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

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The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda.
Shirley du Boulay. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005, xx + 276
pp.

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

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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."^{cxv}

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.

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^{cxv} *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.

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