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REPORTS

The Abhishiktananda Society

An Introduction

Swami Abhishiktananda (with his French name Henri Le Saux) passed away on 7th December, 1973, at the age of only 63. The early death of this pioneer of Hindu-Christian dialogue at its deepest level left an impact on all those who knew him, who felt that they should take up that 'grain of wheat which had died' and which promised to give a rich harvest. Being a truly spiritual man, Swami Abhishiktananda did not leave behind any unaccomplished tasks or unfulfilled desires. Yet, his life and thought remained a challenge to Hindus and Christians alike, to the Church and to seekers of new (and old) paths of spiritual life.

A group of his friends decided to form a society whose legal status was necessary to assure the copyright of his books and unpublished papers. The *Abhishiktananda Society* was founded in 1978 with Prof. Raimundo Panikkar as its first president.

The Society has set itself mainly two aims to fulfil:

1. The publication, collection and translation into various languages of Swamiji's writings, as well as writings about him and his message.
2. The continuation of his ideals and ideas in a living way, which includes personal contact and correspondence with people interested in him and in interreligious dialogue in general, organisation of meetings and seminars, and collaboration with groups or institutions having similar objectives.

So far the Society has been more engaged in the first task, since a lot of work was to be done on his unpublished writings, especially his spiritual journal which has been published in French. Swamiji's innumerable letters were integrated into a biography compiled by the Secretary, Rev. James Stuart, who has so far done most of the editing and translation work in English. A complete list of publications can be obtained from the Society.

Regarding the second task not much has been done by way of organised meetings, but in December 1985 an "Abhishiktananda Week" was held in Jaiharikhal (Jeevandhara Ashram) whose proceedings were also published in book form.

At present the Society is preparing a Seminar-cum-retreat on "Mysticism: Saiva and Christian" which intends to bring together different sampradayas or schools of mysticism for a living exchange and sharing. The Society also intends to publish the proceedings of this Seminar, maybe enriched by a selection of texts from each of these traditions.

Apart from publications, the Society has also helped in the production of a film on Swamiji for the French television, which has now also been dubbed in English: *Swamiji, un Voyage interieur* ("Swamiji, an Interior Journey"). The film is available on video cassette.

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The Society is bringing out an "Occasional Bulletin" once a year, containing news about publications and activities, as well as short articles.

Anybody interested in Swami Abhishiktananda, his writings, and the activities of the Society, wanting to become a member and to receive the Bulletin, can write to the Secretary, Rev. James Stuart, Brotherhood House, 7, Court Lane, Delhi 110054, or the President, Dr. Bettina Bäumer, B1/159 Assi, Varanasi 221005.

Inter-Religious Dialogue Centres

Although it is very much evident that India does cradle quite a few Hindu-Christian Dialogue Centres, it is very difficult to visualize its true picture. More often than not, such centres or institutions remain unknown. So far no serious study has been made providing information about the Hindu-Christian Dialogue initiatives in India.

This modest attempt is to initiate the process of gathering details about the various existing dialogue centres. As a beginning, only two Southern States, viz. Kerala and Tamil Nadu are surveyed, since these two States have a substantial Christian population and an assessment of this type will give us a fairly clear picture of the Christian presence in the Dialogue venture before an All-India survey could be thought of.

Since no address of any of the Dialogue Centres was at hand, a preliminary letter of request was sent to all the Christian Bishops of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The appeal was to identify the Dialogue Centres that exist within the jurisdiction of their particular diocese. The objective of the survey was also made clear in the same letter. It was meant to gather information about the existing Dialogue Centres, their objectives and their regular activities and publications. It was also meant to create an awareness among the public about such ventures and to encourage further initiatives in this line.

A large majority of the Bishops did respond to the appeal, thus making known quite a few Dialogue Centres in the two Southern States.

The second request letter with a questionnaire attached was dispatched directly to the Directors of the Dialogue Centres. The questionnaire sought information such as the year of starting, particulars of activities, the religious denominations and the number of people gathering for the Dialogue, details of publication by the Centre and a self-assessing response to their activities.

Seventeen Centres from both Kerala and Tamil Nadu responded to the questionnaire, giving adequate information about their activities. The survey thus conducted is based solely on primary data made available through the responses received.

Year of Starting. From the available data it appears that the first Inter-religious Dialogue Centre came into existence for the first time in 1968, in Madras. It was almost a decade later (1977) that Madurai and Nagercoil followed suit. In Madurai it

began as a unit of the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary and in Nagercoil it was started as a unit of the Diocesan Pastoral Centre. The fourteen other centres were started later, some as late as the mid-eighties.

The first regular Dialogue Centre was started at Cochin, Kerala in 1983. In 1985, three more Centres sprang up in Salem, Trichy and Kanya Kumari districts of Tamil Nadu. The following year, three Centres were started in Kerala. Two more started in 1987, again in the State of Kerala. The most recent (1988) effort towards Dialogue and Ecumenism is from the city of Calicut in Kerala. Three Centres, however, have not specified the year of starting.

Mention must be made of Fr. Bede Griffiths and his ashram, Shantivanam, situated close to Trichy in Tamil Nadu. Although it considers itself to be more than a Dialogue Centre, the Ashram has a typical Indian set-up. Fr. Bede Griffiths, however, is well known as a man of dialogue and is renowned for his Ashram work in India and his various publications in the line of dialogue. This Ashram was established as early as 1950.

Publications. More than half of the respondents claim to bring out publications in the form of periodic reports, bulletins, books and in other unspecified forms.

Details of Participants. The participants are usually Hindus and Christians. Only two Centres from Tamil Nadu have Muslim participation. The number of participants, however, vary from Centre to Centre. Two Centres have a sizable strength of about 500 participants. Others average to about 80 to 85 participants. Three Centres did not specify the number.

Activities. Inter-religious Dialogue seems to be the main concern of all the Dialogue Centres of both the States. Organizing Seminars also finds an important place. Interaction with other communities comes next in the order of importance. Among others, organizing courses and study of literature of Inter-religious Dialogue and conducting Inter-religious prayer meetings are some of the activities. Dealing with issues of social importance, and organizing competitions also form part of the various activities. Interaction towards ecumenism is also taken up by a few. In general, it can be noted that all Centres are involved in more than two activities.

Directors' assessment of the of their work. Four Centres have marked against very good, good and satisfactory in response to the assessment of their efforts in retrospect. One Centre has specifically said that the response is good but the programmes are limited due to various practical reasons. Undoubtedly, a positive response can be inferred from all the existing Dialogue Centres.

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List of Centres:

Tamil Nadu

- 1950 — Shantivanam, Thaneerpalli
- 1968 — Aikiya Alayam, Madras
- 1977 — Pastoral Centre, Nagercoil
- Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary, Madurai
- 1979 — Jubilee Pastoral Centre, Shantinagar
- 1983 — Divyodaya, Coimbatore
- 1985 — Dialogue & Ecumenism, Kakaveri
- Arul Jyothi Ashram, Trichy
- Centre for Peace & Justice, Kanya Kumari

Kerala

- 1983 — Chavara Cultural Centre, Cochin
- 1986 — Chair for Christian Studies, Calicut University
- Upasana, Thodupuzha
- 1987 — Sacred Heart Church, Kottayam
- Sameeksha, Centre for Indian Spirituality, Kalady
- Kerala Council of Churches, Kottayam
- Pastoral & Missionary Orientation Centre, Calicut
- Kerala United Theological Seminary, Trivandrum

Conclusion. These are the Centres that responded to our questionnaire. It is possible that there are some more Centres in Kerala and Tamil Nadu that escaped our scrutiny. Obviously this survey covers only the Christian initiative. No attempt is made to list the Hindu initiatives in this field, since this was not feasible at the moment. In fact, that would have added a new dimension to our report.

Usually the Christian Centres of Dialogue are the interest and initiatives of some individuals. After some initial struggle they come to be known and accepted by the group to which these individuals belong. Secondly, some of these centres did not begin explicitly to promote dialogue as such. What are known as ashrams among the Christian circles have now taken a definite turn in the direction of Hindu-Christian Dialogue.

Now the Church authorities themselves have brought out official documents encouraging dialogue initiatives and giving guidelines for it. For instance the CBCI Commission for Dialogue which was started in 1966 issued guidelines in 1977 as a Call to Catholics to foster dialogue. As a result various diocese have named someone or other in the diocese to be in charge of dialogue though its growth and continuity mostly depend on the resourcefulness of that individual. In the same way, the Kerala Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in India jointly organized a seminar on Inter-religious dialogue in 1986 and published its report recommending the formation of local inter-religious/ideological dialogue units in different areas in

order to realise peace with justice. There are quite a few attempts of this type at the organizational level.

What is significant here is the increasing Christian involvement in Dialogue and this picture could be true also for the whole of India though the number of centres and personnel could be fewer in the North. But what is important is the atmosphere of dialogue that seems to be emerging on the Indian scene in spite of the fact that only a few are actually involved in dialogue as such when compared to the vastness of the country and its population. But after all, dialogue succeeds only in the hands of people who have charism for it and such people are always few in number.

Navin Frank and Dr. Josephine

The Ecumenical Dialogue of Kirtananda Swami Bhaktipada

Kirtananda Swami Bhaktipada, the first initiated American disciple of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), began a vigorous dialogue with Christian leaders in the mid-1980s. After a dispute with ISKCON's governing body, the General Body Commission, Bhaktipada founded the Worldwide League of Devotees, headquartered at New Vrindaban, a Hare Krishna community, near Moundsville, West Virginia. ISKCON has not been active in Christian dialogue, in the sense of finding a common ground between Hinduism and Christianity. Rather, ISKCON has sought to initiate Christianity into a Hindu-Vaisnava lifestyle, including vegetarianism, chanting, and guru veneration. Bhaktipada has visited Christian leaders throughout the United States. He has dialogued with scholars, clergy, and students. He and his disciples have toured Roman Catholic monastic communities. He has sponsored conferences and seminars at New Vrindaban. Bhaktipada declared,

There is only one religion. Religion means to love God.... So God is the same whether you call Him God, Allah, Buddha, or Jehovah....¹

Bhaktipada was born Keith Ham in 1937 in Peekskill, New York. He was the son of a Baptist minister. As a child he evangelized his classmates and tried to convert them to the Baptist church. As a young man, he became dissatisfied with the Baptists and made a pilgrimage to India in 1965 in search of a genuine spiritual master. His search was unsuccessful until he returned to New York in 1966 and met Prabhupada.

Bhaktipada was one of Prabhupada's most intimate disciples until the latter's death in 1977. Prabhupada asked him to establish the New Vrindaban community in 1968. Bhaktipada envisioned that New Vrindaban would be home to all religions. He teaches that beneath all the outward forms of religion (beneath all the countless faiths and sects), there is an underlying, essential religion. This "essential religion" is called "sanatana dharma." In a conversation with Dr. Harvey Cox of Harvard Divinity School, Bhaktipada said,

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Buddhism, Christianity, Muhammedanism, and Judaism are all faiths. You can choose your faith—you can be born a Christian and then decide to become a Jew—but you cannot change your religion.²

“Religion” is equivalent to the Sanskrit word “dharma” which refers to a person or object’s “inherent nature.” According to Bhaktipada,

The dharma of fire is to give off heat and light. You can’t take that quality away. Our actual nature is that we are part and parcel of God. That cannot be changed.³

Thus,

One may be born a Christian, but if he actually understands this principle [i.e., of sanatana dharma], he’ll recognize it anywhere. If he doesn’t, then he doesn’t recognize his own religion. He simply follows religion and dogma.⁴

In his dialogue with Christians, Bhaktipada organized the Interfaith Circle of Friends which are groups that meet throughout the United States for interfaith discussion. He sponsored the World Teachers’ Seminar in 1989 to bring together leaders of various religious movements for week-long retreats at New Vrindaban.

An Interfaith Conference was held at New Vrindaban in June 1988. It was attended by leaders of mainline churches, as well as representatives from such groups as the Church of Scientology and the Unification Church.

A primary theme of the Conference was the crucial need for spiritual insight and renewal in today’s world. The impetus for the Conference was discussed in the New Vrindaban periodical *New Vrindaban Worldwide* (October, 1988). Quoting theologian Gordon Kaufman, it stated that

The problems which modernity confronts us—extending even to the possibility that we may obliterate mankind completely by a nuclear holocaust—demands that we bring together all the wisdom, devotion, and insight that humanity has accomplished in its long history....⁵

The Conference noted that many Americans have become disillusioned with mainline churches and have embraced Christian fundamentalist and charismatic (Neo-Pentecostal) beliefs, or “alternative” religions.⁶ Such “alternative religions” may be New Age beliefs, Eastern religions, or New Thought-Positive Thinking churches. Quoting Gordon Kaufman, *New Vrindaban Worldwide* envisioned that

The future of religion in America indicates—possibly to a significant degree—alternative, intense spiritual communities which can inspire people hungry for a deeper understanding in the face of a deteriorating materialistic culture....⁷

Through the ecumenical efforts of Bhaktipada, the Hare Krishna movement has extended itself to the followers of all religions. Father Bede Griffith, a Roman Catholic monastic from South India, wrote that while ISKCON taught that “only Krishna can save you...the League of Devotees has grown out of that and they are open to all religions.”⁸ Paramahansa Krishna Swami, of the League of Devotees, stated that

The mission Srila Prabhupada gave to his disciples was to go throughout the world and spread God's message by teaching the laws that Christ had commanded. And, of course, his commandment was for all people to love God with all their heart, mind, and soul.⁹

As the Tao means "the way," and as Shinto means "the way of the Divine," and Buddhism means "the way of the Buddha," Christianity is "the way of Christ." According to Paramahansa Krishna Swami,

There is only one mission. The true mission of Jesus is also the mission of Lord Caitanya (i.e., the Hindu saint who began teaching the chanting of the "Hare Krishna" mantra as a means of God-realization), the mission of Bhaktisiddhanta (Prabhupada's guru), the mission of Prabhupada, and the mission of Srila Bhaktipada.¹⁰

The League of Devotees understands itself to incorporate the mission of Christ.

The path of devotional service, or the path that leads one out of darkness into light, or into love of God, is a living path.... Christianity, or the path of Christ, didn't die after Christ left, nor did the path of Buddha die after him, nor has Krishna Consciousness left after the departure of the great Vaisnava acaryas; but the only way that path can continue is to have someone living it....¹¹

The essence of Bhaktipada's teaching and the motive behind his ecumenical efforts is to unravel and unfold the inherent universal religion that forms the basis of all religions. His mission is to find and to encourage others to find the kernel, the core, the primal energy that unites all into the Universal Body of the One Lord, into the One Religion.

Joel Bjorling
Gilson, Illinois

Notes

1. "Teaching the Original Message," *New Vrindaban Worldwide*, 1 (July 1988), 4.
2. Kirtananda Swami Bhaktipada, *Christ and Krishna: The Path of Pure Devotion*, Moundsville, WV: Bhaktipada Books, 1985, p. 123.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Paramahansa Krishna Swami, "Interfaith Conference 1988," *New Vrindaban Worldwide*, 1 (October 1988), 6.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Paramahansa Krishna Swami, "We Are a City That Can Give Light to the World," *New Vrindaban Worldwide*, 2 (January 1989), 8.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.