January 2006

Book Review: "The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda"

Edward T. Ulrich

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1372

The Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies is a publication of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies. The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.
The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda.

SWAMI Abhishiktananda (1910-1973)—Henri Le Saux—was originally a Catholic priest and Benedictine monk of St. Anne’s Abbey in France. He had a high estimate of India’s ascetical traditions, believing that they involve a deep and genuine quest for God. In 1948 he journeyed to Tamil Nadu to establish a “inculturated” monasticism which, while thoroughly Christian, would observe many of the customs and regulations of Hindu asceticism. However, after his first encounter in 1949 with the holy man, Ramana Maharshi, he came to believe that a genuine experience of God lay within Hinduism, and not merely the authentic human effort to know God. Abhishiktananda then dedicated his life to Advaitic meditation and asceticism while retaining his identity as a Catholic priest and monk. He was thus able to bridge two diverse worlds, writing and speaking on the issues which arise when these worlds encounter each other.

Shirley du Boulay’s biography is an important contribution to the literature on Abhishiktananda. She condenses a large amount of material into a short, organized, and readable form. The book relies on many quotations from his letters and diaries, which, given the uniqueness of his journey, is a positive feature of the book. Also, she relies on archival materials, private collections of letters, letters published in French, and interviews which she conducted. Through these resources the book breaks new ground by showing aspects of Abhishiktananda’s life which have not received much attention in the past. This includes, most notably, his days in France and many of his personal relationships.

Another virtue is the descriptive language which du Boulay uses in reporting Abhishiktananda’s experiences. Abhishiktananda frequently left personal safety and comfort behind, plunging deep into Hindu religiosity. Du Boulay’s descriptions of his Himalayan pilgrimages are good examples: “Abhishiktananda returned to Gangotri alone, spending three days walking with a pack on his back and a bamboo staff in his hand. The paths were stony, muddy, and slippery, and the pilgrims slept close-packed on the narrow verandas of unfurnished wooden huts provided for them. The huts lacked all privacy, and the pilgrims ate only when they could find something to eat.”(195) Some Christians object to Abhishiktananda’s deep involvement with Advaita, but du Boulay’s book shows that he was not engaged in a frivolous, self-indulgent journey. Rather, he was on a serious quest involving great self-sacrifice.

While Abhishiktananda faced hardships in terms of physical safety and security, his deeper struggles were on the spiritual plane. In adhering to both Advaita and Christianity he experienced severe tension in his life. Abhishiktananda referred to his joint practice as a “double summons,” and du Boulay quotes him thus: “You cannot be torn apart in the depth of your soul, as we are by this double summons, and by this double opposition, without being lacerated even physically.”(107) Du Boulay traces the development of the tension between Advaita and Catholicism in Abhishiktananda’s life and shows how he found peace in the final months of his life.

The Abhishiktananda Society reports a recent renewal of interest in Abhishiktananda, and, as I read du Boulay’s book, I wonder how his life will be interpreted. I suspect that those Westerners who tend to seek God on their own, accepting institutional religion only grudgingly, might identify with Abhishiktananda. Du Boulay’s treatment of Abhishiktananda encourages this, for she writes that “Abhishiktananda was frequently
critical of the church, saddened that it had
given India ‘so much evidence of
worldliness. . . It is easy to assume that he
himself had left the church behind, that he
was seeking, and had almost found, a God
beyond the church. . . It was as if he was
caught between another pair of opposites—
one familiar to many Christians today—
exasperation with the shortcomings of
the church and the recognition that it has a role
to play, that structures can have value.” (201-
202)

However, the root of
Abhishiktananda’s difficulties with the
Church laid in his powerful experiences in
India, and is probably quite different from
current Western disenchantment with
institutional religion. Many Advaitic texts
report that ultimate reality, Brahman, is
utterly different from the world of empirical
experience. Hence, the universe often seems
unreal and insignificant to people after they
have become aware of Brahman. In sharp
contrast to this, a classic Christian doctrine
is that God became human. Hence, the route
to God lies in rituals and institutions.
Advaita fundamentally contradicts this
aspect of the Christian message, teaching
that temporal realities cannot lead one to the
Godhead. As Abhishiktananda explained,
“The abyss between Christianity and
Hinduism seems to me more and more to be
this: Christianity, born in a climate of Judeo-
Greek thought, is basically realist. The West
has taken man seriously, as well as the Earth
which upholds him. Not so the East. Man is
the measure of all, said the Greeks: man and
things are part of being, substance. Hence
the value of dogmas, of the Incarnation, the
agonizing importance of the present life. But
for us Hindus, such a view of reality has no
meaning.”

Du Boulay is primarily a
biographer, whose former topics include the
life and thought of Desmond Tutu and
Teresa of Avila. Her current book is a solid
contribution to the literature on
Abhishiktananda. Raimundo Panikkar and
Bettina Bäumer, who both knew
Abhishiktananda personally, praise du
Boulay’s book. Yet, if she had provided
more background information on Advaita
and Christianity, Abhishiktananda might
appear less as a rebel against institutional
religion and more as someone who mediated
between two ancient traditions, exploring
with creative integrity the tensions which
occur between them.

Edward T. Ulrich
University of St. Thomas

Abhishiktananda, Ascent to the Depth of
the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of
Swami Abhishiktananda (Dom H.Le Saux), trans.
David Fleming and James Stuart (Delhi: ISPCK,
1998), 62.

Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in
253 pp.

In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and
220 pp.