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Bettina Bäumer

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REPORTS AND INTERVIEWS

Abhishiktananda Society

Retreat — Seminar:

Mysticism — Śaiva and Christian

Rajpur, India November 1-6, 1990

(Ed. — We offer two reports on the above meeting:
the first by Bettina Bäumer, the second by Murray Rogers)

IT WAS SWAMI ABHISHIKTANANDA'S dream to realize a spiritual dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity. During his lifetime most of the dialogue meetings in which he took an active part were in fact ecumenical meetings of Christians encountering Hinduism (cf. The Hindu-Christian Meeting Point). Together we had planned a Hindu-Christian meeting in Varanasi which did not come about. In fact, Swamiji's was a personal dialogue, first within himself, and with his Hindu gurus, friends, fellow sannyāsīs and disciples. The results of this he passed on to his Christian friends and disciples. Even after his death the Abhishiktananda Society had planned a "Study Week" in 1983 which failed to take place. These failures perhaps taught us that real dialogue is not easy, that it cannot be forced, that it cannot even be organized like an academic conference. It becomes possible only after years of friendship and mutual trust. Therefore it is not a matter of course that seventeen years after Swamiji's departure from this earthly scene a seminar on *Śaiva and Christian Mysticism* could be held successfully in Rajpur, Dehra Dun, against the beautiful background of the Himalayan foothills.

At the time of fixing the dates, nothing could be known about the political and 'communal' tensions in North India, leading to

cancellation of trains, violence and curfew in many towns in U.P. This troubled situation prevented seven speakers from attending the seminar. And yet twenty-eight participants took part in the six day seminar in which thirteen papers were presented from the various mystical traditions, with a response from another tradition (e.g. a Śaiva paper had a Christian respondent, and vice-versa), and a general introduction by the convener. These presentations and the discussions following their response were embedded in a time of collective meditation morning and evening, and worship in the evening in one of the traditions represented. All-Saints day (1st Nov.) and Kārttik Pūrṇimā or Dīpam (2nd Nov.) falling in this week were celebrated in common. The participants were not only scholars or religious, but coming from various backgrounds, seriously interested in mysticism, which enriched the encounter. It was only at the end of the week that we discovered that we represented seventeen languages among twenty-eight participants! Some of the Hindus experienced their first exposure to Christianity and some of the Christians their first encounter with Śaivism. This was important, because academic seminars of specialists mostly remain limited in scope and inaccessible to non-academics.

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The papers presented a high level of learning and spirituality. In the absence of Dr. K. Sivaraman, Dr. R. Panikkar ably led the discussions, steering us between the two poles of personal sharing of experiences on the one side and intellectual discussion on the other to a real spiritual exchange.

There was no systematic attempt to define 'mysticism', though it was taken in a broad sense, as illustrated by the papers. It became clear that each spiritual tradition is a galaxy in itself, and that a mere comparison is not possible, because it would presuppose a view from outside. We discovered many correspondences/homologies in the various mystical traditions, and yet we were aware of the danger of easy equations, as expressed in language (e.g. if we translate *icchā śakti* as 'will power'). Concepts have their meaning only in their total context. And yet communication is possible, at its deepest level in silence, as was intensely experienced in the last session.

In the absence of six Śaiva scholars who could not come due to unavoidable circumstances, the discussion had the tendency to revert to Vedāntic concepts which bring in a very different problematic than the Śaiva context. For the same reason some central aspects of Śaiva mysticism were hardly touched upon, such as *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, *krama yoga* and others. Rightly understood, these aspects of Śaiva yoga could be an important bridge to a Christian sacramental and incarnational spirituality.

The aim of the seminar was not to reach any 'conclusions' or points of agreement. As said in one of the circulars before, the aim was to be found in itself, in the time spent together in reflection, exchange of ideas and deeper being together in meditation and prayer. Most participants felt that the spiritual and the intellectual dimensions became blended together, complementing each other, a combination of *bhakti* and *jñāna*. The need for more time of personal sharing was felt.

If we can talk of an indirect result, it may be described as follows: There was no attempt at mixing or diluting traditions, or reducing the variety of traditions to any single one. On the other hand, the kind of 'super-bazar' of religious traditions now found in Western countries, with the New Age movement etc., was in

no way approved of or encouraged. There must be a healthy pluralism where every one follows his or her own spiritual path to the end. And yet we are no longer living in closed systems, there are many lines of communication. A Hindu Swami having a deep experience of Christ, or a Christian finding her spiritual fulfillment in the advaita Śaiva mysticism, are concrete examples. The 'responses' also gave many instances how the insights of one tradition can touch strings in the heart of another tradition. Thus bridges are built which are not based on political slogans, emotional illusions or cheap syncretism, but which have their roots in a deeper experience of reality. Last but not least, the mystical experience by its very nature transcends the narrow limitations of 'religions'.

Another question was raised legitimately, since the beginning of organizing the seminar: Are we not escaping from the cruel political and social reality by having a meeting on mysticism? Are we not encouraging elitism and escapism? Some felt that on the contrary, we are helping to bridge the gulf between different religions in this country and elsewhere, setting an example of the level where real dialogue should start. One participant felt that there was no need for justification, the value of the meeting lying in itself. Besides, Meister Eckhart giving more importance to Martha as the one who puts her love into practice and the examples of Śaiva saints being a 'sign' in their times, shows that mysticism does not lead to sheer passivity. Only a mystic like Lal Ded could bridge the gulf between Śaivas and Muslims in Kashmir. And yet we have to distinguish between mystics who have often lived in times of crisis, and our talking about them.

Thus many issues were raised which could not be fully discussed, and hence the need was felt to continue this venture and to arrange another meeting with a more limited topic. The proceedings of the seminar will be edited and published.

Bettina Bäumer

B 1/159 Assi. Varanasi - 221005 India