that draws humanity to a deeper participation in the divine life. These theologians recognize the need for new models, images, and ideas of the Church; thanks to them, Catholic ecclesiology has undergone a considerable change of emphasis from the Church as a monarchical structure organized under the primacy of the pope to the collegial union of bishops to the Church as the people of God, where a more important role is left for the laity in the ministry. These changes in theology are mirrored by the major documents that came from Vatican II. *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* emphasizes the Church as

the people of God over the older idea of the hierarchical and monarchical nature of the Church. In *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, the Church is the servant of the world.

The Pre-Vatican II Church

The First Vatican Council left the Church as an unfinished work necessary to be concluded. That council had been prematurely interrupted because of the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, with the result that its document on the Church, *Pastor Aeternus*, had ended up confined to a single isolated chapter on papal infallibility. In 1893, Pope Leo XIII issued his encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris*, which made the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas normative for the Church. This was a strong impetus for the renewal of Thomist studies that had already been going on. Thomism then spread throughout the Church, and was revitalized by a large amount of fine scholarship. As an official doctrine, Thomism began to take on the color of the institutional structure of the Church, and became both authoritative and defensive. This defensiveness did not end with the world outside the Church, but extended itself to the pioneers within the Church who wished to pursue ecclesiology within the Church. In his valued book, *Twentieth-century Catholic Theologians*, Fergus Kerr tells the story of one of these pioneers: George Tyrrell (1861-1909); born in Dublin, raised Anglican, he became a Catholic in London in 1879 and entered the Society of Jesus. He was expelled from the Society in 1906. In his book published in 1908, *Medievalism*, Tyrrell wrote that “the religious interest still lives and grows in Protestant countries, whereas it languishes and dies among Catholics;” that the lay Catholic’s place is not just “to receive the faith passively as one receives a traveler’s tale of regions beyond his ken” since “the laity are part of the Church.” In general, he

dealt with the governance of the Church, the dignity and role of laity, and the concept of experience and tradition as loci of truth. His writing were considered unorthodox (Tyrrell was not forgotten at Vatican II. On October 1, 1963, in a powerful speech, Ernesto Ruffini, Cardinal Archbishop of Palermo, informed the assembly that the idea of the Church as a sacrament came from Tyrrell).⁷¹ Since the Church felt alienated from the surrounding reality and threatened in her survival, she maintained a conflicted relationship with the world, preferred to defend her structure of authority and obedience, and base her organization on a strict hierarchy.

According to Emile De Smedt, the Council of Trent taught that Christ had institutionalized the seven sacraments and the hierarchy. Vatican I had added the papal dogma of infallibility.⁷² The end result was a Church that was expressed through her doctrinal and sacramental documents, and her act of government, and that based her existence on the stability and continuity with tradition. Additionally, she maintained a strong identity and enjoyed an equally strong institutional loyalty. A Church interpreted as “state,” run by a class of government. The clergy had been taking the total authority of the Church, in part by divine right. When celebrating the sacraments, the priest carried the sacred powers that lay people did not have. This was a Church reluctant to develop an ecumenical strategy, and certainly reluctant to grant salvation to non-Christians. In fact, the Church administered the heritage of doctrine, sacraments and ministries that can lead man to salvation. This heritage is a gift that was given to the Church. The Church was a society engaged in the preservation of this heritage that can be accessed only by those

⁷¹ Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 5-7.

⁷² *Acta Concilii Vaticani II*, Vol. 1, Part 4, Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis, 1971, 142-44.

who join the Church. The papal documents existing up to the time of Pius XII⁷³ frequently deny that the term “church,” in a proper theological sense, can be applied to bodies not in union with Rome. The ecumenical movement is condemned by the *Mortalium animos* encyclical of Pius XI (1928); the Pope criticized those who would overcome denominational barriers in search of “fraternal agreement on certain points of doctrine which will form a common basis of the spiritual life.” Those seeking the agreement with non-Catholic Christians are “subversive of the foundations of the Catholic faith.”⁷⁴ Since the twentieth century, the Church has been seen as a divine institution, a doctrine that found official expression in *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943). However, the Church was not understood to be missionary by nature. The universal care of missions to non-Catholics was reserved exclusively to the Apostolic See according to old canon law. Gradually, a fundamental shift emerged through various papal teachings over the years. The missionary encyclicals of the twentieth century prior to the Second Vatican Council—especially *Maximum Illud* (1919), *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926), *Evangelii Praecones* (1951) and *Fidei Donum* (1957)—were in the direction of a missionary understanding of the Church.

The Church was more institutional and hierarchical than prophetic and charismatic. It was a Church founded more on tradition than on Scripture. It was a Church that was an administrator and guardian of the revelation, which—precisely because of this revelation—you must obey. According to the official Roman documents of the pre-council period, the revelation authoritatively taught by the Church was a body of doctrine

⁷³ The Catholic Church is the only one in which subsists the “essential constitutive elements” of the Church intended by Christ. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*, June 29th, 2007.

⁷⁴ *Mortalium Animos* (On Religious Unity), Pope Pius XI, 1928.

that derived from the Apostles, who received it “from the mouth of Christ himself,” or “by the dictation of the Holy Spirit.” This doctrine is fully contained “in the written books and unwritten traditions” that have come down from apostolic times.⁷⁵ Consequently, in the words of Vatican I, “all those things are to be believed with divine and Catholic faith that are contained in the Word of God, written or handed down, and which the Church, either by a solemn judgment, or by her ordinary and universal *magisterium*, proposes for belief as having been divinely revealed.”⁷⁶ The conception of infallibility that emerged in this period of Church history corresponded to its highly juridical, authoritarian, and propositional understanding of revelation. “Catholic faith was understood as an implicit confidence in the teaching office.”⁷⁷

The Church as an Institution

The word “church” could indicate each community that can be seen as and considers itself made by “followers of Christ.” Theologically, the term refers to the mystery of Christ who lives in the community of those who believe in him and come together in his name. For Christians, the Church is not only a human reality, but is accessible to anyone, even those who are not Christian. The Church is God’s work, which is present and active in the Church through the Holy Spirit, and where Christ performs his saving actions. Often the two meanings of the word are used together in the same sentence—for example, “the church of human beings and God.” The characteristics of the Church are those set by the creed: the Church is one, holy, Catholic and apostolic. Of these four criteria, holiness is the oldest, and is a matter of faith: “credo...sanctam ecclesiam.” Since

⁷⁵ Council of Trent, Fourth Session (1546). It is here quoted from the translation in Josef Neuner and Heinrich Roos, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1967), 80.

⁷⁶ Neuner and Roos, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, 68.

⁷⁷ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), 185.

the fifth century, a systematic apology had been developed to defend the true Church by its enemies. The issue became urgent again in the controversy between Protestants and Catholics, ten centuries later. For several centuries, and certainly up to Vatican II, Catholic apologists had preferred defending the Church by identifying the Church as an ecclesiastic community: the Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, the Roman Catholic Church was the Church of Christ. This identity implied that the only church, which can be attributed to the criteria of the creed, was the Catholic Church: one, holy, Catholic and apostolic. Moreover, that the Catholic Church was not a community on its way toward the full realization (the *basilea*, as in Kung. *Basilea* is the work of God, the *ekklesia* is the work of man),⁷⁸ but was now fully realized. Finally, that the Catholic Church was an institution, and as an institution, she deserved respect. The Church was an institution that had received from God a series of attributes that defined her; these attributes were authoritative and gave her a static, unchangeable character. These attributes were also recognizable, and an human being could recognize the signs of God's presence in the Catholic Church and choose to join her in order to save his/her soul. The salvation of the soul and membership at the institution came together. Since the attributes were identifiable, they were interpreted in terms of their visibility. Unity was interpreted as obedience to the visible head of the Catholic Church, the Pope. Holiness was identified as the holiness of the liturgy. Catholicity was known as the uniformity of doctrine, liturgy and code. The apostolicity was defined as the identification of the institution as the defender of the tradition: doctrine, sacraments, *and magisterium*. The institution, as the Church of Christ and preserving the legacy of the first apostolic community, was a means of salvation. The main consequence of this ecclesiology was

⁷⁸ Hans Kung, *The Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 117-125.

the rigidity of the institutional system: a language (Latin), a rite (Roman Catholic), a theology (Scholasticism), and a canon (canonic code). Instead of encouraging new and different forms of thought and ritual life, the institution required conformity to the requirements and the uniformity of the doctrine. A second consequence was the institutional interpretation of the famous maxim "outside the Church, no salvation," which at those times historically associated the mission of the Church to the colonialism of European states. The third consequence was the outward expression of devotion as a form of holiness. Congar maintained that in the modern centuries, the Church was regarded "as machinery of hierarchical mediation, of the powers and the primacy of the Roman See, in a word, 'hierarchyology.'"⁷⁹ The trajectory of the institutional model of the Catholic Church reached its climax at Vatican I, during which it was declared not only that the Church was a perfect society, but also that "the Church has all the marks of a true Society...the Church is not part of any other member of society and is not mingled in any way with any other society. It is so perfect in itself that it is distinct from all human society and stands far above them."⁸⁰ From the counter-reformation until the second half of the nineteenth century, the Church was largely understood as an institution and *societas perfecta*.

In the institutional model, the powers and functions of the Church were three: teaching, sanctification, and governance. In the Church, then, there were those who teach and who were taught, one who sanctified and those who are sanctified, those who governed and those who are to be governed. Therefore, when it may be said that the Church taught,

⁷⁹ Yves Congar, "The Church: The People of God," *Concilium*, 1 (1965), 7-19.

⁸⁰ *Primum schema*, or first draft of the Constitution on the Church is in *Collectio Lacensis* (Freiburg: Herder, 1890), Vol. 7, 567-78. It is here quoted from the translation in Neuner and Roos, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, No. 361, 213-14.

sanctified and governed, it refers to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁸¹ The Church was primarily a teacher—magister—in the sense that her bishops had the charisma of truth. She was holy in the sense that the Pope and bishops opened the doors of the Church to holiness. She ruled, in the sense that the clergy governed the Church. There was a division in the medieval church of Christians in two states: the “spiritual,” that gathered clerics and religious, and a “carnal,” bringing together the laity. They were the two natures of the Church: the visible and the invisible. The decisive nature was the invisible one; the invisible nature made possible the visible. Clerical mediation between the invisible and the visible natures was motivated precisely by this vision. It gave to the religious class and the clergy (the spiritual state) the government of the Church; to lay people (the carnal state) it required obedience. Thus, the clergy was the subject of guidelines and lessons, limitations and convictions, and the laity was the object. Each proposal and program was developed by the clergy, while the community of believers was not even accustomed to reading the Bible regularly or without assistance. The pre-conciliar Church was based on a hierarchical concept of authority. The Church was not intended as a democracy, but as a reality in which power was concentrated in the hands of a class of governors who were accessed by co-optation. “The Church of Christ is not a community of equals in which all the faithful have the same rights. It is a society of unequal...particularly because there is in the Church the power from God whereby to some it is given to sanctify, teach, and govern and to others not.”⁸²

⁸¹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 42-3.

⁸² Neuner and Roos, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, No. 369.

Ecclesiology and Vatican II

The long process of theological reflection that led the Vatican II council to the definition of the Church as People of God was spread inside and outside the Roman Church. In the nineteenth century, the Tubingen school of Catholic theology developed the notion of the Church as a supernatural organism vivified by the Holy Spirit. J. Adams Mohler is known as the originator of the influential view of the Church as the continuation of the incarnation of Christ. Mohler first wrote an ecclesiology, *Unity in the Church or the Principle of Catholicism* (1825), which clearly opted for a spirit-centered ecclesiology. Soon, however, he came to view the Church as the continued incarnation of Christ. According to B.E. Hinze, the “Twentieth-century renewal of pneumatology in Catholic ecclesiology could be constructed in part as an attempt to reaffirm Mohler’s early Spirit-centered approach and to reintegrate it with his later incarnational ecclesiology within a fully developed Trinitarian framework.”⁸³ In his first major theological work, *The Communion of Saints*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer developed the notion of the Church as an interpersonal community. He wrote, “The community is constituted by the complete self-forgetfulness of love. The relationship between I and thou is no longer essentially a demanding but a giving one.”⁸⁴ Several noted theologians, such as Hans Kung, Karl Rahner, and Yves Congar played a crucial role in initiating a fuller recovery of the early patristic roots of the Catholic doctrine of the church on the eve of Vatican II and afterward.

⁸³ Quoted in G. Routhier, *Vatican II. Herménetique et Réception* [E.T.: *Il Concilio Vaticano II. Recezione ed Ermeneutica*, trans. Abbazia Benedettina Mater Ecclesiae, (Milan: Vita & Pensiero, 2007), 69]. Translation is my own.

⁸⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 123.

In the course of the 1930s, Congar introduced in Roman Catholic ecclesiology distinctions that reevaluated the inner life of the Church. While affirming the Church's unity, he distinguished within "the Church between divine and societal unity, organism and organization, incorporated members and authority/subjects, hierarchy of holiness and of society, interior/moral and legitimate order, spirit and mission, vital and sociological/juridical body, eternal and temporal duration."⁸⁵ For the early Congar, these distinctions are made witness to the eschatological dimension (what Congar mentioned as "supernatural substance") of the Church and to its human form of expression and achievement: two realities that included respective unities, events, needs, and logic, while there was but one Church.⁸⁶ The early Congar's engagement on the reevaluation of the Church's inner life had ecumenical implications within the Roman Catholic Church. Historically, both Protestant and Orthodox ecclesiology had stressed the importance of the Church's inner life, expressed in the former by the common priesthood of all believers and in the latter by the deification process. Moreover, "the distinction between the Church's inner and outer reality allowed the early Congar to view ecclesial life and ecclesiastical structures as related sacramentally rather than identically", and therefore explore *rapprochement* with Anglicanism. Congar's logic and theological center were Christological: as Christ is divine and human, so is the Church. Because of her divine nature, the Church is God's family, a community that participate in God's life; because of

⁸⁵ R. J. Beauchesne, "Heeding the Early Congar Today, and Two Recent Roman Catholic Issues: Seeking Hope on the Road Back," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 537-8.

⁸⁶ Yves Congar, *Chrétiens desunis*, (E.T.: *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*), trans. M. A. Bousfield (London: Geoffrey Bles,-The Centenary Press, 1939), 75.

her human nature, she is a community that moves away from God as it struggles to realize its divine mandate humanely.⁸⁷

According to Walter Kasper, "the question about the Church" in Vatican II was "subordinate to the question about God."⁸⁸ Despite what it was said during and after the Council, Vatican II was firmly centered on God. One of its main achievements, and a central part of its *ressourcement*, was the recovery of a biblical perspective on God. Both the document on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, and the Council's dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, talk about a God who has entered into history. It is the triune God, the communitarian God, the God of the history of salvation (*Historia Salutis*). So when the Second Vatican Council faced the issue of the Church, it is not surprising that it wanted to look at the Church as *communion*. The Council refers mainly to the origins of the Church in the mystery of communion that is rooted in the life of the Trinity, who opens up for us in Jesus Christ. Walter Kasper summarizes: "According to the council, the mystery of the church means that in the Spirit we have access through Christ to the Father, so that in this way we may share in the divine nature. The communion of the church is prefigured, made possible and sustained by the communion of the Trinity. Ultimately...it is participation in the Trinitarian communion itself. The Church is, as it were, the icon of the Trinitarian fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit."⁸⁹ Whatever about the centrality of the theme of communion at the Council, it was above all the theological notion of "people of God" that initially gained most attention with Chapter

⁸⁷ Congar, *Chrétiens Desunis*, 95-6

⁸⁸ See Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (London: SCM, 1989), 153.

⁸⁹ Kasper, *Theology and Church*, 152.

Two of *Lumen Gentium* carrying this very title.⁹⁰ Identify with the image of Church as “People of God,” the Council wanted to bring out more clearly the Church's eschatological pilgrimage character. It also wanted to bring about a change from seeing the Church primarily as a static body that receives things done or an agency of sacramental activities, liturgical rites, and pastoral actions, to something much deeper, universal and all-encompassing - a people of holiness, love, life and truth.⁹¹ After the Council, there was much debate about the meaning of the notion "people of God." Walter Kasper summarizes the meaning of the notion “people of God”: the council uses the phrase, the people of God...means the organic and structure whole of the church.”⁹²

The ecclesiology of Vatican II certainly marks a turning point from the Church's previous position. For Congar, the council concluded the long season that began with the Council of Trent; it concluded the long season of the counter-reform, the five centuries marked by hostility and polemics against Protestants, based on a doctrine used to show that Catholicism was the only true Christian religion. According to Congar, the implication was that the ecclesiastical organization - that consists of a unified Church, an infallible *Magisterium* and a hierarchical organization with clergy on the top and laity at the bottom of the hierarchy – that had saved the Catholic Church from the risk of fragmentation, could be abandoned and replaced with a form of church more communitarian. Chenu, however, has interpreted the council as the time of termination of

⁹⁰ See Congar, “The Church: The People of God,” 7-19.

⁹¹ Brendan Leahy, 'People, Synod and Upper Room: Vatican II's Ecclesiology of Communion'. In: Vatican II: Facing the 21st Century Historical & Theological Perspectives. *Veritas*, (2006): 49-80.

⁹² See Kasper, *Theology & Church*, p. 162. See also the International Theological Commission, "Selected Themes of Ecclesiology" in Michael Sharkey (ed.), *International Theological Commission, Texts and Documents, 1969-1985* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989): 267-304. On postconciliar ecclesiology see Angel Antón, "Postconciliar Ecclesiology: Expectations, Results, and Prospects for the Future" in *Vatican II: Assessments and Perspectives: Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987)*: Volume I., ed. René Latourelle (New York: Paulist, 1988): 407-38.

the Constantinian Church, namely the long period of fifteen centuries in which Christianity first, and then Catholicism, had enjoyed its status as that of a state religion. Free from its institutional ties, the Catholic Church now could focus better on its other functions and vocations, while getting to serve the community of believers and, more generally, the whole world. Finally, Rahner has often talked of the council as a point of departure of the church world, namely the self-revelation of the Roman Catholic Church as a church universal, not European or Western. Again, the implication is clear: from a centralized model, the Church had to move to one that allowed the preservation of local identities and open up a dialogue with indigenous churches.

The Council had not delivered a single and definitive ecclesiology that replaced the previous one. During the council, both different ecclesiastical perspectives and different images or models of the Church⁹³ were proposed and discussed, both in the sessions and in the official documents. These perspectives were the result of theological elaborations of previous decades, developed mainly in France and Germany.

Church as Koinonia

Yves Congar made the category of community or communion central to his ecclesiology. The concept of the Church as a communion (*koinonia*) harmonized with several biblical images and in particular with the Church as Body of Christ and Church as People of God. The idea of Body of Christ was biological, rather than sociological. The Church was seen as the analogy of a human body equipped, equipped with various organs. The Body of Christ, as distinct from any natural body, had a principle of divine life, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had room for voluntary initiatives to revivify spiritually and without prior

⁹³ Dulles, *Models of the Church*.

consultation with the hierarchy.⁹⁴ In 1943, Pius XII published *Mystici corporis*, where he stated that the Church of Jesus Christ was the Mystical Body of Christ, and the Mystical Body of Christ was identical with the Roman Catholic Church.⁹⁵ In *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II reaffirmed the idea that the Church was the Body of Christ, but it distinguished between the Church as a hierarchical society and as the Body of Christ. It asserted that the two are related to each other in a way comparable to the human and divine natures of Christ. It did not identify the Church of Christ or the Mystical Body with the Roman Catholic Church. However, the principal paradigm of the Church in the documents of Vatican II was that of the People of God. This identification of the Church as the “People of God” is Congar’s most notable contribution to the council. It is a biblical concept having deep roots in the Old Testament and is proclaimed in the *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*. In addition, the idea of the Church as the People of God stressed the importance of the mutual service of the members toward one another and on subordination of the particular good of any one group to that of the whole People of God. The Church was seen as a community of persons, each of whom was individually free. In stressing the continual mercy of God and the people’s continual need of the Church for repentance, the Church as People of God picked up many favorite themes of Protestant theology. The Church was not an institution or a visible organized society, but a communion of human beings, primarily inward, and also expressed by external bonds of creed, liturgical, pastoral, and ecclesiastical responsibilities. Too, the term “member” changed his meaning: it was no longer a juridical term or an organizational role, rather it was used in

⁹⁴ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, chapter III.

⁹⁵ See A. Antón, *El Misterio de la Iglesia: Evolucion Historica de las Ideas Eclesiologicas. Vol II: De la apologética de la Iglesia-misterio en el Vaticano II y en el posconcilio* (Madrid-Toledo: Catolica, 1987) and see also David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991): 390.

a biological, spiritual, or even mystical sense, referring to the Church as a communion of grace. The Church was wider than any given institution, since it was the Spirit that brought people together into a fellowship of faith, hope, and love. Vatican II made clear that the institutional elements were quite distinct from the mystical and spiritual ones. In some presentation, this implied a doctrine of invisible membership. The purpose of the Church was to lead people to communion with the divine. The Dominican theologian Chenu pointed out that “the act of the believer terminates...not in the dogmatic statement, but in the divine reality itself.”⁹⁶ The Second Vatican Council gave great importance to the concept of mystical communion of grace. Revelation was practically identified with grace, while faith was understood with the acceptance of grace. The general principle was that God is at work on his ways wherever there are human beings. God is immediately at work through his grace in the soul of every believer. The Church therefore subsists wherever God is operative through his grace.

The Church was no longer exclusively identified with a society or institution, but was seen as a divine device, both within and beyond the constraints of a particular organization. Consequently, the Church was explained adopting a dynamic, vitalistic narrative, and was viewed as still growing to its full perfection. The Church could ever aspire to be more fully one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic. The unity was the inner unity of mutual love, which leads to a communion of friends; this inner communion was holy, although that God alone knows. The catholicity of the Church remained in her ability to be open and able to love; and the persistence of love maintained the apostolic heritage and the originality of the Church. Priest and bishops existed in the Church “for the

⁹⁶ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La Foi dans l'Intelligence* (Paris: Cerf, 1964), 250.

nurturing and constant growth of People of God” so that all “can work toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, and arrive at salvation.”⁹⁷ For some years before the council, Congar had been elaborating and diffusing a more communitarian vision of the office in the Church. Hans Kung, in *Why Priest?*, posited that a priest was “an inspirer, moderator, animator, in preaching, administration of the sacraments and committed service of love.”⁹⁸ Like Congar and Kung, Walter Kaspers acknowledges the priestly office mainly in terms of its sociological-ecclesial function rather than in its sacral-consecratory one.

Church as a Sacrament and Servant

In addition to the Church as *koinonia*, two other models of the Church were used during the Vatican II: the Church as a sacrament and as a servant. In the first article of its *Constitution on the Church*, the Council declared that by virtue of its relationship to Christ, “the Church is a kind of sacrament of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind; that is, she is a sign and instrument of such union and unity.”⁹⁹ The theme of the Church as basic sacrament returned in many passages of Vatican II due to the influences of theologians like Rahner and Schillebeeckx. Rahner distinguished the Kingdom of God and the Church—the church is a sacrament of the Kingdom of God but not the Kingdom of God itself. Schillebeeckx viewed the church as “a sacrament of the world” (*sacramentum mundi*); the Church shows the way in which people may co-exist throughout the world. Küng argued for a distinct gap between the Church and the Kingdom, and saw the Church as a servant of the Kingdom. In several Council

⁹⁷ Thomas F. O’Meara, “Towards a Roman Catholic Theology of the Presbytery,” *Heythrop Journal* 10 (1969): 401.

⁹⁸ Hans Kung, *Why Priests?* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972): 114-5.

⁹⁹ *Constitution on the Church*, Vatican II, art. 2.

documents, especially the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, it was made clear that “the goal of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in her sacrifice, and to eat the Lord’s Supper.”¹⁰⁰ Later in the same Constitution, we read that the Church “reveals herself...when a full complement of God’s holy people, united in prayer and in a common liturgical service (especially the Eucharist)” intensively participate in the official worship of the Church together with their bishop and priests. The sacrament was, in the first place, a sign of grace. A sign of something that really was present. The Church therefore was in the first instance a sign of redemption, a sign of God’s redemptive love. She was not just a sign, but also a sacrament where the grace of Christ was present. Hence, the Council of Trent described a sacrament as “the visible form of an invisible grace.”¹⁰¹ As a sacrament, the Church has both an inward and outward side. The institutional side was the visible one and appeared as the sign of God’s redemption. However, it is not enough. As Rahner states, “the Church is more tangibly and intensively an ‘event’ where Christ himself is present in his own congregation as the crucified and resurrected Savior.”¹⁰² The institutional side of the Church made it possible for the Spirit to express itself. The body was an expression of the human spirit. The expression was not simply a symbol; the expression gave the Spirit the material support it needed in order to actuate itself. The corporal body gave the spirit the support to realize itself and the spirit gave shape and meaning to the corporal expression. *Lumen Gentium* asserts that the Church is the sacramental presence of the ultimate Kingdom.¹⁰³ By her

¹⁰⁰ *Sacrosanctum concilium*, Vatican II, art. 10.

¹⁰¹ Neuner and Roos, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, No. 17.

¹⁰² Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963), 317.

¹⁰³ *Lumen gentium*.

visible presence, the Church reminded men and women of God's Kingdom and kept alive their hope for the blessings of eternal life. However, she was not just that, because the Kingdom was already at work in the Church, although not exclusively in the Church. It was not necessary that the Church, during the time of her historical existence, should physically include all those human beings who lived by the grace of Christ and are saved. Rather, the Church was called to be a representative sign. However, the invisible reality of grace may be realized outside the Church as well as within.

Together with the idea of Church as sacrament, Vatican II developed the idea of Church as servant. It was Pope John XXIII, who disassociated himself from those who "in these modern times...can see nothing but prevarication and ruin"¹⁰⁴ and positioned the Church as part of the total human family, sharing the same concerns as the rest of men and women. Also Congar asserted that the Church is to be a servant to others. *The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* affirmed that just as Christ came into the world not to be served but to serve, so the Church, carrying on the mission of Christ, sought to serve the world by fostering the brotherhood of all. The idea of Church as servant was based on the work of some of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. Teilhard of Chardin, for example, said that the Church and the world were to each other like a "flower in the water;" the Church must be open to everything good that emerges from the dynamism of the world, especially science and technology.¹⁰⁵ In his posthumously published *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer called for a humble and servant Church: "the Church is the Church only when it exists for others...the Church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Walter M. Abbott, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966), 712.

¹⁰⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 138.

dominating, but helping and serving.”¹⁰⁶ The Church’s mission, from this theology’s point of view, was not mainly to obtain new recruits for its own ranks, but rather to be of support, assistance, and help to all human beings, wherever they were. The exclusive commitment of the Church was to keep alive the hopes and the aspirations of people for the Kingdom of God and its values. In the light of this hope, the Church was able to discern the signs of the times and offered guidance and prophetic discernment. In this way, the Church promoted the mutual reconciliation among human beings and drove them in different ways towards the Kingdom of God. The servant ecclesiology sought to give the Church a new self-understanding and a new mission. The Church provided an altruistic service toward people, especially the poor and the oppressed.

Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue

Ecclesiam Suam was the first encyclical of Pope Paul VI (August 6, 1964). It was an important document, which identified the Roman Catholic Church with the Body of Christ. The encyclical was a strong promotion of the idea of dialogue. That was one of the main characteristics of the council documents on dialogue with non-Catholics, with other believers, with the modern world. There was very little dialogue going on between Catholics and non-Catholics all around the world. Ecumenism actually was kept under very strict control by the Vatican. As for dialogue with the modern world, the dominant attitude was one far more of suspicion and even condemnation. In *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI invited the separated Churches to unity, stating that the continued papacy was essential for any unity, because without it, in the words of Jerome, "There would be as

¹⁰⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 203-4.

many schisms in the Church as there are priests."¹⁰⁷ In this encyclical, Paul VI attempted to present the Marian teaching of the Church in view of her new ecumenical orientation. *Ecclesiam Suam* called the Virgin Mary the ideal of Christian perfection. Pope Paul VI regarded "devotion to the Mother of God as of paramount importance in living the life of the Gospel."¹⁰⁸ Paul VI also pursued a series of apostolic journeys in Jerusalem, America, Africa, Asia, and Australia, which became historical opportunities to establish the presence of a pope on every continent. In his diary of the council, after the strong ecumenical openness of Pope Paul VI, Yves Congar wrote, "The pope's gestures that create a new climate in terms of ecumenism, have not the ecclesiological basis which would be required...We operate a very medieval ecclesiology, which is daughter of the Counter-Reformation."¹⁰⁹ The same day of his hearing with Paul VI, he wrote, "I say that openness and ecumenical gestures he made to the patriarchs require...an ecclesiology that has not been developed: ecclesiology of communion, in which the Church appears as Communion of Churches."¹¹⁰ Congar was convinced that failure was inevitable in the field of ecumenism if there was not going to be an adequate ecclesiology to sustain it. A few years later, he showed clearly that the development of a balanced theology of tradition, the development of a theology of the local church, the revaluation of the communion between the churches, and the upgrading of pneumatology in ecclesiology represented the theological environment that is suitable for developing a real ecumenism.

¹⁰⁷ *Ecclesiam Suam* 110.

¹⁰⁸ *Ecclesiam Suam* 58.

¹⁰⁹ Routhier, Vatican II. *Herménetique et Réception*, 45.

¹¹⁰ Routhier, Vatican II. *Herménetique et Réception*, 45).

A positive encounter with other Christians was matched with an intense activity of dialogue with other religions. *Nostra Aetate* presents “openness both to those intellectual and spiritual traditions, and to those social and ethical traditions, which might serve for the inculturation of Christian faith and practice”.¹¹¹ Christians should ‘while witnessing to their faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture’.¹¹² The encyclical bravely moves toward a mission engaging in a “common spiritual heritage” with other religious traditions¹¹³ and openly express the vision of a common destiny.¹¹⁴ This vision empowers the Church to dialogue with other religions in the perspective of hope. The entire human family “shared in a common destiny” and is included “in God’s saving design which extends to all men/women.”¹¹⁵ Therefore, mission as “recognition of saving grace” involves mutual understanding and discernment and mutual awareness invitation, witnessing, and empowerment. It participates in the common pilgrimage of humanity between the poles of “common origin” and “common destiny.”¹¹⁶ Christian identity is in solidarity with the pilgrimage to a common goal “when the elect are gathered together in the holy city which is illumined by the glory of God and in whose splendor all people will walk.”¹¹⁷ *Nostra Aetate* is symbiotic to other documents of Vatican II in its commitments to recognize “elements which are true and good” (*LG* 16), “precious things both religious and human” (*GS* 92), “seeds of contemplation” (*AG* 18),

¹¹¹ This paragraph is built on Martin Ganeri, OP, “Catholic Encounter with Hindus in the Twentieth Century: In Search of an Indian Christianity,” *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1016 (July 2007): 410-432.

¹¹² *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

¹¹³ *Nostra Aetate*, 2-4.

¹¹⁴ *Nostra Aetate*, 1.

¹¹⁵ *Nostra Aetate*, 1.

¹¹⁶ *Nostra Aetate*, 1.

¹¹⁷ *Nostra Aetate*, 1.

“elements of truth and grace” (AG 9), “seeds of the Word” (AG 11, 15), and “rays of that Truth which illumine all humankind” (NA 2) that belong to other religious traditions.

Conclusion

In the first two chapters, a description of the historical context in which the revival of Catholic theology takes place was presented. The difficult transition from the rural to an urban and industrialized civilization, and how the Church struggled to manage the transition was discussed. Perched in an uncompromising defense of tradition, and definitely at the attack of modernity, the Church had closed in on itself, engaged in the defense of her identity at the cost of cutting all relations with the world. The choice of the Church to alienate herself from the world leads to a certain ecclesiology, and an institutional, dogmatic, doctrinaire Church, gathered around the defense of infallibility of the Pope. This was the Church that did not seek an ecumenical dialogue, and even more, an interreligious one; it was a hierarchical, closed, apologetic Church. However, in the decades immediately preceding Vatican II, Catholic theology showed the intention to renew the church, recovering the original thought of Thomas Aquinas or even replacing it with the Patristics. A generation of theologians, especially historians, recovered and renewed the tradition, offering new forms of expression, placing the Church in modernity. All this work will find embodiment at the council, when the old image of the church will be superseded by new images: images of the Church as a sacrament, service, community, and, above all, People of God. In the historical phase that immediately followed the conclusion of the council, the distinction between the Church as communion and as People of God will become increasingly clear; the relationship that Congar detected between ecclesiology—on one side—and ecumenism and interreligious

dialogue—on the other. It is now time to turn to the study of Le Saux. He lived in the historical context and in the intellectual milieu that has been described in these two chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: A CHRISTIAN MONK IN INDIA

Introduction

Swami Abhishiktānanda (1910-1973) is the Indian name of Henri Le Saux, a Benedictine monk who together with Jules Monchanin in 1950 founded the ashram of Saccidānanda, India. He spent the first 38 years of his life in France. He participated in World War II and returned to his monastery. He moved to India, and there he spent the last 25 years of his life, mostly living a semi-hermit and wandering life. Barely six months after his arrival in India, he had the meeting that changed his life. In his diary, he says of this meeting: “My mind was carried off as if to an unknown world. Even before I was able to recognize the fact and still less to express it, the invisible halo of this sage was received by something in me deeper than words. Unknown harmony awoke in my heart...It was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. It was a call that pierced through everything, rent it to pieces and opened a mighty abyss....The Ashram of Rama[^]a helps me to understand the Gospel; there is in the Gospel much more than Christian piety has ever discovered.”¹¹⁸ His life can be divided into four stages. The first phase took place in France (1910-48). The second one spanned from his arrival in India to the death of his partner, Jules Monchanin (1957). The third stage encompassed the years when—still in India—he was seeking his own way. Those were also the years of the pontificate of John XXIII and the Vatican Council II (1958-68). Finally, the fourth and final phase of his life is that of the maturity and development of his most original thoughts; the most important experiences

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Odette Baumer-Despeigne, “Abhishiktānanda: An Interview with Odette Bäumer-Despeigne conducted by Sr. Pascaline Coff,” *Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, no. 51 (October 1994): 17-24.

of his life until his death (1973). In this chapter, the first two phases of his life are addressed.

Life in France (1910-1948)

Hyacinthe Joseph Marie Henri Le Saux was born August 30, 1910 in Saint Briac, a small village on the northern coast of Brittany, near Saint-Malo. He was the first son—and for eight years will be the only one—of a pious French family of eight children. His parents, Alfred and Louise Le Saux Sonnefraud, ran a grocery store. Born into his middle class, countryside, conservative, Catholic family, Le Saux received the idea of the love for family, country, and God. Le Saux expressed from a very young age his intention of serving God; the family welcomed with favor his vocation and sent him to the seminary at age 11: first to the Minor Seminary at Châteaugiron, then—five years later—to the Major Seminary at Rennes. He proved to be an excellent student, and his superiors had already begun preparations to send him to study theology in Rome, when the boy showed a different interest: no longer did he want to become a priest, but rather he aspired to become a monk. A close friend of his at the seminary communicated to Henri that he wanted to become a Benedictine monk. When that friend died, Le Saux felt that he had inherited this vocation to become a monk. Some obstacles, including military service, delayed the change of life for awhile. In December 1928 however, Le Saux began to correspond with the novice master of the Abbey of Ste-Anne de Kergonan, on the northern coast of Brittany. Kergonan was founded 30 years previously and was famous for the quality of its Gregorian chant. In a letter he sent to Kergonan, there was already the nucleus of his life plan: “What has drawn me [to the monastery] from the beginning, and what still leads me on, is the hope of finding there the presence of God more

immediately than anywhere else.”¹¹⁹ Accepted into the monastic community in 1929, Le Saux made his simple profession just two years later. He completed his duties with the army and, once back in the monastery, he made his first solemn profession in 1935 and became a priest. The first post he assumed after the solemn profession was that of librarian and assistant to the master of ceremonies (who was in charge of monastery’s liturgy). As a librarian, he probably read a lot, especially the texts of Patristic thought and mysticism.

In September 1939, at the outbreak of war, Henri Le Saux enlisted in the army. A year later, during the offensive in Germany, he was in the French army. His regiment was, like many others, forced to surrender, and he was captured by the Germans. Le Saux was lined up with his companions, waiting to be registered, to be placed on a train and sent to a concentration camp in Germany when he decided to escape. While his captors were registering the names of the prisoners, Le Saux took advantage of a momentary distraction to run away and hide in a cornfield. A nearby garage keeper gave him a pair of workman’s overalls and a bicycle on which Le Saux was able to make his way home to Saint Briac where he went into hiding before eventually returning to the monastery. Two years later, he moved with his fellow monks to another location when the monastery was requisitioned by the German army. He returned to Kergonan after the war.

His first work, *Amour et Sagesse*, was written during the war in 1942 and is dedicated to his mother. This is a study on the dogma of the Trinity, which he considered the noblest mystery of the faith, “so little known, so little savored, experienced, even by fervent

¹¹⁹ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 4.12.28.

Christians.”¹²⁰ The text shows a deep knowledge of the Fathers, especially the Greeks (Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria and Gregory Palamas), a special interest in apophatic writers—particularly Ruysbroeck—and a curious interest in India. He quotes Tagore’s *Gitanjali* with respect to God’s loving condescension in accepting the devotion of his creatures. He ended each chapter with the sacred syllable “OM.” How, living inside the high wall of a monastery, had he acquired this interest in India and Indian tradition? Le Saux only rarely showed his feeling and was very accustomed to maintain control of his thoughts and passions. However, his letters and diaries revealed that as early as 1934, Le Saux had begun to show a growing attraction for India. Kergonan was not satisfying his ambition in seeking God. He longed for an even deeper monasticism. It is not clear why he chose India. He began to study Sanskrit, Tamil and English and to read the sacred Hindu texts. Someone even traced his call to mission to an event of 1925, when Le Saux was only 15 years old and was at the seminary. A year earlier, in 1924, his mother nearly died giving birth to another child. The following year, she was again expecting a child. Le Saux made a private vow that if she survived, he would go as a missionary wherever God would have him go, “even to the most distant mission.” An uncle of his had gone as a missionary to China in 1923. His mother did survive and had two more children. This missionary vocation that had accompanied him for many years, little by little was crystallized into a clear plan and a precise goal.

In 1944, his mother died. After the war, Le Saux came back to his role as a librarian; he took lessons for novices on the history of the Church—with special emphasis on the works of Greek and Latin Fathers—and Canon Law. Before the war, he had spoken with

¹²⁰ *Amour et Sagesse*, 1942 (unpublished).

the abbot of his desire to go to India, but had not received any encouragement. In 1945, however, the abbot gave him permission to explore the possibility of accomplishing his goal. He wrote many letters but did not obtain any results. Finally, two years later, he wrote to Bishop James Mendonça Tiruchiapalli of a diocese in the southern state of Tamilnadu. In his letter, he explained that he had in mind to plant a hermitage in the bishop's diocese and live "the contemplative life, in the absolute simplicity of early Christian monasticism and at the same time in the closest possible conformity with the traditions of Indian *samnyāsa*" (complete renunciation of worldly ties).¹²¹ The letter was written in French. As a result, the bishop asked a French priest of Lyons, who for some years had worked in his diocese, to translate it. The priest was Jules Monchanin. Le Saux and Monchanin began their correspondence in August 1947. Eventually, the bishop agreed to receive Le Saux and assigned to him and Monchanin the modest presbytery of Kulittalai. Finally, once all formalities, including the indult of exclaustation (formal permission for a monk to live outside his monastery), were completed, Le Saux left Kergonan, reached Marseilles and embarked for India. After he arrived in India, Le Saux stayed in touch with his brothers and sisters. However, he never returned to France.

The story of the first 38 years of Le Saux's life helps us to trace his profile during this time. He showed a primary interest in the seminary, where he had the option to become a priest. A real vocation followed; the discovery of the monastic vocation and entrance into the monastery. Finally, a missionary impulse when he developed his idea of the trip to India. It is well known that he was influenced by his family, mostly his mother. One of his sisters, Sr. Marie-Thérèse, 20 years younger than Henri, also entered the Abbey of St.

¹²¹ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 15.5.47.

Michel, a sister Abbey to Kergonan. Some of Le Saux's most personal correspondence is with her. About his readings, it is known that Le Saux immersed himself in the Patristical and mystical literature of the Church, especially the Desert Fathers, as well as reading about the spiritual traditions of India. He was particularly taken by the work of St Gregory Nazianzen, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, and Gregory Palamas: Patristic literature was his background. In general terms, his personal humanistic background acquired before moving to India was made up of the very classical, strict, and narrow scholasticism that was the standard of his time. He spent 19 years at Kergonan, and like any other monk, he assumed roles and commitments inside the organization of the monastery. He was in charge of teaching novices at the Abbey. He taught the history of the Church, which included the writings of the Church Fathers. There are not available comments on his performances as librarian, assistant to the master of ceremonies, and teacher. He did not become the master of novices, a role that leads to the top of the monastic hierarchy. Apparently, he preferred roles he could accomplish by himself. It seems that after the war, he also served as a master of ceremonies, a duty he discharged with some relish. Years later, he will recall with nostalgia the songs in Gregorian chant. It is known, from one of his letters written many years later, that in 1934 (one year before the solemn profession), he was already feeling "deep dissatisfaction" with his life at Kergonan. The 19 years he spent in the monastery before he moved to India are his lost years. He came near to calling them so. "It was in my deep dissatisfaction that my desire to come to India was born."¹²² It is not clear whether it was the dissatisfaction with life in Kergonan that led him to choose a missionary or the missionary vocation rendered untenable the monastic life. Yet, in his last year of life he wrote, "Kergonan has been the

¹²² *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 13.3.67.

background of all that I have been able to do here.”¹²³ It can be assumed that he chose the monastic life because he hoped to find there “the presence of God more immediately than anywhere else. I have a very ambitious spirit—and this is permissible, is it not? when it is a matter of seeking God—and I hope I shall not be disappointed.”¹²⁴ What Le Saux certainly learned at Kergonan, and which will form the basic structure of his mission in India, is the monastic discipline of time, body and liturgy. The 19-year period in a monastery before the move to India is the training school that taught Le Saux monastic time and how to follow monastic rhythms. It was a training period that prepared him to move to the next phase of his life. Ascetic life is not a natural skill. It is not something inherent in a human being. Rather, to pursue an ascetic life requires training in certain habits, practices, and skills that enable one to cultivate a disposition for detachment. Preparation requires training, participation by other members of the community and their support, and a constant, intelligent grasp of the real and eschatological situation. Ascetic life in the Christian tradition has nothing to do with the shape of one’s body. What is needed is Christ inhabiting one’s body. The ascetics are ascetics because their life reflects orthodox teaching. Finally, in Le Saux’s life and written work there is little evidence of the historical and theological context described in the first two chapters. He lived in Brittany and belonged to a conservative, happy Catholic family. He spent about two decades in a traditional Benedictine monastery. It seems that history and Le Saux are not interested in each other. The only exception is during the war, when the soldier Le Saux is asked to fight for his country, shared the defect with his compatriots and risked dying. However, we will see later that what first appears to be the case on some kind of personal

¹²³ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 22.9.73.

¹²⁴ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 4.12.28.

level is certainly not the case if we take the struggles of the Church and its theology around Vatican II into account. Here we not only see that Le Saux is a direct product of this context, but that he himself kept very much attuned to that context.

Life in India (1948-1957)

On his arrival in India via Colombo, Le Saux joined Jules Monchanin. At that time, Monchanin lived a semi-eremitic life in Bhakti Ashram. For some years, he had dreamed eventually to adopt the same monastic kind of life that Le Saux talked about in his letter to the bishop. Upon being shown the letter, Monchanin took it as a providential sign, an answer to his prayers, and an opportunity for finally proceeding in his project to establish an ashram. The day after the arrival of Le Saux in India, Monchanin reported to a friend, “The Benedictine Father has come! I can only praise God;...in essentials—the conception of our mission, understanding of Hinduism and the monastic life—he agrees more than I had ever hoped with what I have always desired.”¹²⁵ A few days later, Monchanin added, “As days pass in his company, I wonder more and more at the most incredible *convergence* of the Father’s ideas and my own aspirations. And this is all the more striking, because at the human level...we are very different.”¹²⁶ Le Saux, for his part, wrote to his father, “This correspondence in outlook and thought with Monchanin is extraordinary. A providential coming together.”¹²⁷

Le Saux began his life in India as an immigrant traveling to get to know the Catholic parishes in Tamilnade. Then, again accompanied by Monchanin, he enlarged the boundaries of his world, made many visits around, and began to include the temples and

¹²⁵ Quoted in Baumer-Despeigne, “Abhishiktānanda: an interview with Odette Bäumer-Despeigne,” 17-24.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Raimon Panikkar, “A Letter to Abhishiktānanda,” 430.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Baumer-Despeigne, “Abhishiktānanda: an interview with Odette Bäumer-Despeigne,” 17-24.

the Hindu ashram. They visited their Hindu counterparts, the monks from the order of Ramakrishna, and then attended the *darshan* or public presentations of Aurobindo. In January 1949, six months after his arrival, he visited the ashram of Sri Rama[^]a Maharshi, at the foot of the sacred mountain of Arun[^]achala.

Sri Rama[^]a and Arun[^]achala

Sri Rama[^]a was a sage who had left his home and family after an intense mystical experience, as a young man. He had gone to the mountain of Arun[^]achala, India, one of most sacred mountains. Sri Rama[^]a was one of the great *sadhu* who lived on this mountain, first as a hermit in various caves, and then as part of the ashram that was formed around him. According to a disciple, the most central point in Sri Rama[^]a's teaching is the mystery of the heart: "Find the heart deep within oneself, beyond mind and thought. Make that one's permanent dwelling, cut all the bonds which restrain this heart and hold it at the level of sense and external consciousness, all the fleeting identifications of what one *is* with what one *has* or *does*." "Heaven is hidden in the depth of the heart, that glorious place which is found only by those who renounce themselves."¹²⁸ The visit to Sri Rama[^]a's ashram was a transformative experience for Le Saux. It touched an interior, deep, and hidden chord. "Even before my mind was able to recognize the fact, and still less to express it, the invisible halo of this Sage had been perceived by something in me deeper than any words. Unknown harmonies awoke in my heart...In the Sage of Arun[^]achala of our own time I discerned the unique Sage of the eternal India, the unbroken succession of her sages, her ascetics, her seers; it was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious

¹²⁸ *Souvenirs d'Arun[^]achala: récit d'un ermite chrétien en terre hindoue* (Paris: Epi SA, 1978). Translated as *The Secret of Arun[^]achala*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1979, revised 1987), 9.

communion with it.”¹²⁹ Initially, the monk did not feel anything special in the Hindu Sage. Then, the sweet smile of the Sage, the Vedic sounds and songs that were repeated in the morning and the evening, finally opened a breach in the heart of Le Saux, and he perceived “a call which pierced through everything, rent it in pieces and opened a mighty abyss.”¹³⁰ In spite of the fact that this meeting was to be a crucial moment in the spiritual journey of Le Saux, no word was exchanged between the monk and the sage.

A month after his visit to Sri Rama[^]a’s ashram, Le Saux bought his first *kavi* or saffron robe. He was amazed by all he encountered; he adopted the life of a *samnyāsa* or holy man, wore robes, ate dahl and rice, learned local customs and Hindi language with commitment, and merged Hindu chants, prayers, readings, and practices into his daily monastic liturgy. He returned to Sri Rama[^]a’s ashram at Arunāchala a number of times over the years. In 1952, he spent five months in *mauna* (total silence). Between 1952 and 1958, he stayed for long periods in one or other of the caves that dot the sides of the mountain, living a very strict ascetic life as a Christian hermit among Hindu solitaries, and depended on the *bhiksha* (alms) of others for his food and sustenance. He was faithful to the daily celebration of the Eucharist and recitation of the Breviary besides long hours of silent meditation. Initially, he bravely and stubbornly resisted these “powerful new experiences,” finding it so difficult to incorporate them into his “previous mental structures,” but the resistance was in vain: “their hold on me was too strong for it ever to be possible for me to disown them.”¹³¹ At the heart of these experiences was an immense spiritual and intellectual breakthrough. In his own words: “The realization of

¹²⁹ Quoted in Odette Baumer-Despeigne, “The Spiritual Journey of Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktānanda,” *Cistercian Studies* 4 (1983): 310-329.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Baumer-Despeigne, “The Spiritual Journey of Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktānanda,” 310-329.

¹³¹ *Souvenirs d’Arunāchala: récit d’un ermite chrétien en terre hindoue*, 9.

the all-pervading Presence of God in my actions, in my being, as in everything.” The next year he confides in his diary: “The Christian samnyāsa discovers with astonishment that in reaching the peak of Arunāchala, he has penetrated into the very heart of Hinduism. He, Christian as he is, has realized the fundamental experience of Hinduism, the experience that one exists...What is to be done? Only one thing. If the Christian Mystery is true it will appear intact on the other side of the non-dualistic experience...Reason may discuss, but experience knows.”¹³²

Both the mountain and the life and doctrine of Sri Rama[^]a had an intense influence on Le Saux. He arrived in India with the spirit of the missionary. A year before leaving France, he had written to Monchanin of his dream of a Christian monastic community in India that would “fashion a Christian India, as their elder brothers fashioned a Christian Europe.”¹³³ In September 1948, just after he arrived in India, he wrote in a letter to his family, “the more I come to these Hindus, the more I feel them at the same time close to me in their loyal search for God and far from me in their psychological inability to admit that Christianity is the only authentic means of coming to God.”¹³⁴ Yet, the inner harmony that had been achieved at Sri Rama[^]a Maharshi’s ashram and during weeks in solitude regularly spent on Mount Arunāchala, powerfully altered Le Saux’s understanding of his very vocation. Whereas he had come to India believing that living as a *samnyāsa* would give effective Christian witness to Hindus, by 1952, he had come to the position that such a life of almost complete renunciation of secular possessions and desires was simply meaningful in itself, no more related to his Christian belonging. It was

¹³² Odette Baumer-Despeigne: “The Spiritual Way of Henri Le Saux/Swami Abhishiktānanda,” *Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* 48 (Oct. 1993): 21 (17.4.56).

¹³³ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*; 18.8.47.

¹³⁴ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 4.12.28.

the outward expression of his inward sense that he was almost committed to the realization of a radical monastic desire for the Absolute, against which everything else paled by comparison. Writing at this time to his sister Marie-Therese (who had become a nun at Kergonan), he insisted that he was no longer “a missionary, but a poor Christian monk in the midst of Hindu monks.”¹³⁵

The experience of Le Saux at Arunâchala was told in a book, *The Secret of Arunâchala*,¹³⁶ published in 1979. Due to its nature as something of a personal journal, Le Saux felt that the book should not be published until after his death. The book expresses something of the process of this inner stream of feelings, emotions, and concept through which Le Saux passed and that which he learned both by his own experience and of those whom he met there. The book, as it is known, is the result of retrospective reviews of the author. In 1955, he writes in *Secret* about his visit to Rama[^]a six years prior. He describes in depth and detail the first time he heard the chanting at Rama[^]a’s ashram. He says that the chants “issue from the archetypal sources of being,” and that they “irresistibly draw those who chant them or hear them into the same most secret sources of being.”¹³⁷ He also describes the afternoon when he saw Rama[^]a. In the book, Le Saux also refers to his return from Rama[^]a’s ashram to Shantivanam. “These descriptions are retrospective; he is interpreting his experience with Rama[^]a in terms of Jung, whose works he had not read at the time he visited Rama[^]a.”¹³⁸ He did the same work the year earlier, when he made a comparison between his previous experience at

¹³⁵ Swami Abhishiktânanda: *His life told through his letters*, 35.

¹³⁶ *Souvenirs d’Arunachala: récit d’un ermite chrétien en terre hindoue.*

¹³⁷ *Souvenirs d’Arunachala: récit d’un ermite chrétien en terre hindoue*, 7-9.

¹³⁸ Friesen, Abhishiktânanda’s Non-monistic Advaitic Experience, 492.

Arunāchala and psychoanalysis.¹³⁹ The books that emerged from his thoughts at this time, titled *Guhantara: au sein du fond* (literally, "one who dwells in a cave"), and *Guhaja* (or *Guhantara II*) were never published.¹⁴⁰

Sri Gnānānanda and Mauna Mandir

In December 1955, Le Saux visited an ashram called Tapovanam, in Tirukoilur. There he was introduced to another Hindu sage, Sri Gnānānanda, of whom he learned in Arunāchala and whom he decided to visit against Jules Monchanin's advice. It was Sri Gnānānanda who drove him through the depth secret and spirituality of the Upanishads. During his weeks at the guru's ashram, Le Saux became aware of the Hindu Scriptures and was absorbed in Hindu ceremony and ritual. Gnānānanda taught using simple stories and parables, and also more direct tales on solitude and self, and by using long periods of uninterrupted silence. Le Saux absorbed everything. He noted in his diary, "I cannot escape from the conviction that he is my guru, mysterious ways of Providence! In him I feel the truth of *advaita*—non-duality. I should need months, perhaps years of profound silence to determine my position in this matter which transcends the intellect." Years later he wrote to Baumer-Despeigne: "With Gnānānanda I had a marvelous experience of the transmission from guru to disciple."¹⁴¹ He was ready to write not only a book on his experiences with Gnānānanda, but a long essay simply entitled "Esseulement" or "Total

¹³⁹ Again, Friesen. See Diary, p. 120 (30.8.55). Abhishiktānanda makes a similar comment in 1959 in "Lettres d'un sannyāsa chrétien à Joseph Lemarié," p. 222 (3.6.59): "Le Soi, l'être se révélant dreadful (redoubtable) par-delà le dark des archétypes en attendant l'apparation toute de paix et de resplendissement du matin."

¹⁴⁰ *Guhantara: au sein du fond* (written 1952-53; only extracts published so far). Part of Chapter 3 published in Initiation (I.A.14). Parts of Chapters 4 to 7 published in (I.A.19). *Guhaja* (or *Guhantara II*) (unpublished, in Abhishiktānanda Archives, Delhi).

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Baumer-Despeigne, "Abhishiktānanda: an interview with Odette Bäumer-Despeigne," 17-24.

Solitude," that became a part of *Interiorite et revelation: Essais theologique*.¹⁴² Gnānānanda was Le Saux's *guru*, the subject of his exceptional book *Guru and Disciple*.¹⁴³ This book talks about the meeting between Le Saux and Sadguru Gñānānanda, in the second week of December 1955, and his retreat of two weeks in March 1956. Le Saux revised this essay several times, and it became *Gnānānanda: un maitre spirituel du pays tamoul* (Chambéry: Présence, 1970).

Toward the end of 1956, in order to merger all that he had received from his previous retreats, Rama^â, the caves of Arunāchala, and Gnānānanda, he entered the well-known Chola temple at Tamal Nadu with its Mauna Mandir or Temple of Silence. Here he undertook a long and austere retreat of 32 days, shut up in an underground room of the temple. Besides his Breviary, he took no book; his food was handed to him through a window. Once the Eucharist was celebrated, his sole activity, apart from long hours of meditation by day and night, was writing in his diary. Following this period, Du Boulay summarized, "He was given a large dark room in a separate building in the garden. There was a bathroom attached, and like an enclosed nun, he received his food through a revolving hatch. Apart from that silent human contact, he was in a solitude greater than the solitude he had experienced in the caves of Arunāchala."¹⁴⁴ Le Saux stayed in the temple, keeping a private diary but writing no communications intended for the outside world. He reveals in these pages both his anguish and his peace. He reveals his experiences of solitude and silence, of fear and of nakedness before God.

Shantivanam

¹⁴² Abhishiktānanda, "Esseulement," in idem, *Interiorite et Revelation: Essais Theologique*.

¹⁴³ *Guru and Disciple*.

¹⁴⁴ Du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart*, 138.

At about the same time, Le Saux and Monchanin were engaged in the work of building a Christian ashram. Since early 1949, they dressed and acted as Hindu *samnyāsas* (Hindu monks who have renounced everything). Le Saux also adopted his Indian name, Abhishiktānanda (“Bliss of the Anointed One”), the name to be used henceforth, Swami Abhishiktānanda—Swamiji to his friends. It is perhaps indicative of the course that his life in India took that he is usually referred to by his Hindu name, while this is not the case with Jules Monchanin or their successor at Shantivanam, Bede Griffiths. During this time, as commentator Du Boulay notes, “Poverty and simplicity were central to their living conditions as both men were adamant that they did not want to live at a higher standard than their neighbors....Each had a hut with walls of bamboo and a roof of coconut leaves. There was no furniture, and the flooring was simply a few bricks to keep the floor dry and to serve as bed, chair, and table....One of the huts had a verandah, where they said Mass, and a wooden structure was built for their books, just enough to be called a library.”¹⁴⁵ They replaced the bamboo—no barrier to snakes, scorpions, and voracious white ants—with brick walls, and tiled the roof against inquisitive monkeys. At once, they turned their attention to constructing an ashram in the style of a Hindu temple, to be called Shantivanam. By early 1950, Abhishiktānanda and Monchanin were ready to establish their ashram, *Saccidānanda Ashram* (after the Vedantic ternary Being-Awareness-Bliss). Appropriately enough, the ashram was formally opened on the Feast of St Benedict, March 21, 1950. In *An Indian Benedictine Ashram* (first published 1951), they expressed their aim this way: “to form the first nucleus of a monastery (or rather a *laura*, a grouping of neighboring anchorites like the ancient *laura* of Saint Sabas in Palestine) which buttresses the Rule of Saint Benedict—a primitive, sober, discreet rule.

¹⁴⁵ Du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart*, 83.

Only one purpose: to seek God. And the monastery will be Indian style.” Then they look at the samnyāsa tradition, and express their aim “to crystallize and transubstantiate the search of the Hindu *samnyāsa. Advaita* and the praise of the Trinity are our only aim. This means we must grasp the authentic Hindu search for God in order to Christianize it, starting with ourselves first of all, from within.” Their hope was that ‘what is deepest in Christianity may be grafted on to what is deepest in India.’ This was not a syncretic exercise which would issue forth some kind of religious hybrid but a serious attempt to fathom the depths of Christianity with the aid of the traditional wisdom of India. The bridge between Indian spirituality and the Church was to be monasticism, ‘the plane whereon they may feel themselves in consonance with each other.’ They looked forward to the day when God would send to the hermitage many “priests and laymen alike, gifted with a deep spirit of prayer, an heroic patience, a total surrender, endowed with an iron will and right judgment, longing for the heights of contemplation, and equipped, too, with a deep and intimate knowledge of Christian doctrine and Indian thought.” The book was translated in French as *Ermites du Saccidānanda*—The Hermits of Saccidānanda (1956)¹⁴⁶ and then revised for another edition of the English text as *A Benedictine Ashram*.

Abhishiktānanda gradually gave up his dream of a community of Hindu-Christian monks; instead, he devoted himself to personally being a *samnyāsa* who was at the same time both Christian and Hindu. So potent was the impact of the Indian sages and of Abhishiktānanda’s several retreats on Arunāchala that by early 1953 he was writing,

¹⁴⁶ *An Indian Benedictine Ashram* (In collaboration with Abbé J. Monchanin (Shantivanam, Tannirpalli: Saccidānanda Ashram, 1951; reprinted, Douglas [Isle of Mann]: Times Press, 1964). Translated and revised as *Ermites du Saccidānanda: un essai d’intégration chrétienne de la tradition monastique de l’Inde*, (Tournai/Paris: Casterman, 1957), 90.

“Shantivanam henceforth interests me so little. Arunāchala has caught me. I have understood silence...Now *sannyāsa* is no longer a thought, a concept, but an inborn summons, a basic need; the only state that suits the depths into which I have entered.”¹⁴⁷ Plus, Monchanin had never before led a monastic life; in contrast to him, Abhishiktānanda had had practically no other life rather than the one inside the monastery. The Shantivanam ashram was a disappointment to Abhishiktānanda; and by no coincidence he and Monchanin had difficulty attracting Hindus to join the ashram. In 1971, looking back on the ashram, Abhishiktānanda wrote: “Expansion in human terms, success, numbers are of no importance. All that belongs to the realm of *māyā*, appearance, and the monk is only concerned with *nitya*, the real.”¹⁴⁸ Shantivanam was never a success while being established by Abhishiktānanda and Monchanin; it only became so after Bede Griffiths took over, in 1968. Inquirers interested in joining the two men wrote or visited from time to time, but year after year, these inquiries bore no fruit. In 1957, Monchanin died. He left Abhishiktānanda in charge of Shantivanam.

We will address the point of the dramatic impact of the sages, the ashrams, the natural temples of India on Abhishiktānanda in details in the next chapters. Here we prefer to focus our attention to another important influence, Jules Monchanin. He was important to Abhishiktānanda in many ways. He showed an impractical nature and also a pleasure to think and talk and share impressions and ideas with his theological friends. He was the polar opposite of Abhishiktānanda, who sometimes redefined himself based on Monchanin’s different vision about India and a more orthodox Christianity. Monchanin

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Murray Rogers, and David Barton, *Abhishiktānanda: A Memory of Dom Henri Le Saux* (Oxford: SLG Press, Convent of Incarnation, 2003).

¹⁴⁸ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 108.

was a true pioneer in the area of interreligious dialogue. He envisioned that the Church had to take on new forms in other cultures rather than carrying with it European forms. However, during the first part of his life, Monchanin was formally only a provincial French priest. He was born near Lyons in 1895, and decided at an early age to enter the priesthood; he completed his theological training in 1922. An enthusiast, at first, for neo-Thomism, Monchanin would eventually transfer his interest to the Greek Fathers—above all Gregory of Nyssa and, behind him, Origen. Then he discovered the Carmelite mystics, notably Therese of Lisieux and John of the Cross, and finally Jan Ruysbroeck. Despite his intellectual distinction, he did not complete his doctoral studies but instead asked to be sent to a miners' parish in a poor suburb of Lyons. He served in three parishes before serious illness led to less demanding appointments as a chaplain, first in an orphanage and then at a boys boarding school. Throughout these years, he continued to move in an academic milieu and applied himself to a range of studies, although it would not be until 1930 that he would meet Henri de Lubac, the rising star of the great Jesuit school of theology of Lyon-Fourvières and future inspirer of that forerunner of the Vatican II, the *nouvelle théologie*. De Lubac was so impressed with Monchanin that he wrote a book devoted to him after Monchanin's death, and he treated Monchanin in his *Memoirs* as both mystic and saint. As a young man, Monchanin had felt an attraction to India, which steered him toward Sanskrit, along with Indological and comparative religious studies. From the early 1930s, Monchanin was exploring the possibility of living some sort of Christian monastic life in India. It took years of negotiations before he finally received the approval of the Bishop of Tiruchirapalli; Monchanin left Marseilles for India in May 1939. For the next decade, Monchanin was immersed in pastoral work in India. These

were years of physical hardship, loneliness, and difficulty in relating with the social context; however, they were also a needed period of preparation for the contemplative life to which he aspired. Monchanin was equipped with a sharp mind, a sophisticated culture, and a deep sensitivity. If only he wished, he might have had a brilliant academic or ecclesiastical career. He was told by de Lubac to go to India and then clashed with India. This clash had forced Monchanin to “remake Christian theology,”¹⁴⁹ where “remaking” is understood to mean rethinking theology in the light of mysticism, thus freeing theology “from all accessory elements and rediscovering the entire essential.”¹⁵⁰ Abhishiktānanda said of him, “He was one of the most brilliant intellects among the French clergy, a remarkable conversationalist, at home on every subject, a brilliant lecturer and a theologian who opened before his hearers marvelous and ever new horizons.”¹⁵¹ Although accompanying Abhishiktānanda on some of his travels, Monchanin nonetheless was far more prudent in his immersion in Hindu spiritual culture and in his theological reflections in response to them.

In the early days of their association, Monchanin had written, “As the days pass in his company, I admire more and more the scarcely believable *convergences* of his views with my own aspirations.”¹⁵² However, as Panikkar has observed, it was inevitable that the divergences in both personality and theological outlook should in time lead to some reciprocal estrangement. After the first few years of their association, Monchanin became increasingly troubled by Abhishiktānanda’s excursions into Hinduism and disapproved of

¹⁴⁹ *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktānanda* (Dom Henri Le Saux), 16.

¹⁵⁰ Sonia Calza, *La Contemplazione. Via Privilegiata al Dialogo Cristiano-induista* (Milano: Paoline, 2001), 52. The translation from Italian is my own.

¹⁵¹ *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam: Fr. J. Monchanin 1895-1957* (Shantivanam, Tannirpalli: Saccidānanda Ashram, 1959), 2.

¹⁵² Quoted in Raimon Panikkar, “A Letter to Abhishiktānanda,” 430.

his travel to ashrams and retreats. In a letter to Abbè Edouard Duperray in 1955, referring to Abhishiktānanda, Monchanin confided that “The institutional Church is a burden to him (to him who was earlier devoted to Canon Law and Liturgy!); he suffers from its narrowness, realized through his contact with Hinduism. Basically he comes from a *rigorist* and even *integrist* theology: the change is too sudden...I react in a contrary direction; never have I felt myself intellectually more *Christian* and also, I must say, more *Greek*.”¹⁵³ Abhishiktānanda mirrored those thoughts when he wrote, in 1954, that Monchanin “is too Greek to go to the depths.”¹⁵⁴ All this said, Abhishiktānanda’s debt to Monchanin was massive. In particular, Monchanin is the point of contact between Abhishiktānanda and the *nouvelle théologie*. Abhishiktānanda learned about Monchanin thanks to an article by Jean Daniélou, who himself, like de Lubac, was a Jesuit, a practitioner of *nouvelle théologie* and a future cardinal. Abhishiktānanda recognizes his debt to Monchanin: “It is from him that I learnt that Scriptures and Christian doctrines are relatives: once I understood it, thanks to him, I just applied logic.”¹⁵⁵

Conclusion

Henri Le Saux was a French Benedictine monk. He arrived in South India in 1948 to join his compatriot, Father Jules Monchanin, in the establishment of a ‘Christian Ashram’ at Kulittalai, on the banks of the sacred Kavery River. Thus it was that Le Saux, soon to be known as Swami Abhishiktānanda, embarked on a spiritual journey which continued to the end of his life in 1973. He undertook this exploration 15 years before the Second Vatican Council. His personal humanistic background acquired before coming to India

¹⁵³ Quoted in Sten Rodhe, *Jules Monchanin, Pioneer in Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 47.

¹⁵⁴ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 17.6.54.

¹⁵⁵ *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktānanda (Dom Henri Le Saux)*, 12.1. 56.

was made up of the very classical and strict, narrow scholasticism that was the standard of his time. Abhishiktānanda wanted to undergo this experience “in the name of the Church.” His aim was to live his Christian faith together with the insights of the Upanishadic tradition. Already in 1954, he was confiding to his diary that “Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., are not parallel, nor is each of them a successive step, Christianity being the definitive step. They are all *darsana* [visions] of the Beyond. Each is true in its own line.”¹⁵⁶ In the next chapters, the evolution in his experience during Vatican II and later is tracked, along with a brief summary and evaluation of his effort, especially in regard to Abhishiktānanda’s mature understanding about his place in the Church.

¹⁵⁶ *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktānanda (Dom Henri Le Saux)*, 2.7.54.

CHAPER FOUR: BETWEEN THE HIMALAYAS AND THE CHURCH

Introduction

In the second part of his life in India, Abhishiktānanda accomplished many objectives. He became a true Hindu monk, became a guru, and achieved the awakening. In his words, “the definitive Awakening beyond all else, the final explosion.”¹⁵⁷ But above all, he found his place in the Church. He was captivated by India and the hermitical life of *samnyāsa*. After the death of Monchanin and for ten years following, he maintained his base in Shantivanam, but had long and frequent trips to the North, up to the Himalayas. In 1964, he made an arduous pilgrimage to the source of the Ganges with Raimon Panikkar, a pioneer in East-West dialogue. There in the high North, at Gyansu near Uttarkashi, a solitary hut next to the Ganges had been built for him, and he settled into it in October 1968; a few months earlier, he had made his final departure from Shantivanam, leaving the ashram in the hands of Bede Griffiths and the two young monks who accompanied Bede from Kurisumala. However, he never became a stranger to the Catholic community in India. Exactly the opposite, he increasingly established himself as a major presence in the Church. It can also be said that progressively he adopted an ecumenical attitude and became a pioneer of dialogue between the various Christian churches. He had meetings with Protestant and Orthodox representatives, and some of them became close friends. He was interested in pre-Vatican II theology, and read the authors of the *nouvelle théologie*. When the Council opened, he followed its work closely. He pursued his monastic vocation and his hermit ideal, but without leaving

¹⁵⁷ Odette Baumer-Despeigne, “The Spiritual Way of Henri Le Saux/Swami Abhishiktānanda,” 24.

the Church; indeed, he was part of her life, on less important occasions as well as in the more institutional ones.

Life in India (1958-1968)

The death of his companion Monchanin in 1957 marked a decisive event in Abhishiktānanda's life. He loved solitude and yet needed people. He looked to the Desert Fathers as a source of inspiration for his life-style and confirmation of his vocation. He lived among the rocks because he wanted to be with God and to flee a world that he perceived as interfering with his search. And yet Abhishiktānanda was attracted to people. He loved spending time with them and famously walked three days to spend only one night with a friend. St Antony of Egypt, the founder of monasticism, had shut himself away for twenty years in a deserted fort only to return to the world and make himself available to a never ending stream of visitors. Abhishiktānanda rather preferred maintaining a constant dialogue with the world, moving back and forth between solitude and people, and connecting the high peaks of the Himalayas with the reality of the Christian community in India. This apparent contradiction produced a tension that surely enriched his creativity. In some ways, his experience recalls very closely that of another monk, Thomas Merton. As Merton aspired to complete loneliness while living in a cenobitic monastery, so Abhishiktānanda sought the absolute solitude while responding positively to requests for meetings and dialogue. Both men seem to find a personal posture between solitude and company, still in their monastic vocation. In a letter, he wrote that "It is precisely the fact of being a bridge that makes this uncomfortable situation worthwhile. The world, at every level, needs such bridges. The danger of this life as 'bridge' is that we run the risk of not belonging to either side; whereas, however

harrowing it may be, our duty is to belong wholly to both sides. This is only possible in the mystery of God.”¹⁵⁸ He was certainly a very complex man; he belonged to both Christianity and India. Abhishiktānanda was never to leave his adopted country; he became a naturalized citizen in 1960. At the same time, he kept in constant contact with his monastery of which he remained a monk until his last day. But he also shows his double belongingness¹⁵⁹ with regard to silence and word. This double belongingness may explain his wandering life and his trips spent in a third-class coach; his ocher cloth of the *sannyāsi* and a bowl for rice in post-colonial India. It may also explain his library of hundreds of books in his hut in the Himalayas and his participation in meetings, conferences, and congresses.

A life of Solitude

When alive, Monchanin was not willing to accompany Abhishiktānanda into more uncharted spiritual adventures such as visits to Arunāchala or explorations of *advaita*. When Monchanin died in October 1957, only weeks after Abhishiktānanda had completed an amazing seven-month tour of north India, Abhishiktānanda felt even more tempted to abandon Shantivanam and relocate in the North. At that point, his thoughts were directed toward the Himalayas in order to live as a Christian among the many great Hindu monks and sages who lived there. As he later wrote to his sister Marie-Therese, “The Himalayas have conquered me! It is beside the Ganges that Shantivanam ought to be. I do not know if that will ever happen, but how splendid it would be!”¹⁶⁰ In fact, that

¹⁵⁸ Bettina Bäumer, “Swami Abhishiktānanda/ Henri Le Saux OSB, Pilgrim and Hermit: A Bridge between Hinduism and Christianity,” *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* Bulletin 72, (May 2004).

¹⁵⁹ About the concept and meaning of ‘double belongingness’, see: Michael Amaladoss, S.J., “Double Belongingness,” *Vidyajyoti* [forthcoming].

¹⁶⁰ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters* 134, 16.7.59.

never did happen, but Abhishiktānanda did begin spending more time at the holy sites of Hinduism. In 1959, for example, he spent nine months on such pilgrimages and peregrinations. In the succeeding decade, he journeyed thousands of miles all over India, always traveling third class—often being able to get in or out of the astonishingly crowded carriages only through the window! Robert Stephens has characterized him as “the hermit who could not stay put.”¹⁶¹ He refused to fly anywhere as he believed that such a mode of travel was quite incongruous for a *samnyāsa* vowed to poverty.

In one of these meetings, he met Murray Rogers. A brief sketch of this meeting informs that:

“It was a dark Indian night in 1959, in Uttar Pradesh, some 70 miles from the Himalayas, and the ecumenical community of Jyotiketān were ending compline as they always did, standing at the door of the chapel to give a blessing to the neighboring villages. By the light of the kerosene lamps they saw a strange figure patiently waiting in the mango grove. He was wearing the saffron robes of the *sādhu*, a wandering monk, and the bags containing his worldly possessions were slung around his neck. It was the Benedictine Henri le Saux, better known as Abhishiktānanda. He had come at the suggestion of the priest Raimon Panikkar, but he had been lost until the lanterns shed light on the ashram and its chapel. The community members took the wanderer to their hearts...Abhishiktānanda had never met an Anglican, nor had he met a married priest of any denomination. At first he found it hard to believe that Murray and Mary were Christians at all; he was, says

¹⁶¹ R.A. Stephens, “Religious Experience as a Meeting-Point in Dialogue: An Evaluation of the Venture of Swami Abhishiktānanda” (master’s thesis, Sydney University, 1984), 44.

Murray, chary, constantly needing to remind them that he was a Roman Catholic.

None the less, Murray's overriding impression was of a man who was deeply authentic, open and human. He was a solitary who loved company."¹⁶²

This sketch tells us how Abhishiktānanda was still conservative in 1959, at the beginning of his personal ecumenical journey.

His love of silence and solitude was growing and driving him to the North. He walked endlessly with the pilgrims to the sources of the Ganges, and he finally settled down in a very small hermitage in the heart of the Himalayas. In April 1961, while he was at Almora, his wish to live in the Himalayas became a reality when he was given a few hundred square meters of land at Gyansu on which to build a hut. Raimon Panikkar bought it for him; the land was acquired in the names of Abhishiktānanda and Panikkar jointly and he could remain there for life. By November, the hut was completed, but Abhishiktānanda ironically had decided not to live there permanently. At that moment, he wanted to keep both ashrams, Shantivanam and Gyansu, until he could hand the former over to Father Bede Griffiths. In June 1964, Abhishiktānanda and Panikkar walked the ancient Himalayan pilgrim route from Haridwar to Gangotri, climbing to Gomokh where the Ganges finds one of its sources in the melting glaciers. Here the two Christian pilgrims celebrated the Eucharist. After bidding farewell to his companion in Uttarkashi, Abhishiktānanda returned to Gangotri to spend three weeks in total silence, like the *munis*, the silent *sādhus*. Each morning, he plunged into the cold Ganges; then, dressed in saffron dhoti, he begged for his food. He passed his days in his hut or outside if it was

¹⁶² Shirley Du Boulay, "The Priest and the Swami," *The Tablet* 4 (April 2009).

warm, all in the shadows of the snow-capped mountains of the Himalayas and beside the thundering river at its source.

In the decade between the death of Monchanin and 1968—when he formally relinquished the leadership of Shantivanam to Fr Bede Griffiths (after this turnover he never returned to Shantivanam)—Abhishiktānanda lived a double life. He was a *samnyāsa* that lived a life of total renunciation. He was an ascetic monk who withdrew from the world into a retreat three thousand meters high, in the heart of Himalayas. To him, it became “a complete fast of the mind,”¹⁶³ with no books, not even a Breviary, but simply reciting Psalms and repeating the sacred mantra OM. “The monk is a man who lives in the solitude (Greek: *monos*) of God, alone in the very aloneness of the Alone....He does not become a monk in order to do social work or intellectual work or missionary work or to save the world. The monk simply consecrates himself to God.”¹⁶⁴ He is a *sādhu*, a wandering monk who “has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58), who stops at a place at the right time to collect some food, have a rest and immediately leave. His continual travel was compatible with the ascetism of his life: “For food—even when prepared by oneself—just food received from begging, what people throw to a beggar. For clothing, what is most ordinary, what the rich leave for the poor when they no longer want it. For shelter, what is lent to the passer-by, what people allow a beggar to use. The minimum of indispensable equipment, and not a compromise with what is more practical. But, what about that which is supposedly necessary to work? My work is to be.”¹⁶⁵ Swami

¹⁶³ Swami Abhishiktānanda: *His life told through his letters* 162 (MT, 28.6.64).

¹⁶⁴ From Abhishiktānanda, “Le Père Monchanin,” quoted in Andrew Rawlinson, *Book of Enlightened Masters* (Chicago, Open Court, 1997): 148. An almost identical passage can be found in Abhishiktānanda, *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, 28.

¹⁶⁵ “Abhishiktānanda: Solitude and Paradox,” <http://www.hermitary.com/solitude/abhishiktananada.html>

Chinanada was so impressed by Abhishiktānanda's grasp of *advaita* that he invited him to contribute a series of articles which appeared under the title *Samnyāsa: The Call of the Desert* and which later comprised the first half of *The Further Shore*. His friend Murray Rogers gives us a picture of the intimacy that Abhishiktānanda enjoyed with *samnyāsas* and *sādhu* that lived near his hut. Years after his death, it became increasingly clear that Abhishiktānanda was one of the few, perhaps the only, Christian interpreter of Hinduism who was accepted as authentic within the world of *samnyāsas*.

A Life in Communion

Despite Abhishiktānanda's increasing engagement with the life-style of *samnyāsa*, he maintained interest in people. His love for solitude was balanced with attendance in conversations, meetings, even conferences and seminars. In the days around the Christmas of 1957, just three months after the death of Monchanin, he had a small theological conference, which he found to be a "great week," when Father Dominique, Father Bede Griffith, and Raimon Panikkar met him at Shantivanam for long discussions on *advaita* and Christian mysticism. The success of the theological conference led Abhishiktānanda to create another at the end of 1958. This second conference generated a slightly larger attendance. Then Abhishiktānanda met Jacques-Albert Cuttat, Swiss ambassador to India, who was in a position to support other meetings and conferences with economic help. Abhishiktānanda and Cuttat agreed to hold a series of theological-spiritual discussions based loosely on the meetings Abhishiktānanda had already held at Shantivanam in 1957 and 1958. They decided to bring together a group of priests and theologians concerned with the relationship between Hindu and Christian experience. In the years between 1961 and 1964, the ecumenical and dialogical meetings of the Cuttat

group, of which he was “the main inspiration,”¹⁶⁶ gave him the opportunity to build a small, ecclesiastic and ecumenical group of friends. Among the friends of Abhishiktānanda might be remembered Raimon Panikkar, Murray Rogers, Bettina Baumer (Austrian student), Harold Rose (ex-Trappist novice with interests in Sufism and *Advaita*), Fr Klaus Klostermaier (Germany missionary and scholar), Fr Dominique van Rollenghen (Belgian Benedictine), Mother Theophane, Dr Sara Grant, Madame Odette Baumer-Despeigne, John Taylor—later the Anglican bishop of Winchester—and Orthodox Metropolitan Anthony Bloom. Thanks to these people, Abhishiktānanda was never alone: he was exposed to many influences, was able to share experiences and thoughts, and established himself inside the Church of India. Neither would he forget the role that the Shantivanam ashram played in the religious life of the Christian villagers in the parish in which it was situated, many of them who regularly attended services there. Then, too, there were many conferences, seminars, retreats, study groups which took place at Shantivanam and elsewhere. It was also during the Shantivanam years that Abhishiktānanda took on his life-long role as a spiritual father to the Carmelites of Bangalore, in what became an “invisible ministry.” He realized that “the Spirit also works beyond the frontiers of Rome...A disturbing problem which is set to the Church by the presence of the Spirit outside Rome and even apart from the Christian faith.”¹⁶⁷ Later he referred to the Bakers, the family who ran a hospital in Pithoragarh on the border of Nepal and where he spent two weeks when he was afflicted both by herpes and neuralgia. He described the Bakers as people in India he had found to be taking the Sermon on the Mount most seriously, despite being “a Quaker family who do not even recognize the

¹⁶⁶ James Stuart, “Swami Abhishiktānanda,” *Clergy Monthly*, vol. 38 no.2 (Feb. 1974), 82.

¹⁶⁷ Baumer-Despeigne, “The Spiritual Way of Henri Le Saux/Swami Abhishiktānanda,” 24.

necessity of baptism.”¹⁶⁸ It is amazing how the same man who in 1958 was shocked to meet a married priest was able to argue that ecumenism is not simply “a matter of discussion meetings, even less of cheap social or religious gatherings”¹⁶⁹ a few years later. His understanding evolved, and reached the point where he believed that Christians seeking ecumenism should not have a specific aim, of either giving or gaining, but should simply join with members of other Churches to express fellowship and love.

The Shantivanam ashram monastery interested him less and less. Toward the end of 1958, he wrote to his friend in France, Fr Lemarié, “I no longer have any desire for a monastic institution; it is too heavy a responsibility.”¹⁷⁰ Despite his ambivalence concerning Shantivanam, he was to be based there for another eleven years. During these years, many visitors went to Shantivanam and spent time with him. The list of visitors is very long; it includes, in addition to the names already cited, H.W.J. Poonja (“Harilal,” disciple of Rama[^]a), John Cole (American Presbyterian missionary), Vinoba Bhave (Gandhi’s most well-known disciple), C.T. Venugopal (Protestant convert and railway official), Sachit Dhar (ex-Marxist Bengali), and Fr Lazarus (English Orthodox priest). Moreover, Devananda (Singhalese Anglican, founder of an ashram in Sri Lanka), Swami Kaivalyananda (Hindu monk), Fr Dharmanadhan (who at one time thought he was going to stay there permanently but eventually moved on), Emmanuel de Meester (Belgian Benedictine), Ilsa Friedeberg (Swiss convert to the Orthodox Church), Jean Sullivan (French novelist), Philippe Franchette (Mauritian priest), Max Thurian (from the Taizé Community), Olivier Clément (Orthodox theologian), and Mme Malou Lanvin (one of

¹⁶⁸ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 170 (MT, 17.12.64).

¹⁶⁹ *The Church in India: An Essay in Christian Self-criticism*, 62.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Susan Visvanathan, *An Ethnography of Mysticism: The Narratives of Abhishiktānanda, A French Monk in India* (Shemiah: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1998), 72.

Abhishiktānanda's many correspondents in France) were in attendance. Of course, various Church dignitaries and a host of other Indians who no doubt sought some spiritual sustenance there came to Shantivanam.¹⁷¹

His letters and journals from those years reveal the paradox of solitude and engagement, of Hinduism and Christianity, in which he was entrapped; the growing *advaitan* life within him precipitated a long struggle to reconcile it with his Christianity. It was in the life of Abhishiktānanda that the interior drama of the Hindu-Christian dialogue made itself felt most painful. He felt a deep call within himself to follow the *samnyāsa* life as far as he could into the depths of his soul, while at the same time he felt tormented by the feeling that such a calling was irreconcilable with the Christian faith to which he was so viscerally attached. This inward conflict was to continue in different forms for most of his life in India. There was also the anguish and fear of this double belonging, Christianity and Hindu *advaita*, what he called “Jesus and Arunāchala,” and the pain to be in the middle of a spiritual turmoil. Abhishiktānanda writes, “And if to become Christian I had to give you up, O Arunāchala, to abandon you, O Rama[^]a, then I would never be able to be Christian again....If only I could be completely sure that there is no eternal risk to be run in following Rama[^]a to the end.”¹⁷² In his diaries, there is evidence of this double belonging. The *fil rouge* that link these two lives is his belonging to the Church. Even during the most secluded retreat, the so called “an advaitic retreat,” he maintains his practice to pray “conscientiously” by reciting Lauds at 8:00, Matins at

¹⁷¹ Source of the list of visitors is Harry Oldmeadow, *A Christian Pilgrim in India* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2008), chapter 2.

¹⁷² Abhishiktānanda: Solitude and Paradox, <http://www.hermitary.com/solitude/abhishiktananada.html>

11:00, Vespers and Compline at 3:00.¹⁷³ He celebrates the Eucharist and the Liturgy, the act that remained for him central during all his life even though the external forms changed and became more and more flexible and silent.

Abhishiktānanda and the Church

In the years before Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate*, he organized and participated in a number of groups, primarily with other Christians that explored the option of the dialogue with Hindu spiritual traditions, bringing him into contact with Indian and Western theologians whose lives and thought he would influence. Though he was convinced that the intersection of Christian and Hindu can only happen in the cave of the heart and be reached existentially, in the 1960s he nevertheless accepted invitations to be involved in the ecclesiastical renewal, and became a partner in dialogue, a retreat leader, and a spokesperson for liturgical reform in the Indian Church. He participated in a number of prayer seminars where he helped many people to increase their understanding of contemplative prayer. These contacts and meetings revealed a strong degree of interest in Christian-Hindu dialogue, encouraging Abhishiktānanda to participate to a theological meeting at Bangalore, an experiment in contemplative reading of the Upanishad in Delhi, a Eucharistic conference in Bombay, and the Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Since he had become an influential member of the Christian community in India, Abhishiktānanda met representative Taize, Anglican, and Orthodox laypeople and a Teilhard de Chardin study group.

The Second Vatican Council was provoking new interest in Abhishiktānanda's long-established themes. He followed with interest the works of the Council and also read

¹⁷³ Du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktanandaiktananda*, 199.

most of the authors of the *nouvelle théologie*: Henri de Lubac, Congar, Daniélou. He was interested in the theology of Hans Kung, Schillebeeckx, Mouroux, and Teilhard de Chardin. He also examined *Concilium*, *La Vie Spirituelle*, *Verbum Caro*, *Carmel*, *Informations Catholiques International* as well as Indian publications. In the 1968 National Seminar of the Catholic Church in Bangalore on “The Church in India Today” and thereafter, his influence as a promoter of an Indian contemplative dimension within the Church, of life in ashrams, and of new models of inculturated priestly training, was outstanding. In the late 1960s, Abhishiktānanda found himself engaged again in a round of conferences and workshops promoted by enthusiastic post-Vatican Council figures. In many national or sectional meetings of the Church in India in the 1960s and 1970s, he did stress the need for the Indian Church to live a more contemplative life. In 1969, he played an influential role in the Catholic Church's All-India Seminar in Bangalore, contributing a book-length memorandum on how the Indian Church should be renewed through contact with Hindu sources, through liturgical reform (inculturation), and through contemplation. Among the many Hindus with whom he interacted, most notable were Swami Chidananda of Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, and Hindu nationalist, Sita Ram Goel. In his later years, pondering the journey and the two traditions which had nurtured him, both of which he loved profoundly, Abhishiktānanda wrote, “Whether I want it or not, I am deeply attached to Christ Jesus and therefore to the *koinonia* of the Church. It is in him that the ‘mystery’ has been revealed to me ever since my awakening to myself and to the world. It is in his image, his symbol, that I know God and that I know myself and the world of human beings...Moreover I recognize this mystery, which I have always adored

under the symbol of Christ, in the myths of Narayana, Prajapati, Siva, Puruṣa, Krishna, Rama etc. The same mystery. But for me, Jesus is my *sadguru*.”¹⁷⁴

It was only in the period between 1965-1967 that Abhishiktānanda started publishing the bulk of his most significant books. In two books written with Monchanin, *An Indian Benedictine Ashram* and *Ermites du Saccidānanda*, he made a theological explanation of their project of proceeding to a Christian integration into the monastic tradition in India. *The Secret of Arunāchala*, though it had been drafted in 1956, had to wait another 23 years to be published. He considered *Guhantara: au sein du fund* (1953) his most creative and strongest writing; it was the description of his first experience at Arunāchala. It had been banned by the Paris censor and mercilessly criticized; according to Fr J Guennou, the book was full of heresies and “redolent of relativism, modernism, quietism, modalism, and especially pantheism.”¹⁷⁵ Apart from the first chapter published in 1963 under a pseudonym, Macarios the Indian, it was not until after Abhishiktānanda’s death that some extracts were made accessible to a wider public. Two books grew directly out of his participation in the retreats and seminars of the mid 1960s: *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the Cave of the Heart*, and *Saccidānanda*. The first book is a report of various interreligious retreats and seminars concerned with the encounter between Hindu and Christian traditions, struggling to provide a fair account of what emerged. Then there is an understandable unresolved tension between the fulfillment theology that was then very much in vogue in the Indian Church, and a non negotiable belief in the truth of the wisdom literature of India along with the spiritual experience to which it testifies. The second book, *Saccidānanda*, was originally published in 1965 as

¹⁷⁴ *Swami Abhishiktananda: His life told through his letters*, 23.7.71, 331-2.

¹⁷⁵ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, 86.

Sagesse Hindoue Mystique Chretienne: Du Vedanta a la Trinite, a work he had begun in 1962. However, the request in 1971 to publish an English translation afforded him the opportunity to revise a text whose main thesis he no longer accepted—a revision that would demand significant attention during his final three years. In the introduction to the revised edition (that was published after his death), Abhishiktānanda explains that he decided that a real and deep updating of the original was impossible. This was due both to the limitations of his own command of English and to the confines of “the whole world of thought within which and through which the understanding of the Christian faith has developed in the first two millennia of the Church's existence”—a line of thought that directly questioned Vatican II. In particular, he failed to remove from the first edition a theology that he could no longer believe in. This was the theology of fulfillment (all religions will find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ) to which Abhishiktānanda subscribed at that time but later rejected. “My whole thesis in *Sagesse* has collapsed.”¹⁷⁶ In his 1971 introduction to the English translation, significantly retitled *Saccidānanda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*, he states that “the theology of ‘fulfillment’” to which he was committed in the earlier edition “is unable to do justice to all the facts of religious pluralism,” nor is any other theoretical resolution of the problem raised by these “facts.” What becomes quite clear from his book is his evident dissatisfaction with the direction taken on this issue at Vatican II; in fact, although the council produced documents dramatically more open to the inherent value of non-Christian religions than previous pronouncements (*Nostra aetate*, *Lumen gentium*, *Unitatis red-integratio*); nevertheless it took a position close to a fulfillment theology. Abhishiktānanda cannot

¹⁷⁶ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, 369, 2.2.73.

find a theoretical solution to the problem of religious pluralism; however, he does propose a practical one: to engage in dialogue with other religions, both outward and inward. *Prayer* was first published in India in 1967. It is probably Abhishiktānanda's most widely known book. The author reflects on prayer from different perspective along with various forms of prayer. He says that prayer is neither an intellectual nor an emotional commitment, but a state of being where we are completely open to the working of the Spirit. Ultimately, we find God in silence, in the "cave of the heart." Sources of the book are the Scriptures, Ignatius of Antioch, St John Climacus, Gregory Palamas, Augustine, Aquinas, St John of the Cross, and the Russian Orthodoxy. Finally, *The Mountain of the Lord: Pilgrimage to Gangotri* (1966) is a recount of the pilgrimage of Abhishiktānanda and Panikkar to the sources of Ganges. It was first published in 1966 but gained much wider circulation when it appeared in 1974 as a companion piece to *A Sage of the East*, the two together comprising *Guru and Disciple*. *The Mountain of the Lord* is not only a celebration of the Himalayan peaks, symbolizing transcendence, but also to the solitaries, recluses, renunciates, and "acosmics" to be found in the caves and forests on their slopes.

Life in India (1969-1973)

Abhishiktānanda definitively left Shantivanam in late August 1968, leaving it in the hands of Bede Griffiths, and settled in his Himalayan hut, where he stayed for half of the year—based on climate—for the rest of his life. He passed the time planting fruit trees, tending vegetables and continuing his dual rituals both Hindu and Christian. He would say daily Mass and follow the monastic hours that were now a mixture of his own apparatus. Abhishiktānanda thus came to spend the following three years of his life

primarily in the Himalayas, though he would occasionally accept invitations to travel south for such purposes as giving retreats to religious communities, delivering addresses at conferences and seminars, or meeting with Church leaders to discuss ways of best implementing the directives and spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

The year 1971 marked a new and most important stage in his inner evolution. Some genuine disciples came to him. Among the most prominent were two Hindus (Ramesh Srivastava and Lalit Sharma), Sister Térèse Lemoine and Marc Chaduc, a young Frenchman. Abhishiktānanda discovered a new human dimension: spiritual paternity. All four, he said, “consider me as their guru and are for me a human relationship which reaches the most intimate depth of paternity. They take everything from me without depriving me of anything.”¹⁷⁷ In Chaduc, he found “a true and wholehearted disciple.”¹⁷⁸ Marc Chaduc, a French seminarian, started correspondence with Abhishiktānanda several years prior and finally came to India to meet him in Delhi on October 21, 1971. Chaduc was a seminarian with four years of philosophy and theology training behind him. In the following months, Abhishiktānanda committed himself incessantly to training Chaduc (as well as the two Hindu disciples) in the ways of *samnyāsa*, which Abhishiktānanda saw as his own monastic ideal and as the Indian expression of the tradition and life style practiced by the earliest monks of Egypt, Palestine and Syria. More frequently than in the past, Abhishiktānanda now left his Himalayan hermitage to devote his time to Chaduc and in 1972, he went to sojourn in Phulchatti, a small ashram hidden in the jungle upstream from Rishikesh. Abhishiktānanda and Chaduc devoted the whole time to meditative study of the Upanishads. This study resulted in a series of experiences, or

¹⁷⁷ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, letter to Baumer-Despeigne, 11.3.71, 288.

¹⁷⁸ Baumer-Despeigne, “Abhishiktānanda: an interview with Odette Bäumer-Despeigne, 17-24.

rather spiritual experiences. In a letter he wrote to Murray Rogers he said: “Days of extraordinary fullness in Phulchatti—an intoxicating experience of the truth of the Upanishads, even if for me it was physically shattering. To feel oneself in the Presence of the True is too powerful an experience. It scorches one!”¹⁷⁹ After returning to his hermitage, he suffered his first attack of breathlessness. This was never again to leave him, and when complicated by a heart attack, finally led to his death the following year.

The Church in India (1969) is a slightly revised memorandum written for a small group of Christians preparing the All-India Seminar of the Roman Catholic Church. Its subject is the integration of the “cultural, religious, and spiritual heritage” of India into the life of the Church. It consists of a series of exploratory notes; however, the content of this list is amazing: i.e., the re-animation of the ‘cosmic covenant’ within Christianity; or the quieting of the mind, the renunciation of attachment to the fruits of actions. The book is one of Abhishiktānanda’s more consistent and clear reflections of the subject. In *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church* (1970), he reminds the Church of the primacy of spiritual values and contemplation. In *Guru and Disciple* (1974), in which he recalls his experiences both with Ramaṅṅa and Gnāṅṅanda, there is a generous mix of anecdote and observation of the life in the ashram and surrounding village. The book is cast in the form of a story about Vanya, who is no one other than Abhishiktānanda himself. This narrative device allows him to depict his experiences with a certain detachment. In particular, the book addresses the question of the nature of Gnāṅṅanda; it leaves the reader in no doubt

¹⁷⁹ Baumer-Despeigne, “Abhishiktānanda: an interview with Odette Bäumer-Despeigne,” 17-24.

not only about Gnānānanda's status as a spiritual guru but about his impact on Abhishiktānanda.¹⁸⁰

He himself regarded *Guru and Disciple* as his most durable and significant work. Writing in the last year of his life, reflecting on the impact of all his books, he defined *Guru and Disciple* as “almost the only thing that remains afloat. All the rest consist of *namarupa* amusing itself with ‘the theology of fulfillment.’” *The Further Shore* (1975) comprises two separate works, *The Upanishad*, written in 1971 but never finally revised, and *Samnyāsa*, a series of essays written in 1973. In this final work, completed only a few months before his death, Abhishiktānanda offers his most mature thoughts on many of the subjects that had interested him in his last quarter of a century, together with his deepest meditation on the *Upanishads* and the ideal of *samnyāsa*. In an important passage of the book, he establishes a link between the ideal of *samnyāsa* and Eucharist, and explains that the former is embodied in the sacrament of the latter, which itself can be—like *samnyāsa*—a “sign beyond sign.”¹⁸¹ A collection of several essays, *The Eyes of Light* (1983), appeared posthumously. The longest essay, “India and the Carmelite Order” (which had already appeared in *Carmel*, 1965), is a lengthy meditation on the message of the *Upanishads*, the place of contemplative monastic orders in the Church at large, and the role that the Carmelite Order might yet play in Indian Christianity. The book also includes passages from Abhishiktānanda's correspondence with his family, friends, monks, and priests. He also wrote tens of articles and maintained a spiritual journal, his

¹⁸⁰ Oldmeadow, *A Christian Pilgrim in India*, 73.

¹⁸¹ *The Further Shore* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1975; reprinted with additions in 1984). Revised and expanded in *Initiation à la spiritualité des Upanishads: Vers l'autre rive* (Sisteron: Présence, 1979), 50-52.

diaries, which ran to something on the order of two thousand pages by the time of his death.

In 1973, Chaduc recognized a deep call to monastic life. It was a call that he had heard almost from his very first encounter with Abhishiktānanda and it found its realization in the *samnyāsa* diksha—the monastic profession. Abhishiktānanda and Swami Chidanandaji, the Hindu monk, head of the well-known Shivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, performed this ritual ceremony simultaneously. Abhishiktānanda’s last book, *The Further Shore*, was written in anticipation of this ceremony. In this way, Chaduc—renamed Ajatananda—“gained admission to a twofold monastic inheritance, Christian and Hindu, in the unity of the Spirit.”¹⁸² Two weeks later, on July 14, Abhishiktānanda suffered the severe heart attack that laid him low in the streets of Rishikesh and brought him his final awakening. Abhishiktānanda was supposed to be in Rishikesh, some fifty miles south of Uttarkashi, for a short time to buy provisions for Chaduc and himself. As he ran to catch a bus, he was stricken by a massive heart attack. For a long time, doctors, friends and religious sisters did all they could to nurse him back to health. However, after five months of gradual recovery, marked by occasional relapses, he suffered another major attack and died late in the evening of December 7. He was only sixty-three, but had suffered under self-imposed conditions of ascetism during most of the twenty-five years after his arrival in India. He was buried the next day in the cemetery of the Divine Word Fathers in Indore, where his gravestone reads simply: “Swami Abhishiktānanda, OSB/ born 1910/ ordained 1935/ died 7.12.73.” He prayed the Psalms and celebrated the Eucharist until the end of his life. It is proven that Abhishiktānanda remained, until his

¹⁸²Baumer-Despeigne, “Abhishiktānanda: An Interview with Odette Bäumer-Despeigne 17-24.

last breath, Christian and absolutely loyal to the Catholic Church and his Benedictine roots.

Conclusion

This is the summary of Abhishiktānanda's life. We have seen him grow in a happy family in Britain and become a monk in the years preceding World War II. He escaped death during the war, chased the dream of going to India, and lived there like a Desert Father. However, Abhishiktānanda's story does not stop here. He lives in India as a Father of the Desert, but is also a Benedictine monk that belongs to the Church. As such, he needs to renew his indult of exclaustation, act as a Catholic priest, and pass his writings through the hands of a censor in Paris. He belongs to the Indian Church, shares her destiny, and participates in the historical events of her community; he shows a passion for Vatican II, he follows its work, and mediates the message to India. He is a God seeker, but does not abandon people or the world. And people and the world do not abandon him: he was treated in a hospital run by Quakers when he was sick, and later, he was surrounded by friends in a Catholic hospital where he passed away. He is a man of the Church and at the same time a hermit. Ultimately, it is this dual belongingness that is crucial in the life of the French monk. As Amaladoss points out, Abhishiktānanda "claimed to have had the advaitic experience of non-dual oneness. But at the same time he was faithful to the psalms and the Eucharist till the end of his life...till a short time before his death, he was not able to reconcile harmoniously his double belongingness. It was a life-long struggle."¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Amaladoss, S.J., "Double Belongingness," *Vidyajyoti* [forthcoming];

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CONTEMPLATIVE SOUL OF THE CHURCH

Introduction

The primary source of Abhishiktānand's ecclesiology is naturally his monastic vocation. He was a monk; he had left the seminary for the monastery of Kergonan and then, although without enthusiasm, remained there for almost twenty years. Even in India, he confirmed his monastic vocation. He understood himself as a monk. However, this monastic vocation was dense and structured, and took different forms over time. This vocation certainly showed a traditional, coenobitical, Benedictine side, which led to the foundation of the Shantivanam Ashram and the book *An Indian Benedictine Ashram*, written with Monchanin, which portrays its authors' vision of a Christian ashram, and provides a clear account of the theology underlying it. *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church*, written more than fifteen later, is a passionate defense in the last years of his life of the ashram as structures of which the Church is in urgent need. Abhishiktānanda's Benedictine side kept him grounded and acted as a counterbalance to his aspiration to become an "acosmic." In fact, his monastic vocation expressed also a hermitic side, which he manifested in the long solitary retreats and a wandering life. Abhishiktānand's models were the Desert Fathers he studied at the monastery; the encounter with the reality of India helped him to interpret his models in terms of *samnyāsa*. Together, the two sides of his monastic vocation helped him to build a strong, mature and articulate link between monasticism and the Church and secure a core role to contemplatives inside the Church.

The Monastic Vocation

The handful of scholars and theologians who have written in any detail about Abhishiktānanda gave more attention to his view on Upanishads and their relationship to Christianity. However, the exploration of the ecclesiological themes of Abhishiktānanda is preferably launched from the more appropriate departure point—his monastic vocation. To claim that his vocation as a monk was the polar star of his life is not to evoke some static and unchanging ideal; his ideas evolved and so did his understanding of his own vocation and that of being a monk. First, the monk is the one who is alone. This may be the origin of the word monk, from the Greek *monos*, meaning single or alone. This also could mean the hermit or the coenobitic. In every culture, the monk's "aloneness," as we say in Christian terminology, is an eschatological sign that ultimately we will face God alone; "there will be no marriage or giving in marriage" (Mt 20:30). No doubt in this individuality we will find union through communion, but the *monos*, the single one, stands as a sign of that fundamental aloneness of the path. When he wrote to Fr Monchanin in 1947 about his plans for a monastic life together in India, he maintained "the point of departure should be the Rule of St Benedict because it had behind it an extremely reliable monastic tradition which would prevent a headlong plunge into the unknown....I believe that the Benedictine Rule, in its marvelous profundity and stability, is pliant enough to dominate all these monastic forms." In a less famous passage of the letter he sent to Monchanin in 1947, he adds that, "on this basis, like you, I envisage the tree of monasticism once more flourishing in all its variety, with hermits, solitaries, and mendicants; we have to sanctify the whole contemplative thrust of India and Christianize the monastic institutions....I think the Rule of St Benedict is sufficiently flexible, in its

depth and marvelous stability, to control all these forms of monastic living—in fact, it has already done so in the greatest periods of its history.”¹⁸⁴ This is an important point, since it proves that already at the time of his arrival in India, he looked forward to a coenobitical and an eremitical life.

In 1950, we note a modification in his language. In *Benedictine Ashram*, jointly written by Monchanin and Abhishiktānanda, they articulated their goal this way, “to form the first nucleus of a monastery (or rather a *laura*, a grouping of neighboring anchorites like the ancient *laura* of Saint Sabas in Palestine) which buttresses the Rule of Saint Benedict—a primitive, sober, discrete rule. Only one purpose: to seek God. And the monastery will be Indian style. We would like to crystallize and transubstantiate the search of the Hindu *samnyāsa*. *Advaita* and the praise of the Trinity are our only aim. This means we must grasp the authentic Hindu search for God in order to Christianize it, starting with ourselves first of all, from within.”¹⁸⁵ It is easy to find here all the elements that become constants in the thoughts and writings of Abhishiktānanda’s. There is reference to pre-Benedictine monasticism, to the ideal of reconciliation between the Western monastic vocation and one of a Hindu *samnyāsa*, and to the idea that monasticism, “the plane whereon they may feel themselves in consonance with each other,” was to be the bridge between Indian spirituality and the Church. Finally, in his last years, Abhishiktānanda wrote of his impatience with going to seminars about monasticism. “Congresses and seminars,” he says, “will not contribute anything.” “Monasticism is in the first place a charism. Structures will be born from the charismatic

¹⁸⁴ Swami Abhishiktānanda: *His life told through his letters*, 8.18.47, 22.

¹⁸⁵ Joseph G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute: The Life and Work of Jules Monchanin*, (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 73.

enthusiasm of individuals...Reform is not going to come from chit-chat and discussion. Benedict, like Antony, went off into the desert, and Francis took to the roads without collecting all the neighboring monks for a congress.”¹⁸⁶ He became keenly aware of the limitations of Christian monasticism, at least with respect to its actual practice in the Church. “Monastic profession withdraws the Christian from the world but binds him still more closely to the Church.”¹⁸⁷

Whatever his uncertainties about where he stood in relation to Christianity and *advaita*, he was completely free of doubts about his role as a monk, a man of God. As Fr Vattakuzhy remarks in his study, “the center of Abhishiktānanda’s life was his monastic consecration to which he was experientially and existentially committed. He came to India, not because he was a Christian, but because he was a monk.”¹⁸⁸ Raimon Panikkar addressed him on this issue in his “Letter to Abhishiktānanda” (written on the second anniversary of his death): “The center of your life was your monastic vocation...You were tortured by the apparent incompatibility between Christianity and *Advaita*. Experientially and existentially committed to both, you could not solve the tension between the two, except perhaps at the very end of your life...You doubted whether, out of loyalty to yourself, you should quit the Church; you hesitated to give yourself fully to *Advaita*, but you never for a moment questioned your monastic consecration, your way of life...Your support was your life of a monk, and we must pay tribute to that pure and

¹⁸⁶ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 301.

¹⁸⁷ *La montée au fond du cœur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, 9.1.54, 89.

¹⁸⁸ Emmanuel Vattakuzhy, *Indian Christian Sannyasa and Swami Abhishiktānanda* (Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1981), 210.

clear surrender of your existence which allowed you to become a *kurukṣetra* (a battlefield), while the outcome of the war was still totally undecided.”¹⁸⁹

Years after his arrival in India, Abhishiktānanda discovered that Fr Monchanin was not practical. The work of planning, contracting, and collecting funds for their ashram fell to Abhishiktānanda exclusively. He was to call Fr Monchanin a “good companion but a bad partner.” Nor was Fr Monchanin willing to accompany Abhishiktānanda into more uncharted spiritual adventures such as visits to Arunāchala or explorations of *advaita*. In his *diaries*, Abhishiktānanda made an interesting comment. He said that if Monchanin “had taken seriously our monastic life in 1950, this would have not happened for sure. He cannot understand that my visits at Arunāchala are not as simple brackets of the monastic life of Pondicherry and Bangalore.”¹⁹⁰ First, Abhishiktānanda says that life at the ashram and in the caves of the mountain are different expressions of the same unique monastic vocation. The monastic vocation that brings monks to the ashram is the same that drives them to the retreat on the mountain and the same that leads them wherever the search leads to God. Secondly, he says that the monk is the one who seeks God by him—or her—self. “Seeking God alone” means seeking nothing but God. Not riches, not fame, not glory, not family, not even the foundation of an ashram. During the *samnyāsa diksha* (initiation) in India, the candidate proclaims, “I renounce the desire for offspring, the desire of riches, the desire of the world.” Therefore, “the monk simply consecrates himself to God.”¹⁹¹

The Legacy of the Ashram

¹⁸⁹ Panikkar, “A Letter to Abhishiktānanda,” 446.

¹⁹⁰ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, 12.1.56.

¹⁹¹ From Abhishiktānanda, *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam: Fr. J. Monchanin 1895-1957*, quoted in A. Rawlinson, *Book of Enlightened Masters*, 148.

The establishment of Shantivanam, the ashram in Tamil Nadu Abhishiktānanda founded with Fr Monchanin, is the first output of his monastic vocation. Ashram (from the Sanskrit *asrama* is a place where a *guru* (spiritual teacher) lives with his disciples. From antiquity until today, ashrams have abounded in India. Shantivanam, the ashram opened on the day of the Feast of St Benedict in 1950, and survives to this day. There were to be many difficult years still ahead but Abhishiktānanda and Monchanin's dream finally came to fruition under the husbandry of Bede Griffiths. During his life, Abhishiktānanda has often declared his skepticism toward "structures" of any kind, indifference for power, and irony about institutions, and this also was true for the Christian-Hindu ashram he founded. He was convinced of the priority of the spiritual search and personal experience to any kind of organization. Yet, when the moment came, he wished for the spread of Christian ashrams where Christian communities can live "on traditional Hindu lines" and in which "an authentic Indo-Christian spirituality, liturgy, and theology will evolve."¹⁹² He said that the Church today needs such oases of silence, which could be spiritual refueling centers along the streets of a speedy life. "Contemplative prayer is the most urgent need of the Church in India today."¹⁹³ The Second Vatican Council, in its declaration on non-Christian religions [*Nostra Aetate*], avowed that "the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions" and encouraged Catholics to "recognize, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral values as well as the social and cultural values to be found among them." Once we contextualize the time of that sentence, the direction of the All-India Seminar on the Church in India Today in 1969 showed the need

¹⁹² *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church*, (Bangalore: Dharmaram College, 1970).

¹⁹³ *Prayer* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1967, revised edition 1972, reprinted London: ISPCK, 1972, reprinted Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973). Revised by the author as *Éveil à Dieu, essai sur la prière* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1984); this revision includes an additional essay "Le chrétien en vérité" translated separately as *In Spirit and Truth* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989). Revised and newly translated as *Prayer* (new edition) (Delhi, ISPCK, 1999), 33.

for a liturgy “closely related to the Indian cultural tradition” and a theology “lived and pondered in the context of the Indian spiritual tradition.” It was a seminar where Abhishiktānanda played an influential role and which was attended by the complete hierarchy and representatives of the entire Catholic Church in India. In particular, the need was expressed “to establish authentic forms of monastic life in keeping with the best traditions of the Church and the spiritual health of India.” The final declaration of the Seminar proposed to “encourage the setting up of ashrams...[to] project the true image of the church.” Abhishiktānanda identified a contemplative deficit in the Church and saw the ashram as a practical way to revitalize this dimension of the Church, point to the eschatological horizon of the Church, and relativize the structures and rituals emerging from the heritage of the Church. Abhishiktānanda challenged the Christian Church of his day to become more contemplative and his legacy is to be found in the slowly but gradually emerging development of Christian Ashrams.

Today, many Christian ashrams exist in India.¹⁹⁴ These are small ecumenical and interreligious communities devoted to the deepening of Christian spirituality in communion with Hinduism—and all denominations and faiths—structured along the lines of a traditional Hindu hermitage. In the typical hermitage, disciples gather around a guru, the spiritual master, and the day involves a time for meditation, the practice of yoga, teaching the teacher, along with the celebration of Christian and Hindu rites and sacraments. Although in different ways, new realities continue to be born that are inspired by the great masters of the past. Currently, the federation Aikya Ashram—which

¹⁹⁴ This paragraph is based on S. Calza, *Essere Sale e Lievito. Il dialogo intrareligioso nell'esperienza degli ashram hindu-cristiani*, unpublished paper.

meets and brings together many of these independent foundations of Catholic inspiration that are variously linked to Christian and Hindu religious orders—counts as active members over forty ashrams. There are also a small number of ashrams in continued growth of “independent researchers”—religious or lay people of all nationalities—who share in a different way a similar path in this association and its meetings as a point of reference. Many of these ashrams are peopled entirely by indigenous Christians who continue the task of seeking out and living a distinctively Indian form of Christianity. Today the Hindu-Christian ashrams are spaces of welcoming, listening and dialogue open to all, with no discrimination of religion, caste, status or class of life. Each ashram has intertwined relations and exchanges with other Hindu ashrams, their guru and local communities, including those with Muslim traditions, although to a lesser extent. Amongst the most enduring of these ashrams, along with Saccidananda, are Kurisumala, Christukula, established by two Anglican missionaries in the early 1930s, Christa Prema Seva Ashram, founded by John Winslow in 1927 in Shivajinagar (Mumbai region), Jyotiniketan near Bareilly, and the Christi Panti Ashram in Varanasi.

Kurisumala Ashram, set among the lush tea plantations of central Kerala, a Cistercian monastery that accepts fully monastic tradition in India. Every day there, you can see the monks—*sannyāsin*— along with dozens of local workers, manage a great and innovative farm that houses a plant for the pasteurization of milk, extensive plantations of fruit, spices, tea and pastures for animals. In addition, there is a biogas plant, a bread oven, a dispensary and other activities that not only make it perfectly self-sufficient for their needs. The monastery (in which about 20 monks live and where religious or lay people

who continually visit or withdraw are hosted) also offers professional training to those who want a decent livelihood. This numbers over one hundred families in the area. Many of the ashrams established in the last fifty years owe their inspiration to Shantivanam and to Monchanin, Abhishiktānanda, and Bede Griffiths.

Whether one regards this legacy as beneficent depends on one's point of view. In his history of the Indian Christian Church, A. Mathias Mundadan¹⁹⁵ suggests that within Hindu-Christian relationships, there has been a shift from an emphasis on "intellectual and spiritual engagement to one of social concern for the humanitarian realities and needs of current Indian Society."¹⁹⁶ Earlier generations of Catholics dealt primarily with Brahmins and other high caste Hindus in an attempt to make Christianity attractive to them. Mundadan refers to this engagement with the higher caste Hindus as *Advaita Vedanta*, defined as a contemplative, spiritual experience associated with the ashramic movement. In the past 30 years, however, there has been more attention paid to the humanitarian needs of the Dalits, who are the oppressed in the Hindu caste system, and less emphasis paid to the higher castes. The Church has favoured an enculturation into Dalit traditions and an emphasis on social emancipation for this oppressed population. There is an emerging Dalit theology that is rooted in the belief that God is living, struggling, and suffering together with the Dalits for their liberation and the Dalits must rely on their inner strength. The Dalit Panchayat Movement emphasizes the tremendous potential that lays hidden within the Dalit community that has never been able to be tapped. What can be claimed here without fear of contradiction is that Shantivanam

¹⁹⁵ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians: Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy* (New Delhi: Dharmaram Publications, 1984).

¹⁹⁶ Ganeri, OP, "Catholic Encounter with Hindus in the Twentieth Century. In Search of an Indian Christianity," 410-432.

ashram and the pioneering work of Monchanin, Abhishiktānanda, and Bede Griffiths had opened the path for the Christian Ashram movement.

A Desert Father

Abhishiktānanda is known not only for his commitment to Shantivanam, but also for his love of solitude. In *The Mountain of the Lord*, he declares his love to the high peaks of Himalayan, its mountains that overpass the clouds, and celebrates the life of sadhu, acosmics, and recluses who can be found in the caves and forests on their slopes. By extension, it could also be seen as a way to pay honor and respect to the vocation of the solitary renunciate, whether a Christian monk in the Syrian desert, the Hindu *muni*, or the *staretz* on the Russian forests.¹⁹⁷ “The solitude of the Alone...Solitude with God is not solitude. Accept being alone, infinitely alone. Alone in my eternity.”¹⁹⁸ Abhishiktānanda was interested in living a monastic life more similar to those conducted by the Desert Fathers who had populated his youthful reading; he found a place in India in favor of this desire. Some elements of his life confirm this hypothesis. First, there are his readings and lessons that were held in Kergonan. Then, his letter sent to Bishop James Mendonça of Tiruchiapalli, where he spoke specifically of his desire to live “the contemplative life, in the absolute simplicity of early Christian monasticism and at the same time in the closest possible conformity with the traditions of Indian *samnyāsa*.”¹⁹⁹ This appears to be a plan much like that of the Desert Fathers’ but set into an Indian context.

In *The Further Shore*, he examines the way in which a *samnyāsa* might be assimilated into the Christian tradition to reanimate those spiritual impulses which were so evident in

¹⁹⁷ Oldmeadow, *A Christian Pilgrim in India*, 81.

¹⁹⁸ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou*, 26.7.64.

¹⁹⁹ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 48.

the flight of the Christian solitaries both to the deserts of Egypt and Syria and to the forests of Russia. Eventually, his ideas about pre-Benedictine monasticism fused with the Hindu ideal of *samnyāsa* and in same sense were subsumed by it. Abhishiktānanda continually repeats the idea that the Christian *samnyāsa* recovers the contemplative tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the early Christian Church, St Isaac the Syrian, and the Hesychast tradition of stillness, to mention a few still in the Church but forgotten for centuries. “In India the highest ideal of pure contemplation has been practiced and cherished by the age-long institution of *samnyāsa*. In the West it has been chiefly represented by the hermits of the first Christian centuries, in Syria and Egypt. Later on, although the solitary life was never totally abandoned by Christians, there is no doubt that, as the centuries passed, less and less attention was paid to this type of vocation. It is indeed a sign of the times and a token of the divine mercy that of recent years spiritual people have once again heard the call to solitude; it is to be hope that the Church of India will in the end bring to the universal Church an authentically Christian *samnyāsa* as the crowning of the monastic life, thus the Church will recover after centuries the purest traditions of the Desert and of the Hesychast movement, and at the same time drink deep at the inexhaustible sources of the Hindu ideal of renunciation in a life devoted to God alone.”²⁰⁰

Hindu-Christian monasticism gave Abhishiktānanda not simply a program of inculturation, but also provided a way of life very similar to that of the Desert Fathers. It is well-known that the monastic tradition was born in the third, fourth and fifth centuries. It originally developed in Egypt through the lives of the Fathers of the Desert (from

²⁰⁰ *Prayer*, 33.

which the name monasticism originates) and became known in Palestine, in the Sinai Peninsula, in Cappadocia, in Pontus (today, the central regions of Turkey), in Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia (in the fourth and fifth centuries). It will then extend to the West (Italy, France, Germany, England, Ireland), to Constantinople and Bithynia (fifth and sixth centuries). Lastly, it will arrive in the Slavic countries (Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania); finally, it will arrive in Russia (tenth century and later).²⁰¹ The spiritual experience of the Desert Fathers “seems to issue whole and armed from Anthony the Great and continues unperturbed and unchanged for eighteen centuries, through the Christian East: the entire mystical Church of the East is built on it.” Anthony’s doctrine

“produced Arsenius the Roman, who had been a pedagogue at the court of Byzantium and, having become a monk at the age of forty, ‘nobody could ever say how he lived.’ It produced Macarius the Great, Evagrius Ponticus, Hylarion, Pastor, Alonius, Sisoe, Poemen, Paisius, John the Dwarf and Moses the Ethiopian. These produced a multitude of others, till we reach the 4th century masters of the desert of Gaza: Seridus, Barsanuphius, John and, Dositheus. Then we find the sublime 5th century Syrian masters, Isaac and Ephrem. Their teachings mirrored the teachings of their friends and disciples (*sic*), bishops and Eastern doctors: Athanasius, Chrysostomus, Basil and, the two Gregories. Through Cassian the Roman he placed

²⁰¹ The most representative monks for each of the geographical regions are: Anthony the Great, Ammona, Pachomius and Macarius the Great in Egypt, Caritone and Doroteo in Palestine, John Climacus in the Sinai peninsula, Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Cesarea in Cappadocia, Evagrius in Pontus, Ephrem, Simeon Stylites, Isaac of Nineveh and the monk who is concealed behind the pseudonym Dionysius Areopagite in Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia. Maximus the Confessor (Constantinople) and Simeon the New Philosopher (Bithynia), as well as the monks of Mount Athos naturally; Isaiah (Serbia), John of Rila and Gregory of Sinai (Bulgaria), Antimus of Wallachia and Nicodemus (Romania) and Sergius of Radonezh, Teophan the Recluse and Seraphim of Sarov (Russia). The most well-known monks in the West are Benedict and Gregory the pope (Italy), Martin (France), Boniface (Germany), Augustine of Canterbury (England) and Colomanus (Ireland).

the foundations for the patriarchal rule of Benedict of Norcia, (and, hence) of the entire western monasticism. Later, another Latin, Nicephorus the Solitary, and Gregory of Sinai based the doctrine and practice of the Jesus Prayer on it, the pure uninterrupted prayer, which is the heart of the Greek and Russian *Philokalia* and of the novel that edified an entire people, *The Way of a Pilgrim*. All Mount Athos with its anchorites, whose number is unknown to all,...the Slavic monastic communities and, the few Russian *skiti* left are still founded on it today. In the West that teaching...resurfaced with the mysterious Counter-Reform,” and, especially, “the one who built its system, John of the Cross.”²⁰²

Abhishiktānanda did not seek to establish an Indian Christian monasticism simply to promote a Hindu-Christian dialogue. He also wanted to get closer to the source of his monastic vocation. It was an anabasis, a journey back to the origin. Monastic spirituality revolves around the search for lost innocence; for the *apatheia*, to say it in an ancient Christian language.²⁰³ This opens access to the Spirit and allows us to pass “over the world like the flight of a bird and leave it as it is, contemplating it from above.”²⁰⁴ From the deserts of Egypt to the forests of the heart of Russia, from the monasteries nestled like eagles’ eggs at the summit of unreachable mountains, Christian monasticism has always expressed the desire for a profound union with God through the renunciation of the world. This renunciation is favored by monastic vows, the solitude of the cell and *metanoia*. The monastic tradition is above all a gigantic plan to rediscover original innocence. There was a time when union with God was heedless. It was the undiscerning

²⁰² Campo, and Draghi (eds.), *Les Sentences des Peres du Desert* (Milano: Rusconi, 199), 15-16.

²⁰³ Apatheia means freedom and independence of the spirit from the *pathos* of the flesh. Tomas Spidlik, *La Spiritualità dell’Oriente Cristiano* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1985), 90.

²⁰⁴ Vereno Brugiattelli, *Wittgenstein. Vivere l’Inesprimibile*, (Padova: Edizioni Messaggero, 2002), 66. The translation from Italian is my own.

and spontaneous acceptance of what happens at all levels and in all human dimensions. It was putting the individual aside, the complete and absolute self-manifestation of God. It was a time of original innocence; “your left hand must not know what your right is doing” (Matthew 6:3). What is the monastic spirituality? It is the reunification of the separated dyad. Originally, man was one with God. Now they are separated. But the monastic tradition reminds us of how things once were. There is a unity to be recomposed. Thus, the *descensus* of God, who participates in the human condition and then returns to the heavens, is a countermelody to the *ascensus* of man who once participated in the divine condition. On the one hand, the whole classic world is shaken by the inconceivable interruption of the divine in history, an interruption that raises questions about the intellectual nature of the divine and the eternal nature of the world. On the other hand, the whole Semitic world is shaken by the hyperbolic affirmation that we are “children of God” (1 John 3:9), an affirmation that is, on its own, capable of eliminating the abyss that the Jews had dug between man and God. And so, like a promise of reunification, the expectancy of a return to the original, primordial heavenly condition comes about. The monastic tradition of Gregory, Basil and Evagrius relives the cosmic drama of a man who was of a divine nature, who fell, became corporeal, and to whom the road is now reopened to become God again, thanks to the love of the God from whom he originates. The eschatological and soteriological landscape that acts as a backdrop for the monastic tradition is fundamental for understanding its nature, its function and its meaning.

The Church and Samnyāsa

Abhishiktānanda reached the conclusion that “the Church of India will in the end bring to the universal Church an authentically Christian *sannyāsa* as the crowning of the monastic life”²⁰⁵ after his long and painful personal journey involving many lonely years of reflection, search, and self-doubt. In fact, since the early 1950s, Abhishiktānanda faced a intriguing problem: how to reconcile the *advaitic* experience, which Rama[^]a, Arunāchala, and Gnānānanda had brought him, with his own deep Christian commitment and his vocation as a priest and a monk. In September 1953, he articulated the conflict in his diary, in a sentence that appears dense of pain: “What does it mean, this agony of having found one’s peace far from the place and form of one’s original commitments, at the very frontiers of Holy Church?”²⁰⁶ He agonized over these problems for many years—how to manage the relationship with the institutional church, to keep and protect his Christian faith, how to assess his experience of *advaita* – as there was no simple answer available. However, it was not until his last years that the conflicts were fully resolved. In Abhishiktānanda’s thoughts, his writings, his spiritual experiences, he addresses these issues continuously. Here is one of many tormented and painful passages from his journal: “Therefore I am full of fear, plunged in an ocean of anguish whichever way I turn....And I fear risking my eternity for a delusion. And yet you are no delusion, O Arunāchala.”²⁰⁷ Nor was his dilemma helped by his growing disenchantment with many aspects of the institutional church. “If only the Church was *spiritually radiant*, if it was not so firmly attached to the formulations of transient philosophies, if it did not obstruct the freedom of the spirit...with such niggling regulations, it would not be long

²⁰⁵ *Prayer*, 33.

²⁰⁶ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, 73.

²⁰⁷ Panikkar, “A Letter to Abhishiktānanda,” 438.

before we reached an understanding.”²⁰⁸ It is now known that not only he did not leave the Church, he also tried to develop a possible solution to his dilemma. First, he accepted his double belonging. Then, based on this double belonging, he began to understand himself as a bridge between the two traditions, Hindu and Christian. After that, he imagined that this meeting between India and the Church could be performed directly, somewhere. Finally, he explained that the meeting place of the two traditions was not to be found in any doctrinal or philosophical formulation, but in the lived reality of *samnyāsa*. “Believe me, it is above all in the mystery of *samnyāsa* that India and the Church will meet, will discover themselves in the most secret and hidden parts of their hearts, in the place where they are each most truly themselves, in the mystery of their origin in which every outward manifestation is rooted and from which time unfolds itself.”²⁰⁹

Then Abhishiktānanda realized that to be a true *samnyāsa* meant to embrace “solitude, total stripping,” of what he called “Solitude-Silence-Poverty.” He understood that to reach the core of this solitude, he had to surrender the self absolutely to non-duality. He must let go of all expectations. He must disengage from work and go beyond faith, beyond human formulations, beyond doctrines to reach the Absolute, the Alone. Solitude meant renunciation of all relationships, all social, emotional, and psychological support, and all expectations. All this engenders some problems. Abhishiktānanda was not able to fully resolve the problem that existed between Christianity and *advaita*, particularly regarding the concept of non-duality. However, toward the end of his life, Abhishiktānanda experienced a final awakening, which led him to believe that he had

²⁰⁸ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 24.10.1960, 132.

²⁰⁹ *Guru and Disciple*, 162.

achieved advaita, or non-duality. He attempted to put that last great experience into words. He had achieved his goal. There are also the precious clues to be found that he was to move toward the realization of a “Christian *advaita*.” “The discovery of Christ’s ‘I AM’ is the ruin of any Christian theology, for all notions are burnt up within the fire of experience....I feel too much, more and more, the blazing fire of this I AM, in which all notions about Christ’s personality, ontology, history, etc., have disappeared. And I find his real mystery shining in every awakening man, in every mythos...The awakening alone is what counts.”²¹⁰ This awakening is ‘being.’ Not this or that being, nor even Being (noun), but in absolute being (verb), which is being in the Presence, the name Abhishiktānanda gives tentatively to this being (verb) ‘as long as the veil has not yet been torn apart.’ This was what ‘I AM’ means, he concluded—to realize what one is means to realize everything.”²¹¹

Attention, however, needs to be focused on the other problem: how to reconcile the Church, which acts in a realm of words and forms, and *sannyāsa*, whose significance goes well beyond all signs. In his last work, *The Further Shore*, Abhishiktānanda writes movingly and wisely of the ideal of the *sannyāsa*: “*Sannyāsa* confronts us with a sign of that which is essentially beyond all signs—indeed, in its sheer transparency [to the Absolute] it proclaims its own death as a sign...However the *sannyāsi* lives in the world of signs, of the divine manifestation, and this world of manifestation needs him, ‘the one beyond signs,’ so that it may realize the impossible possibility of a bridge between the two worlds.”²¹² If “the Church of India will in the end bring to the universal Church an

²¹⁰ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 311 (MR, 4.10.73).

²¹¹ Abhishiktānanda: Solitude and Paradox, <http://www.hermitary.com/solitude/abhishiktananada.html>

²¹² *The Further Shore*, chapter 4.

authentically Christian *samnyāsa*,” Church and *samnyāsa* need to show some sort of compatibility. In fact, the *samnyāsa* invites to abandon all historical, anthropological and social overtones in view of radical acosmism. The Church recalls the historical value of the Christic event, the communion of all men and theological cataphatism. The *samnyāsa* renounces the whole world of signs, while the Church still belongs to the world of signs. The *samnyāsa* demands the abandonment of the mental framework (history), rites (the Eucharist) and the *mythos* (Christ); he even invites one to abandon the Church. The history, the rites and the *mythos* of the Church are signs of the transcendent reality. Abhishiktānanda was aware of this intrinsic tension between *samnyāsa* and Church, and tried to articulate an answer to this question. He found a possible solution in his monastic roots even if he was unable to articulate his point in theological terms. One of his closest friends, Raimon Panikkar, accomplished this task.

The Unknown Christ of Hinduism

A clear influence by Panikkar on Abhishiktānanda is revealed in the former’s book *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. Abhishiktānanda read this book and was very impressed by it. In fact, he considered that “its holiness far exceeds my *Guhantara*,” the book that the ecclesiastic censor of Paris had found full of heresies. At the time, Abhishiktānanda was also fearful of it, because of its statement of the “provisional truth” of Christianity. He wrote to Panikkar, “You have that terrible phrase on p. 63 [of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*] that Christianity is ‘provisional,’ only of this world.” This view, that Christianity is only provisional, was later a position that Abhishiktānanda adopted for himself. In fact, in the original edition of *The Unknown Christ*, Panikkar wrote “Christianity is temporary and not self-sufficient, since it is only for this temporal

existence and is absolutely based on Christ.”²¹³ The starting point of *The Unknown Christ* is not that what seems different (in form) is in practice the same. What Panikkar declares in his book and, which makes his book so interesting, is NOT that the same reality (the Absolute, the Logos) is revealed in different forms in Hinduism and Christianity, but that the same reality (Christ) is hidden both to Hinduism and to Christianity. Panikkar disassociates himself from those who “claim that ‘we are the same’ and that ‘ultimately’...all religions are ‘transcendentally’ one.”²¹⁴ He merely seeks to formulate an innovative Christology. The focal point of Panikkar’s theology is that it speaks of an unknown Christ and not of an unknown God. The unknown God remains unknown (Acts 17:23). No religion has a hold on the mystery, which remains both unmentionable and intangible to all religions: it has no name, it is the mystery, and it is the totally other. God the Father of Jesus Christ is not a name. Christ’s situation is, instead, different. The essential point is that “Christians have come to believe in the reality they call Christ, but this Christ is the decisive reality.” In this sense, reality “is many names and each name is a new aspect, a new manifestation and revelation of reality itself.”²¹⁵ Christianity is something different from Christ, since Christianity is temporary. In this sense, Christ does not belong to Christianity; He belongs to the Father.²¹⁶ The Christ of Christianity is Christ interpreted in Christian terms,²¹⁷ which does not mean that Christ is the same reality interpreted by the various religions in different terms, but that “Christ is the name Christians have given to the mystery they have found in Jesus.” Panikkar reverses the issue, saying that Christians are not the ones to call Jesus the Christ, but rather Christ is

²¹³ Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1981, first edition 1964), 63; henceforth also indicated simply as Panikkar.

²¹⁴ Panikkar, 32;

²¹⁵ Panikkar, 29.

²¹⁶ Panikkar, 54.

²¹⁷ Panikkar, 51.

the name Christians have given the mystery they find only in Jesus. The theory does not envisage two elements, but three. There is a mystery that remains nameless, there is a historical experience—that of Jesus, of the Gospels, of the Church, etc.; and, there is the name of Christ, which can access the mystery through Jesus. There are two levels between the mystery and us: the special historical experience and the name I can assign to what I discover of the mystery in this historical experience. This name is not a term, but a *word*. “When I discover the mystery of Christ both in and through Jesus, son of Mary, then I can profess myself a Christian. One discovers the entire reality in this mystery of Christ; Christians discover it both in and through Jesus of Nazareth.”

This conceptual system obviously has some important consequences. The first, which concerns Hinduism and Christianity, is that neither of them teaches *x*, but they both seek *x*. Panikkar’s statement is based on the authority of the Scriptures.²¹⁸ The difference *seems* to be less significant, while it is, instead, of the utmost relevance. In fact, if both religions teach *x*, then they are the cultural translation—that takes on different forms—of the same revealed reality. Instead, if both religions seek *x*, then they are both incomplete and, it is this incompleteness that drives one to seek the unknown, which, after all, remains unknown. Panikkar says that the two religions’ similarities do not lie in what they declare, but in their perception of their structural ignorance concerning the immanent and transcendent dimension of reality. The second consequence, which refers to Christ, is that he cannot be conceived outside the Trinity. Christ “is incomprehensible without the Trinity.”²¹⁹ He is not merely a Person of the Trinity, since the Person does not exist without the Trinity. The Trinity is not a link between substances, but rather the

²¹⁸ Prologue to the Gospel of St. John, Acts of the Apostles (14, 16-17), Letter to the Hebrews (1, 1-3).

²¹⁹ Panikkar, 28.

relational link between operations (St Gregory of Nyssa). The Trinity is the constant, uninterrupted flow of relations between its three Persons. It is *creatio continua*. Panikkar's Christ is the Trinitarian Christ.²²⁰ This means that Christ is the Trinity viewed from man's perspective;²²¹ he is the full expression of the Trinity.²²² He is the patristic Christ, the *Christus totus*, the Christ in whom all things exist (Col 1:17). He is the cosmic Christ, mystery and universal presence, through whom everything has been created. *Omnia per ipsum facta sunt* (John 1:3). *Per ipsum, cum ipso, in ipso*. The abyss between the human and the divine is solved in Christ through his nature, *totus homo totus Deus*. The third consequence is that if Christ is the beginning and the end of everything, he is also the beginning and the goal of reality. Christ is immersed in reality; he is both evident and hidden at the same time, both present and operating since the beginning of time. Hence, he is in time but free from time; he is the meeting point between transcendent and immanent reality, an eschatological moment for both the Cosmos and Man. Reality is, hence, an all that is bound with the all and which unites the divine, the human and the natural. Reality is known and mysterious, immanent and transcendent. It is cosmotheandric reality, as Panikkar designates the mystery to which Christ, "ontological mediator between heaven and earth, man and God, One and many,"²²³ gives meaning. The fourth and final consequence is that the language is *locus theologicus*. Each one of us is at the intersection of the historical world, of the perceptible and divine world.

²²⁰ Joseph Prabhu, (ed.), *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 39.

²²¹ Raimon Panikkar and Gwendoline Jarczyk, *Entre Dieu et le Cosmos, Une Vision non Dualiste de la Réalité* (Paris, France: Edition Albin Michel, 1998) (Italian translation, *Tra Dio e il Cosmo*, Roma: Laterza, 2006) 1970.

²²² Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany. The Fullness of Man*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 165.

²²³ S. Calza, *La Contemplazione. Via Privilegiata al Dialogo Cristiano-induista*, 233.

Antony Kalliath writes that “Authors like Rahner, Schlette, and Panikkar, while emphasizing God’s universal salvific will, blur boundaries between Christianity and other faiths. Theologians like Gregory Baum and Rosemary Ruether see the permanent validity of other religions alongside Christianity in the horizon of eschatology.²²⁴ Increasingly, the Church is no longer considered the exclusive sanctuary of salvation but a universal symbol of salvation. Its mission is not redemption but “epiphany.” Its *raison d’être* is not in “saving from sin” but as an agent laboring for “the complete epiphany of God.”²²⁵ Christian identity is in solidarity with the pilgrimage to a common goal “when the elect are gathered together in the holy city which is illumined by the glory of God and in whose splendor all people will walk” (NA 1). This common providence and destiny has no boundaries of race, culture or religion. The Reign of God is “already present on this earth in mystery,” which “when the Lord returns, will be brought to full flower” (GS 25, 39). This thinking boils down to a new missionary paradigm of “epiphany” which promotes a praxis of listening, journeying together, prayer and silence, and dialogue with the future glory when “God may be everything to everyone” (1Cor 15:28). It will also be an evangelizing of the Church.²²⁶ Dialogue may lead us to an epiphany of the hitherto “unknown Christ” in Christianity, whereby followers of other faiths play the role of King Cyrus or Melchizedek!”²²⁷

Conclusion

²²⁴ See Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (London: SCM, 1985), ch.7.

²²⁵ Heinz Robert Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 83-93; Knitter, 132.

²²⁶ Pontifical Council For Inter-Religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991, no. 32.

²²⁷ Antony Kalliath, *Liberative Dialogue towards Harmony of Life: Interrogating Catholic Missiology in a Futuristic Perspective*. www.theo.kuleuven.ac.be/clt/Specialized-Seminar%20Kalliath.doc

Abhishiktānanda linked clearly and without any doubts the Church with *samnyāsa*. His point was that in his days, the Church more than ever before needed to rediscover her contemplative soul. In his book *Prayer*, he regrets the fact that in recent times, the Church has marginalized the vocation of the solitary contemplative. He sees an extraordinary role for the Indian Church. We already quoted these passages. “It is to be hoped that the Church of India will in the end bring to the universal Church an authentic Christian *samnyāsa* as the crowning of monastic life. Thus the Church will recover after centuries the purest tradition of the Desert and of the Hesychast movement, and at the same time drink deep at the inexhaustible sources of the Hindu ideal of renunciation.” Then he added, “The Church has need of the inner silence...so that she may reach the fullness of the sacramental sign which she herself is.”²²⁸ Interestingly, he cites a passage from Pope Paul VI in which the pontiff affirms the indispensable role which contemplatives play in the Church, and refers to “the living water which springs up in the heart of contemplatives” and without which the souls of the faithful might “wither.”²²⁹

²²⁸ *Prayer*, 33.

²²⁹ *Prayer*, 18.

CHAPTER SIX: THE CHURCH OF ABHISHIKTĀNANDA

Introduction

Abhishiktānanda's ecclesiology is clearly monastic in character. Not only his life but also his thoughts took inspiration from the monastic tradition, as he studied it at the monastery in Bretagne, but also as he was able to reinterpret it. His reading of the monastic tradition was facilitated by the rediscovery of Patristic theology that the *nouvelle théologie* pursued in the decades prior to Vatican II. Inside this theological movement, a major strand of study looked back at the sources of monastic spirituality, and reinterpreted them in a light of the present times. Finally, the Vatican II had a glance and legitimated all this theological preparatory work. Abhishiktānanda lived all this historical and theological process, he was inspired by it, and these influences are all in his thinking. The *nouvelle théologie* and Vatican II, together with his monastic vocation, were the main sources of Abhishiktānanda's ecclesiology. At the end of his life, Abhishiktānanda was able to incorporate all these influences, and elaborate a synthesis, where monastic spirituality and theology merged in short, dense thoughts about the Church.

The Monastic Tradition and Nouvelle Théologie

It was previously mentioned (Chapter One) that during the 1950s, as a generation of young Protestant theologians was working on the enormous inheritance left by many theological giants, other authors were working among the shadows cast by the theology of the first six centuries of the Patristic and medieval Church. They were part of that great Catholic theology renewal movement, which anticipated, announced and energized the Second Vatican Council. This movement developed around three great guiding lines: 1.

dialogue with modern philosophy (K. Rahner, H.U. von Balthasar, E. Schillebeeckx, and H. Kung; Rahner, for example, uses the category of existentialism to rewrite theology); 2. dialogue with other religions; 3. return to sources. De Lubac, Congar and Chenu were the representatives of this last line of thought. Their intent, however, went well beyond the recuperation of the past. It dealt with demonstrating the existence, within the heart of the Church, of a non-scholastic theology. In a certain period—the 1950s—when neo-Scholasticism (Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson) was dominating Catholic intellectual life, the study of the Patristic and the monastic tradition played a central role in working out the profile of a Catholic theological alternative. The contemporary masters of patristic studies are Daniellou and De Lubac. However, behind the work of giants, a crowd of academics and scholars began extensive research on the sources of Christian tradition. They made an extensive study of the early Patristic origin, its roots in Origen and the Greek fathers; a meticulous recovery of the monastic heritage in the East and the West. In the movement of the return to sources, a distinctive role was played by Benedictine scholars. Ireneo Hausherr and Lucien Regnault were interested in the Eastern monasticism of the origins and the Desert Fathers. Jean Leclercq focused his study on the Western monasticism in the late Middle Age. He describes the monastic theology of that period in contrast to the theology of the town and urban schools, the clerical schools of the same period. He sketches the two distinct environments – monastery and town school, in which the two different theologies – monastic and scholastic – developed.²³⁰ The implication of his line of thoughts is simple: just as medieval theology was monastic *and* scholastic, modern theology can be so too. A look at Leclercq's text, *The Love of*

²³⁰ Bruno Barnhart, *The Future of Wisdom* (New York, Continuum, 2007), 24.

*Learning and the Desire for God*²³¹ is warranted. From the very first pages, we are propelled into an atmosphere that is very far removed from contemporary logic. It is the rediscovery of monastic culture, of the silence of contemplation, of the solitude of the cloister and the enchantment of mysticism. Leclercq's work aims to demonstrate that not only can we speak of a monastic culture, but certainly also of a monastic theology. In particular, Leclercq focuses on the Cistercian tradition, which reaches its apogee with Bernard of Chiaravalle. Some scholars concentrate their study on the movement of coenobitical monasticism, which commences with John Cassian, develops further with Hilarious of Poitiers, Martin of Tours, Benedict of Norcia, Colombanus and Cluny. Others on the study of the hermitic renewal of the X century—among which are included that of Camaldolese monasticism—which precede the foundation of the mendicant orders. The hermitic tradition looks eastward and finds its sources of inspiration in Origen, Evagrius and the Desert Fathers, rather than in Augustine. As Jacques Winandy clarified, the Eastern tradition (of the Fathers) “constitutes (for monasticism) what the apostolic tradition represents for the faith of the Church.”²³² Benedictines theologians such as Anselm Stolz²³³ and the Camaldolese monk Cipriano Vagaggini²³⁴ work on the rediscovery of Mysticism and Liturgy in the 20th century.

The final target of the work of these theologians and historians on monasticism was to reconnect Catholic theology to the Church's spiritual roots. In fact, the monastic tradition sees spirituality as the major expression of the theological discourse. The essential

²³¹ Jean Leclercq, *L'Amour des Lettres et le Désir de Dieu* (Italian translation, Cultura Umanistica e Desiderio di Dio), (Florence: Sansoni, 1965).

²³² Jacques Winandy, “La Spiritualité Bénédictine,” in *La Spiritualità Cattolica* (Paris: Le Rameau, 1953), 14-18. The translation from French is my own.

²³³ F. Bressan, Alla Ricerca della Figura Spirituale della Teologia e del Teologo: *L'Introductio in Sacram Theologiam* di Anselm Stolz O.S.B. (1900-1942), in *Benedictina* 48 no. 1 (2001): 61-96.

²³⁴ Cipriano Vagaggini, *Il Senso Teologico della Liturgia* (Roma: Paoline, 1965).

element of the monastic spirituality is its link to the Scriptures. The monastic spirituality is based on the Scriptures, since they transmit Verbum Dei through the Spirit. On the other hand, Scriptures are the connection with history. Monasticism strictly connects the Scriptures to the history of salvation, *Historia Salutis*: the history of God's salvific activity for his people; it is God's love and providence that inspires and leads history for the best. The idea of *historia salutis*, so dear to the Church Fathers, as "sacred history" imply that the Word of God is not encased in abstract or static formulas, but has a dynamic power in history which is made up of persons and events, words and actions, developments and tensions, as the Bible clearly illustrates. The *historia salutis*, having completed its constitutive phase, continues its effects through time in the Church. The rediscovery of the sources and the renewal of the monastic tradition were at the very end a return to the Scriptures and to the monastic tradition that is built on them. Scriptures and the people of God in the history of salvation: these are the elements of the monastic tradition and spirituality, and the gift they bring to the Church. It is because of this impressive movement of rediscovery of the meaning and value of monasticism that theologians and monks turned their attention to India. India was the perfect place to renew the experience of the early Church and monasticism.

In the years preceding the Second Vatican Council, theologians and Christian monks began a close dialogue with the Hindu tradition. The objective was to succeed in expressing Christian theology in the indigenous language (inculturation). Understandably, rather than leading to the conversion of the Indians to Christianity, the dialogue led to a profound reflection on Christian theology itself. What De Lubac said to Monchanin has its meaning and roots in the monastic renewal of those decades: "to

rethink everything in the light of theology, and to rethink theology through mysticism,”²³⁵ where “rethink” is understood to mean rethinking theology in the light of mysticism, thus freeing theology “from all accessory elements and rediscovering the entire essential.”²³⁶ Monks and priests then moved to India and founded ashrams and rewrote liturgy, walked like Desert Fathers along the Indian streets and wore the orange robes of the ascetic (*samnyāsa*). They wrote diaries and books, and they provided a testimony with their lives to the rediscovery of the absolute, without ever abjuring their Christian faith. Thanks to these monks and theologians, Christianity, the religion of history and time, might be able to rediscover its mystery; thanks to the encounter with Hinduism, a religion that flees time and denies the value of the world, Christian theology might reconnect with its a-historic, eternal nature.

Abhishiktānanda and Vatican II

We know that as a monk and a priest, Abhishiktānanda participated in the life of the Indian Church as well as the universal one. Certainly, he was involved in the theological debate that unfolded before and during Vatican II. The book *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, with the subtitle “*Within the Cave of the Heart*,” is a translation from the French by Sarah Grant. As she writes in her introduction, the book was written a few months before Abhishiktānanda’s death, but after his experience of awakening, or “the reality of Upanishads and gospels.” He wrote and edited the book carefully and scrupulously, so that it also might be helpful to the readers and drive them to “the awakening... to awareness of the truth of their own being.” The book begins with a reflection on the

²³⁵ *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktānanda (Dom Henri Abhishiktānanda)*, 16.

²³⁶ S. Calza, *La Contemplazione. Via Privilegiata al Dialogo Cristiano-induista*, 52. The translation from Italian is my own.

historical changes in the Roman Catholic Church in 1964. The appointment of the Conciliar Commission by the Pope to link the Church to other Christians around the world and of the Roman Secretariat to dialogue with non Christian religions, are seen by Abhishiktānanda as the Church's admission that Christ is already at work outside the Church's boundaries. These appointments confirm the Church's admission of such a truth. He writes in his own words, "The Church thus realizes that her mission is not to lead to Christ the Savior isolated and poverty stricken individuals, sunk in deepest error and sin. With reverent wonder she finds that, in the hearts of those to whom the name of the Lord is still unknown, his Spirit is already at work bringing them to fulfillment and resurrection. She sees that it is not in spite of but precisely through, the instrumentality of their various religious traditions, their rituals and scriptures and the spiritual vigor and thirst for renunciation which these have transmitted from generation to generation."²³⁷ This idea of fulfillment, the pleroma ("fullness" or "plenitude,") of Christ, is then the main theme of Abhishiktānanda's theology. Further, if the Church is truly serious about entering into dialogue with Hinduism, it is, according to Abhishiktānanda, absolutely essential that it prepares itself adequately. However, this preparation is not at the level of concepts and thoughts, which is theological, but at the deeper level; "the 'knowledge' of those ultimate depths of the self, the 'cave of the heart' where the mystery revealed itself to the awareness of rishis."²³⁸ It is only here, in the secret place of the heart, that real dialogue can take place."²³⁹ In his 1971 introduction to the English translation, which was conveniently retitled *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*,

²³⁷ *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point—within the Cave of the Heart.*

²³⁸ The sages of Vedic times.

²³⁹ *Sagesse hindoue mystique chrétienne: du Védanta à la Trinité* (Paris, Centurion, 1965). Revised as *Saccidānanda: a Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974, 2nd revised edition 1984).

Abhishiktānanda states that “the theology of ‘fulfillment’” that shaped the earlier edition “is unable to do justice to all the facts of religious pluralism,” nor is any other theoretical resolution of the problem raised by these “facts.” What he was probably try to express was his dissatisfaction with the steps taken on interreligious dialogue at Vatican II, given that its documents, although dramatically more open to the inherent value of non-Christian religions than previous pronouncements, take a position similar to a fulfillment theology (for example, *Nostra aetate*, *Lumen gentium*, *Unitatis red-integratio*). We already saw in the previous chapter that he did not find a theoretical solution to the problem of religious pluralism; however he did propose a practical one, to engage in dialogue with other religions.

A chronological study of Abhishiktānanda's writings, in particular the notes on his diary, suggests that he experienced a spiritual and theological transformation during his twenty-five years in India. He arrived as a Benedictine, scrupulous in his observance, and intent on Christianizing India. Through his early powerful spiritual experiences in the caves of Arunachala and at Gnānānanda's ashram, he tested the depths of both Hinduism' and Christianity' sources. By the mid-1960s, he had articulated a theological synthesis based on these experiences in his *Sagesse hindoue mystique chretienne*, a text profoundly open to Hindu sources yet framed by an inclusivist or “fulfillment” theology of religions. However, most interpreters, drawing from his letters and spiritual diary, recognize an additional transformation activated by his daily meditation on the Upanishads and by his heart attack in July 1973. Due to this spiritual awakening, the painful conflict of earlier

years seems finally to have been fixed, and he lived at peace his last months of life with his double belongingness.²⁴⁰

From Abhishiktānanda's point of view, one of the most crucial outcomes of Vatican II was the National Seminar on the Church that took place in India. This seminar, which occurred in Bangalore in February 1969, saw the continuation of the renewal process started at the council and applied in depth to the Church in India.²⁴¹ Abhishiktānanda was involved in the preparations of the seminar, took part in a meeting which set the tone, wrote articles and a booklet as well as continuing his attempts at an Indian liturgy. He attended the meetings full of enthusiasm, his paper coming as a revelation for the other participants. With his articles, he helped to prepare the foundation for the seminar and considered it a success beyond his highest hopes. He regarded it as an important stage in the awakening of the Church in India. His call for renewed theology and liturgy was taken seriously, and his amendments, calling for ashrams of prayer and silence were passed with large majorities. He was personally pleased that Archbishop Pignedoli, secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, endorsed practically everything he had stood for over the last 20 years. The seminar confirmed his opinion that the Church needs to rediscover her contemplative soul. He was not only an important contributor to the seminar; he was also a serious and passionate participant in the struggle for a theological renewal inside the Church during and soon after Vatican II.

²⁴⁰ Judson B. Trapnell, "Abhishiktānanda's Contemplative Vocation and Contemporary India," *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection* 67, no. 3, (March 2003): 161-179. Both Raimon Panikkar and Michael Amaladoss have called Abhishiktānanda's internal conflicts, the "double belongingness." M. Amaladoss, S.J., "Double Belongingness," *Vidyajyoti* [forthcoming]; and R. Panikkar, Introduction to Abhishiktānanda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, p. xviii).

²⁴¹ The paragraph is based on Du Boulay, S. *The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda*, 203-4.

Abhishiktānanda, the Church, and Vatican II

His book, *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church* (1970), opens with one of Abhishiktānanda's more synthetic definitions of the Church: "The Church is essentially a spiritual reality and Christian religion is, first of all, a living experience in the Spirit. Its source is nothing other than the inner experience of Jesus...the Church is the social and human milieu in which that experience of Jesus is transmitted through all ages and to all men by the Word and the Sacraments. She is not an end in herself. She is a sign, herself a sacrament...just as in man the essential is the spirit, so in the Church, too, the essential is the inner reality in the heart of every man where his spirit is in direct communion with the Holy Spirit."²⁴² In this passage, we find several images of the Church. The Church—Abhishiktānanda says—is a 'spiritual reality' and also 'the social milieu and human.' She is not an end in herself and is a sacrament. Abhishiktānanda devoted many efforts to redefine his idea of the Church, especially subsequent to a certain number of years after his arrival in India. Indeed, it is surprising to discover that his first thoughts on the Church, reported in his diaries, date back to 1955, seven years after his arrival to Tiruccirappalli (Trichy). Following the notes he left in his diary and the content of the texts he published in his 25 years spent in India, there are a number of issues that arise with recurrence and different images of the Church. The issues are those on the extension (or borders) of the Church and the historical phase in which she was. The two issues found their connection soon enough, even if a long period of gestation was needed before he found an acceptable degree of completeness. In practice, the Church was working through a crisis that was due to a contemplative deficit. The images of the Church Abhishiktānanda had in mind changed over time, influenced by his personal experience

²⁴² *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church*, (Bangalore: Dharmaram College, 1970), 1-2.

and from the theological debate that was around him. The three main images, which are reported in his writings are: the Church as a community, as a sacrament, and as a service. The Church—Abhishiktānanda maintains—should be the “community of love,” the social realization of God's love, the leaven (yeast) of the dough. However, the Church exists prior to any meeting, before any foundation, before any institutionalization. The Church is. “The Church is the mystery of Christ...its *koinonia* (communion) is the expression on inter-subjectivity of the consciences.”²⁴³ The Church is above all the mystery that every human being is *natu a deo* in a total human community, which extends to all times and all places. The Church should be composed of groups of people who follow the Gospel, who do not lose time discussing whether they are more or less Christian than others, who offer the cheek and live completely dedicated to their brothers and sisters. The Church is also a sacrament. As a sacrament, it is completely subject to the manifestation of the Spirit. In the Eucharist, the Church is present and celebrated. Finally, the Church is at the service of the unification of the world in God.

Of course, there was a fourth image with which Abhishiktānanda was continually dealing, especially when he needed to criticize the Church—the Church as an institution. He never stopped his criticism against the institutional Church. For him, the institutional Church was Israel. “The Church is Israel extended to the Mediterranean world in the setting of the Roman Empire and its successors, but she is hardly extended beyond these limits even to our days. The Church is Israel, which does not recognize anymore the privilege of race and blood to enter the kingdom, but still recognizes members of the Kingdom those who have accepted integration into the human form of society in which

²⁴³ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, 20.7.70.

she has developed.”²⁴⁴ He reminds that the interior life of the spirit is the most important thing in the life of both the Christian individuals and the Church herself, although the ecclesiastical authorities have all too often been more concerned with the external aspects of the institution rather than with the work of the Spirit. This has produced “dangerous deviations,” “unhealthy and superstitious use of the sacraments” and “a shameless collusion with worldly powers, either political or economical.” It has also promoted “an improper rivalry” with other religions. However, quite surprisingly, he also expressed interest on the Church’s life. We know how important the institutional Church was for Abhishiktānanda. He cared about its future. His concern for the Church was particularly evident in the years of the Second Vatican Council. He read the Constitutions, Degrees, and Declarations, and he was excited by the news that was coming from Rome. He admitted that “there is a breath of the Spirit such as the Church has rarely known in the past.”²⁴⁵ Murray Rogers remembers how Abhishiktānanda was optimistic, full of hope, and animated, finding the council “splendid.” To sum up, his every image of the Church was developed, discussed and reflected based on his deep sense of dissatisfaction with the Church and his perception of the insufficient value of the institutional model.

The Contemplative Church and the Interreligious Dialogue

Abhishiktānanda was dreaming of a Church able to rediscover the contemplative soul. He believed that the Church needed to reclaim its contemplative roots because she was facing two formidable challenges in the contemporary world. On the one side, by those forces in the modern Western world, which consider Christianity to be, at best, no more than “a kind of fiduciary currency, lacking security, worth just the credulity of the

²⁴⁴ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien–sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, 6.9.55.

²⁴⁵ *Letters Spiritual and Theological*, Kergonan Archives, 10.10. 63.

ignorant man.”²⁴⁶ He also added, “At the present juncture in the history...the sense of the Mystery is everywhere being increasingly obscured even in those whose special vocation is to bear witness among their brothers to the *eschaton*, to the presence here and now of the ultimate realities. The spirit of secular activism corrodes everything. So in the West monks and clergy seek to establish their status in society and ask for a social recognition which is purely secular in character.”²⁴⁷ On the other hand, there was the challenge, which the civilizations of the East presented out of their own spiritual experience. The focus of attention will be on this second aspect. In fact, he always hoped and prayed that the Church could be redeemed by those “deep contemplative souls” who, open to the Spirit, attune the Church to that same Spirit, thus ensuring that she can open herself to the dialogue with the other religions. Abhishiktānanda clearly linked the spiritual awakening of the Church to the dialogue with the deeply contemplative and spiritually religious traditions of the East. In the revised English version of *Saccidananda*, written in 1971, he offers his most clear passages about the urgent imperative of a Hindu-Christian dialogue in the fullest sense of the term. He opens his introduction with some remarks about the changes that have taken place in the Church and in the world at large since the book’s composition in the early 1960s. He also makes a comment regarding the Second Vatican Council. He says “the Vatican Council took it for granted that salvation is open to any sincere man, whatever religious convictions he may or may not have, and thereby recognized the fact that only a minority of men will work out their eternal destiny with any reference to Christ’s incarnation. Not only is it necessary to grant the actual existence of religious pluralism here and now, but it is also impossible to foresee a time in the

²⁴⁶ *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church*, 10.

²⁴⁷ *The Further Shore*. (chapter 3).

historical future when Christianity might become for mankind as a whole even the predominant—let alone the only—way to realizing their transcendent vocation.”²⁴⁸

Abhishiktānanda does not involve himself in theoretical and theological problem posed for the Church by these new developments, but stresses that a real interreligious dialogue must go well beyond “relations of mutual sympathy” and beyond debate about doctrinal matters, and aim at “a kind of inner communion at the level of the spirit, so that, even when a difference of opinion cannot be bridged at the conceptual level, both parties instinctively look for a higher and deeper insight to which their opposing ways of expressing themselves are only partial approximations.”²⁴⁹

This intellectualized approach of indefinite research versus actual experience is futile. It is thanks to her contemplative soul that the Church in India can assimilate the spirituality offered by the Hindu tradition, and, in turn, find “the best openings through which to instill the grace of the Holy Spirit entrusted to her” and pursue with Hinduism “a kind of inner communion at the level of the spirit.” As he had said most emphatically in *Saccinanda*, “If Christianity should prove incapable of assimilating Hindu spiritual experience from within, Christians would thereby at once lose the right to claim that it is the universal way of salvation...In their claim to be ultimate, Christianity and *advaita* are mutually exclusive. And yet in its own sphere, the truth of *advaita* is unassailable. If Christianity is unable to integrate it in the light of a higher truth, the inference must follow that *advaita* includes and surpasses the truth of Christianity and that it operates on a higher level than that of Christianity. There is no escape from this dilemma.”²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ *Sagesse hindoue mystique chrétienne: du Védanta à la Trinité*, xi.

²⁴⁹ *Sagesse hindoue mystique chrétienne: du Védanta à la Trinité*, xiii.

²⁵⁰ *Sagesse hindoue mystique chrétienne: du Védanta à la Trinité*, 47-8.

Redeeming her contemplative character, the Church is not only able to establish an inner communion with Hinduism, but can also maintain the right to claim she is the universal way of salvation. In other words, Abhishiktānanda links contemplation not only to the Hindi-Christian dialogue, but also to any interreligious dialogue. To be fully Catholic, or universal, the Church must integrate into her own life all nations, all cultures and all languages. Just as Christianity incorporated Judaism and Greek thought, so the Church could incorporate Hindu thought. At the same time, and for the same reason, any dialogue is not possible if it does not happen at the level of the spirit and is likely to be ineffective as a dialogue at the level of religious truth. From Abhishiktānanda's perspective, the dialogue with Hinduism is as needed as was the dialogue with the Hellenistic world in the early Church. He thought that what was happening in India was simply a corresponding event to what happened in the first centuries of the Christian era when the Church developed within the religious and philosophical context of the Hellenistic world. "The greatest Doctors and Fathers of the primitive Church first drank deep of Greek language, literature and philosophy. Then under the grace of the Spirit, they achieved almost unconsciously within themselves the synthesis...referred to above."²⁵¹

He affirmed that there are no non-cultural religions. Every religion is rooted, encapsulated, expressed in a culture, beginning with the most primordial and hidden archetypes which necessarily govern its view of the world. That suggests that there is a kind of primary experience, an original consciousness".²⁵² Abhishiktānanda clearly express this point in a note of his diary, when he explain how the process from the

²⁵¹ The Church in India: An Essay in Christian Self-criticism, 37.

²⁵² Friesen, *Abhishiktānanda's Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience*, 50.

primary experience to the dogma works.²⁵³ The dream is not true, but has its own truth. It is true in the sense that it expresses the primary experience. We can not reach this experience, but we enjoy a representation, the dream. Thus the myth works as well. The myth is like a big collective dream. It seems original, it seems to be the primary experience, but it is just an expression. Reason then works on myth, and turns it into an absolute truth. “This interpretation of experience being elaborated by archetypes and myths, and finally by concepts, is supported by other writings of Abhishiktānanda. Over time, the archetypes crystallize into conceptual formulas, rituals and religious rules ... This results in a “sclerosis” of religious archetypes, to a conceptual and sociological sedimentation. Abhishiktānanda says that people must go back to original experience or intuition, beyond the cultural formulations and rites of religion, beyond all expression and even beyond the archetypes.”²⁵⁴ When people do this and are able to descend into the ultimate depths, they “recognize that there is no common denominator at the level of *namarupa* [names and forms]. Therefore, they should accept *namarupa* of the most varied kinds. Moreover, they should play the game with those names and forms in the same manner as the Lord does with the worlds. They should penetrate to the depth of each one’s mystery and accept the relativity of all formulations.”²⁵⁵ In Abhishiktānanda’s view, to say that something is symbol or myth does not mean it is not true. Because each myth is only one approach to the same mystery, myths are relativized. The truths of the Church are true but only at a relative level. Everything is true in the Church at the level of symbol, but that is only the level of *māyā*. Abhishiktānanda felt deeply the challenge he faced in experiencing and expressing the relativization of religious forms. “The moment

²⁵³ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, (2.2.73).

²⁵⁴ Friesen, *Abhishiktānanda’s Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience*, 50-1.

²⁵⁵ *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His life told through his letters*, 284, 26.1.73.

in history in which we are living calls us to a stern purification of all our means—institutional, intellectual, etc. To recognize the essential beyond all the forms in which it repeatedly embodies itself...But then, in allowing the forms to yield their place, not to lose anything of the essential. The motives for abandoning forms are so mixed—just as mixed as those for keeping them intact. Who will be able to recognize the Spirit in all its purity? Who will be willing always to want nothing but the Spirit?”

The Exhaustion of Culture

The idea behind Abhishiktānanda’s thought is that of culture’s exhaustion. Abhishiktānanda—like others of his generation—interpreted the twentieth century, the two world wars, the end of colonial empires, and the shuffle of peoples and cultures, as a historic moment comparable to the fall of the Roman Empire. An epochal juncture that called into question the institutional structure of the church, her social orientation, her visible and doctrinal nature, had opened the way for new experiences, as had happened in the fifth and sixth centuries after Christ (Saint Benedict, Gregory the Great, etc.). As the rural monasteries replaced the urban basilicas in the past, so now the new oasis of spiritual sources will replace the institutional Church and her lack of Spirit. Christians were found naked in front of Christ, sustained by their faith, upheld by the read, meditated, and assimilated Gospel. While enthusiastic about the council (Panikkar notes that “he reads among others Congar, Mouroux, Schillebeeckx and enthusiastically follows what happens at Vatican II in Rome”²⁵⁶), Abhishiktānanda had the feeling that Vatican II had come too late and done too little. Too late to face the epochal magnitude of the transformations, too little because the review of the founding principles of

²⁵⁶ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien–sannyasi hindou*, 347.

Catholicism to which the council was committed depleted all the energies, leaving the Church exhausted before undertaking the construction of the new phase. In particular, Abhishiktānanda assumed that the intellectual tools to interpret adequately the crisis were missing; he also supposed that the Church was in a phase of exhaustion pertaining to the cultures such that there was no new thought capable of a new cultural synthesis. The Church, according to Abhishiktānanda, survives to serve herself. Her Christian design to be applied to the whole world is a shadow of the *Constantinian temptation*. The Church is still imprisoned in the medieval ideal of the City of God on Earth, and is incapable of providing an answer to the new age; imprisoned in an institutional posture and a doctrinal obsolescence, she is not in the position to offer warmth and comfort. Abhishiktānanda's thoughts had moved away from a "heavy" and "doctrinal" Christianity to a "light" and "spiritual" Christianity. This passage, he argued, brought profound change to the Church. In a time when the priority is interior and meditation, he saw the profile of a Church engaged in an anabasis, a journey backward, from the presence in the temporal to the reconstruction of conscience. From the political and the doctrinal, it moved to the recovery of the sense of the invisible and transcendent sense of God, the work of the Spirit.

In the previous chapter, it was told that Abhishiktānanda was aware of the intrinsic tension between the cosmic Church and the acosmic *samnyāsa*, and also that he was unable to articulate an adequate solution in theological terms. Therefore, it may not be surprising that, as compelling as the call to relativize religious forms in relation to "the essential" was for Abhishiktānanda, he nonetheless was shocked when he read Panikkar's essay on the "Supername." He described this essay as "an attempt to lead Christians as

gently as possible to accept that in losing their *namarupa* they still keep everything...we have to accept that it is all *namarupa*—and to begin with, the idea of *Salvation*.”²⁵⁷ Nothing that is on the conceptual level has absolute value. Now, Christian dogmas are conceptual—mythical expressions of the “mystery.” “Christ’s *namarupa* (names and forms) necessarily explode, but the Church wants to keep us virtually at the level of the *namarupa*.” Later, he will continue that thought. “Christ is not a *namarupa*. His true name is I AM.”²⁵⁸

Church and Awakening

Abhishiktānanda’s search for God was the expression of his monastic vocation. His ecclesiology, however, was the result of a constellation of influences, encounters, experiences. His call for a contemplative soul of the Church was not unusual in those decades; and his interpretation of the Church as a communion of people, Christians and non-Christian, was quite aligned with the spirit of Vatican II. Also his idea that monasticism may play a crucial role in the Church, and allow her to rediscover her spiritual side, was based on the Patristic renewal of his times. At the end of his life, however, Abhishiktānanda made a further step, and began looking at the Church as primary for all men in their awakening. In this way, he was probably trying to link together: the concept he borrowed from Panikkar that “Christianity is ‘provisional,’ only of this world”; that “Christ is not a *namarupa*. His true name is I AM.”; and finally his personal experience of awakening: “This is the culmination of the intuition that struck me

²⁵⁷ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien–sannyasi hindou*, James Stuart says that this view appears to have been at least partly triggered by Panikkar’s essay on the “Supername:” “Salvation in Christ: Concreteness and Universality: the Supername” (Jerusalem: Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies, 1972). A *Diary* entry from 1971 refers to Panikkar’s view that every theological problem arises out of a particular faith. (11.12.71). See also *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien–sannyasi hindou*, p. 371 (2.2.73), where Abhishiktānanda specifically refers to Panikkar’s idea of the Supername.

²⁵⁸ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien–sannyasi hindou*, (10.7. 72).

in January... There is only the Awakening. All that is 'notional' – myths and concepts – is only its expression. There is neither heaven nor earth, there is only Purusha which I am..."²⁵⁹ The development of his thought can be followed in a few intermediate passages of his diaries. He says that "the Church is primarily all those men who are in the present state or in the potential state of their awakening."²⁶⁰ Here Abhishiktānanda links the Church with the awakening and seems to make quite a radical point: the Church is for all man in their awakening. But it is not a point that departs from tradition. What it needed here is the word 'metanoia' for 'awakening'. By *metanoia* (a Greek word) it meant a change of heart, going beyond (meta) the mental-rational (*nous*).²⁶¹ Monasticism sustains that metanoia is like the desert. Not the geographical location, but the timeless space in which the Word resounds. It is the space in which forms are annulled, in which voices are silenced, in which silence dominates, along with solitude and the invisible. The desert is the place of nakedness, the abolition of languages, the non-historical condition ("I am not...I am not...I am not...I am a voice of one that cries in the desert") (John 1:21-3). Metanoia is the irruption of God who became part of the history. What Abhishiktānanda is doing here is to reaffirm the monastic tradition of *historia salutis*: the present time, intermediate, which goes from the Ascension of Christ to His parousia, is the time of the Church, a time of tension between the "already" and "not yet". "The Church—that is, all those who are already awakened to Christ—as a humble servant of God and of his children, have to seek ways of leading each man through his own actual environment to

²⁵⁹ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou*, (11.9. 73).

²⁶⁰ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou*, (25.8. 70).

²⁶¹ *Metanoia*, (Lat. *poenitentia*): the Greek signifies primarily a 'change of mind' or 'change of intellect': not only sorrow, contrition or regret, but more positively and fundamentally the conversion or turning of our whole life towards God, Self, etc. This term is traditionally translated into English as 'repentance'. That it has a moral connotation is clear enough; what's generally not clear to the modern reader is that this moral connotation substantially presupposes a change in man's life.

an authentic awakening; that is, to a conversion, a *metanoia*, at the very source of his being.”²⁶² Here he is taking it a step further: he links the image of the Church of awakening with the image of the servant Church. In the final result of Abhishiktānanda’s ecclesiology, the Church is now a universal symbol of salvation. “Its mission is not redemption but epiphany.”²⁶³ There is no danger of an indistinct membership of the Church, since *metanoia* is not a product of a mystical experience; it is an attribute of faith. In fact, one believes with all his/her heart, he/she opens him/herself up to the mystery and then there is the breakage of the heart, the change of life. Yet, it is faith that transforms an extraordinary experience into a *metanoia* (awakening). Plus, the Church is not the agent of awakening: only Christ is. As the monk does not go to the monastery to be with God but it is the familiarity with God that brings the monk to the monastery, so it is the familiarity with God that bring those who awakened to the Church. Here it can be heard the sound of the Unknown Christ already at work in India.

In February 1973, he finally wrote, “The myth of the Church is left behind, as is the myth of Christ. They have been marvelous guidelines, but by being turned in on themselves, they have lost their elemental force as myths appealing to the depths of the human heart. And the myth can no longer be recovered. The Christian and ecclesial myths are now exploding into symbols that are more powerful, more universal (though still mythical) in their deep insertion and rootedness in the cosmos, and yet often less remote from the invisible archetypes and more meaningful to modern hearts....In these days evolution is

²⁶² *Sagesse hindoue mystique chrétienne: du Védanta à la Trinité*, xiii.

²⁶³ Antony Kalliath, *Liberative Dialogue Towards Harmony Of Life: Interrogating Catholic Missiology in a Futuristic Perspective*. www.theo.kuleuven.ac.be/clt/Specialized-Seminar%20Kalliath.doc

tending towards an awakening at the level of the archetypes themselves. But who is capable of an awakening beyond symbols?”²⁶⁴

Conclusion

Abhishiktānanda made a wide path during his life in India with regard to the Church. He moved from a missionary attitude to a universal prospective. “The Christian goes to his brother without any trace of paternalism, without any inferiority complex which blurs the best of his intentions. He meets him at the very level, material, intellectual, spiritual, in which he lives.”²⁶⁵ This was far from the attitude of Abhishiktānanda himself upon his arrival in India. Marie-Madeline Davy wrote of him, “c’est entièrement purifié de toute attitude missionnaire” (he was entirely purified of all missionary attitudes). He was able to speak this way only because he had lived, suffered and enjoyed the double belonging both to India and to the Church. He tried to reconcile his love for India and his love for the Church. He envisioned a Church that was able to be home for people like him. Sri Lankan liberation theologian Aloysius Pieris, SJ, praises Abhishiktānanda's ability to move beyond a mere assimilation of a non-Christian world view to a full participation in it. “He and the memory he has left behind remains to this day the sole explanation of what he did for the sake of a Church which has refused for centuries to be baptized in the Jordan of Asia's spirituality. Thus he still lingers in our memory as a “type” of a Church that is yet to be conceived in the womb of Asia.”²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ *La montée au fond du coeur: le journal intime du moine chrétien-sannyasi hindou 1984-1973*, 373.

²⁶⁵ *The Church in India: an essay in Christian self-criticism*, 64.

²⁶⁶ Trapnell, “Abhishiktānanda's Contemplative Vocation and Contemporary India,” 161-179.

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Abhishiktānanda was an outstanding character. He crossed in silence the first part of his life, in France. Then he started to 'talk', and with this we mean that he talked through his writings, his sometimes difficult dialogue with Monchanin, his meetings. Little by little, as it said, he found his voice, and - as Panikkar pointed out - his place in the Church of India and more generally in the universal Church. From the day of his death, efforts to study and reflect on his life and his works have multiplied. The Abhishiktānanda Society, which for nearly thirty years has been working earnestly to fulfill its original objectives, is now arriving at a successful culmination point. Since the year 2000, the Executive Committee has been reflecting on the continued relevance of the Society. On 7 December 2007, after considering all aspects, the General Body decided unanimously that the Abhishiktānanda Society should cease to exist as a formal structure. After nearly thirty years, the aims for which the Society was founded have been practically fulfilled. Abhishiktānanda is now well known and the Society was dissolved in 2008. Aside from the Abhishiktānanda Society, the bibliography collects an increasing number of articles and books on various aspects of his theology and spirituality. The attention to him has increased with time. It is not only his life, so unique, so different, that inspires works and thoughts, but also his writings, and sometimes the style of his writings. Le Saux was a poet - Panikkar says - and he knew it. He was considered courageous, a risk taker, maybe rash. He was certainly a talented man.

And yet, it is precisely the time that has elapsed since his death that allows us to highlight a set of reasons that make Abhishiktānanda so interesting, reasons beyond the biographical information, and the content of his writings. And this set of reasons revolves around the convergence of themes and forces that he intercepted and was able to personify. In the quarter of a century that goes from the two decades prior to Vatican II to the period immediately after its end, Abhishiktānanda was a point of convergence of major themes and influences, which are briefly summarized here. He was trained in the tradition of one of the first forms of Christianity, monasticism. He read the works of the Fathers in his years in the monastery, and we know they left an indelible impression on him. He was inspired by the *ressourcement*, which meant a return to earlier sources, traditions and symbols of the early Church. He lived as a monk and as a Desert Father. He enthusiastically participated to the "*aggiornamento*" (updating) of the whole life of the Church. He was a product of the Church of Vatican I, he lived those years and never denied them, though certainly he did not love them. However, he had his own personal Vatican II when he went to India, and then followed his inspiration that led him not in churches but in temples, not to priests but to wise men. He viscerally loved the Church, and was a Church's faithful representative. As has been repeated by those who knew, as it is discoverable from his writings, he never left the Church, and continued until the end of his life to make part of her. At the same time, he carried on his personal experience of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. He developed an ecclesiology that might bring the Church back to her roots, and found in Hinduism the terms that best expressed his thoughts. Many of the debates of the council, many of the theological and spiritual issues

that have crossed Vatican II and have remained there, still waiting for a solution, may be found in his writings, and particularly in his diaries. Like John XXIII, also Abhishiktānanda could have said to "open the windows" of the Church to the world and to other religions.

Towards an Assessment of Abhishiktānanda's Ecclesiology

The judgment of the legacy of Abhishiktānanda's ecclesiology is quite complicated if it is assessed in the light of the reception of Vatican II. In the introduction, the letter of Benedict XVI about the interreligious dialogue was reported. An interreligious dialogue – he says - in the strict sense is not possible. However, his statement is neither isolated nor sudden. It comes after a long series of acts, documents, positions, which extends for at least 20 years. We can identify a starting point: the meeting in Assisi in 1986, where, not surprisingly, the then Cardinal Ratzinger was absent. And a sequence of steps: an encyclical of John Paul II, a book of John Paul II, two speeches of Cardinal Ratzinger, two declarations by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, three sentences against three theologians of the pluralistic theology of religions.

On October 27, 1986, John Paul II called together the world's religious leaders to a World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi. He said, "For the first time in history, we have come together from everywhere, Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and World Religions, in this sacred place dedicated to Saint Francis, to witness before the world, each according to his own conviction, about the transcendent quality of peace."²⁶⁷

Seeing the Pope in white among all the colourfully dressed holy men sent a powerful

²⁶⁷ Pope John Paul II, Address to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions, Basilica of Saint Francis, 27 October 1986.

message around the world and was one of the high points of John Paul II's entire pontificate. However, some saw a different message: something about that each faith is as good as the other, and among which the Catholic Church does not play any different role. What did not escape notice was that Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect for the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was not in attendance. The custodian of sound Catholic doctrine, his absence served as a severe criticism of the Pope.

The encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* was issued four years later. As seen in its initial Latin words, the theme of this encyclical is the evangelizing mission of the Church. In this encyclical, John Paul II lays out the evangelical mission of the Church, debunking the growing idea that there are ways to salvation independent of Christ, or indeed, aside from the Church. In effect, beginning from the affirmation of the Second Vatican Council in the decree *Nostra Aetate*, according to which “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions,” the period after the council saw the widespread approval of the idea of transforming the missions into a commitment to foster the maturation of the “seeds of truth” present in the various religions. He “contrasts this indifferent mentality, unfortunately widely diffused among Christians as well, which is rooted in incorrect theological views marked by a religious relativism that leads to the conviction that one religion is as good as another.”²⁶⁸ It affirms that no other religion can save anyone apart from Christ, the “way, the truth, and the life.”

Between the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) and the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000), however, there is a gradual growing critical attention to non-Christian Eastern religion. In 1993, Cardinal Ratzinger gave a speech in Hong Kong to the presidents of the

²⁶⁸ *Redemptoris Missio*, 36.

Asian bishops' conferences. His reasoning was developed in three phases: the arts; culture and faith; Christian faith and non-Christian religions. In the introduction, he focused his attention on the universal character of Christianity. "Christianity entered the world conscious of a universal mission. From the first, the followers of Jesus Christ recognized their duty to pass on their faith to all men. They saw in the faith a good which did not belong to them alone, but one to which all had a claim. It would have been disloyal not to carry what had been given to them to the farthest corners of the earth. The point of departure of Christian universalism was not the drive to power, but the certainty of having received the saving knowledge and redeeming love which all men had a claim to and were yearning for in the inmost recesses of their beings. Mission was not perceived as expansion for the wielding of power, but as the obligatory transmission of what was intended for everyone and which everyone needed. Doubts have arisen today about the universality of Christian faith. Many no longer see the history of worldwide mission as the history of the diffusion of liberating truth and love, but as a history of alienation and violation."²⁶⁹

In his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, published in 1995, John Paul II discussed further his views about world religions. He suggested that some religions, such as the animist religions of Africa, are closer to Christianity and with which, conversions are easier. Interestingly, he suggests that the "great religions" of the Far East, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism, are more "systematic" in

²⁶⁹ J. Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures," Discourse to the presidents of the Asian bishops' conferences and the chairmen of their doctrinal commissions, Hong Kong, March 2-5, 1993.

nature and are less penetrable. This would explain why "the missionary activity of the Church has born, we must acknowledge, very modest fruit."²⁷⁰

A document from the International Theological Commission, issued a few months later, reaffirmed the ancient expression "*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*" (Outside the Church there is no salvation). The document also describes the three main currents at work inside the Catholic theology. There is the "exclusivist" current, which defends the thesis that Christianity is the only salvific faith and the only direct revelation of God to humanity. For the exclusivists, the ancient expression "*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*" ("Outside the Church there is no salvation") is true. Then there is the 'inclusivist' current, which is well represented in Catholic theology by Karl Rahner. For this current, the previous maxim is reversed: "*Ubi salus ibi Ecclesia*" ("Wherever there is salvation, there is the Church"). And what they mean by the Church is a community made up of baptized and professed Christians and of "anonymous Christians" (those believers who find salvation in their respective religions, including those of Asia, and enter mysteriously by these tortuous ways, without realizing it, into the one Church of Christ). Then there is the "pluralists" current.

The matter of religious plurality reached an apex with the investigation into the work of the theologian Dupuis, who had lived and worked for many years as a Jesuit in India. Shortly after his arrival at Gregorian University in Rome, he published a book that was a summation of his teachings, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (1997).²⁷¹ He had a reputation as an orthodox theologian, had been a consultant to the

²⁷⁰ Pope Paul John II and Vittorio Messori, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

²⁷¹ J. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

Vatican for the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and his work had garnered no criticism until 1999 when he was notified that he was under investigation. Dupuis believes that Jesus Christ is the only 'human face' in which God has revealed Himself, but he recognizes that the same God is always present and at work also in His ways in the non-Christian religions. He holds that the Hindu religion is an "imperfect shadow" of the supreme Christian revelation, but that the Hindu faith is capable of "discovering new depths in Christianity." While Dupuis was a member of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1991, this statement was issued that moves the discussion forward: "Members of other religions receive the salvation of Jesus Christ, even if they do not recognize him as Savior, through the practice of what is good in their own religious traditions." In Dupuis book, he never makes the point that all religions have equal validity, because if that were to be acknowledged, the mission of the Church, and its exclusivity, would lose its meaning. However, he let rise the suspicion that his thesis offers a hand in the disarmament of the missionary vocation of the Church. In the end, Dupuis signed a Vatican pronouncement that reaffirmed that "it is contrary to the Catholic faith to consider the various religions of the world as ways complementary to the Church in the order of salvation."

The declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is dated August 6, 2000, completes the picture of the Church's relationship to religious pluralism. It reads: "The thesis that the revelation of Jesus Christ is of a limited, incomplete, and imperfect character, and must be completed by the revelation present in other religions, is contrary to the faith of the Church ... This position radically contradicts the affirmations of faith according to which the full and complete revelation of the salvific mystery of

God is given in Jesus Christ.”²⁷² The declaration intends to reflect Paul’s assertion that “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3) and restates the fundamental truth of the “uniqueness and universal salvific character of Jesus and the Church.”

In 2007, “precisely because some contemporary theological research has been erroneous, or ambiguous”, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith prepared a document in order “to clarify the authentic meaning of certain ecclesiological statements of the Magisterium.” In this document, the Congregation sustains that the meaning of the affirmation that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church is that Christ “established here on earth” only one Church and instituted it as a “visible and spiritual community,”²⁷³ that from its beginning and throughout the centuries has always existed and will always exist, and in which alone are found all the elements that Christ himself instituted. (²⁷⁴) “This one Church of Christ, which we confess in the Creed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic ... This Church, constituted and organized in this world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the Bishops in communion with him.”²⁷⁵ In number 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* ‘subsistence’ means this perduring, historical continuity and the permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church,²⁷⁶ in which the Church of Christ is concretely found on this earth. It is possible, according to Catholic doctrine, to affirm correctly that the Church of Christ is present and operative in the Churches and ecclesial Communities not yet fully in communion with the Catholic Church, on account

²⁷² Dominus Iesus, no. 6.

²⁷³ Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 8.1.

²⁷⁴ Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3.2; 3.4; 3.5; 4.6.

²⁷⁵ Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen gentium*, 8.2.

²⁷⁶ Congregation for The Doctrine of The Faith, Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 1.1: AAS 65 [1973] 397; Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, 16.3: AAS 92 [2000-II] 757-758; Notification on the Book of Leonardo Boff, OFM, “Church: Charism and Power”: AAS 77 [1985] 758-759.

of the elements of sanctification and truth that are present in them.²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the word “subsists” can only be attributed to the Catholic Church alone precisely because it refers to the mark of unity that we profess in the symbols of the faith (I believe... in the “one” Church); and this “one” Church subsists in the Catholic Church.²⁷⁸

Main Contribution

This dissertation concerns the contribution of Abhishiktānanda / Henri Le Saux OSB, to the modern Catholic ecclesiology. The dissertation has tried to frame this contribution within the life of Abhishiktānanda and the more general process in the Church of his day. The main contribution of this dissertation lies in having chosen ecclesiology as the angle of observation. While there are an increasing number of books on Abhishiktānanda’s theology, a work focusing on his thoughts on the Church does not yet exist. Normally, the focus is placed more on his life, or on the relationship between Christianity and Advaita. The perspective chosen for this thesis has been fruitful. First, it made it possible to again place Abhishiktānanda firmly within the Church, where he has always been, but where different interpretations had sought to remove him. Someone claimed that he left the Church; this hypothetical leave is not supported by historical data. Second, it was possible to identify the theological and spiritual tradition to which he belonged within the more general Christian theology. Some works on Abhishiktānanda were very detailed on which school of Hindu thought he had studied; the same attention was not devoted to the Christian side of his thought. This dissertation pointed out that he developed his thinking within the monastic tradition, and tried to update the message as the *nouvelle théologie* suggested. Third, his ecclesiology is well-founded not only in the theological work before

²⁷⁷ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, 11.3: AAS 87 [1995-II] 928.

²⁷⁸ Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 8.2.

the Council, but also in Vatican II's documents. Once placed in the historical and theological context of his time, Abhishiktānanda's thoughts are much less heterodox than some critics claim.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

Abhishiktānanda's ecclesiology is a labyrinth of paths, in which this dissertation represents only an introduction. This dissertation detected only superficially the main influences that are the foundation of his thought on the Church and have influenced its development. Patristic theology, above all, and its orientation to the Scriptures, particularly the vision of the pilgrim people of God, on their way to salvation. And certainly the vision of a universal Church, yet well-planted in the local realities. The richness of Abhishiktānanda's ecclesiology is still to be fully grasped. It contains treasures of theological synthesis and spiritual insights of sure value, which ideally creates a bridge between the monastic tradition and modern ecclesiology. He was a monk, but well aware of the content of the theological debate on his times. He was able to merge the theological concepts with his spiritual discernments and penetrated deeply the meaning of the historical events of his times. His ecclesiology was in line with those of his time, yet it expresses a primitive energy, a spiritual force, and a very human simplicity. Once he is placed in his time and the theological conversation that precedes and goes through the Vatican II, Abhishiktānanda's thought on the Church looks much more interesting than it might seem.

Final Thought

Abhishiktānanda dreamed of a Church with a contemplative soul, which was a sign of universal salvation beyond names and forms. He wrote that “the only principle of interreligious dialogue is truth; the only way it can succeed is through love.” Perhaps we may conclude our study on Abhishiktānanda’s ecclesiology with the same dream, a Church that is engaged in a dialogue of love with other religions, and together with them, walk in search of the final truth.

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