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Book Review: *Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux): Christian Nondualism and Hindu Advaita*

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124 Book Reviews

feminist theology, and the comparative study of mysticism). The volume is quite readable--without losing any scholarly facility. It may be beyond the reach of many undergraduate students, but the book will be immensely valuable to graduate students, scholars, and

anyone interested in Mirabai, Hadewijch, and/or comparative studies.

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***Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux): Christian Nondualism and Hindu Advaita.* By J. Glenn Friesen. Calgary: Aevum Books, 2015, 592 pages.**

SWAMI Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux 1910-1973) was raised in a sheltered, religious family in France. Later, as a priest and monk, and inspired by missionary aims and the ideal of inculturation, he went to India to establish a Benedictine monastery. Wanting to establish an inculturated form of Christian monasticism, he keenly observed Hindu ways and culture. Through exposure to Ramana Maharishi, Abhishiktananda became convinced that a profound experience of God could be found in Advaita Vedanta. He spent the next two decades, until his death, immersing himself in Advaitic spirituality. Retaining his identity as a Catholic priest and monk throughout those decades, he attempted to relate his Catholic beliefs to his newer, Advaitic experiences. His published books appear to give clear-cut resolutions of the issues, but when one examines his letters and diaries, one sees that his books are snapshots of a turbulent flow, moments frozen in time.

Through a variety of books and articles published since the 1970s, Abhishiktananda's thought has been well marked out. Friesen's recent contribution is to lay out a wide variety of categories, and to examine Abhishiktananda's thought in these categories, paying attention to how his thought changed. These categories include "transcendence," "immanence," "non-

duality," and "levels of perception." Significantly, he maps out the variety of positions that fall under each category. Friesen also includes Christian theological categories, such as "Christology" and "eschatology." Further, he brings Abhishiktananda's thought into dialogue with what some classic scholars of Eastern religions, such as Paul Hacker and David Loy, who have written about non-dual traditions. In addition, he identifies some of the many diverse influences on Abhishiktananda's thought.

Friesen makes many points in this lengthy study. His main point is to show how Abhishiktananda's thinking in the various categories mentioned above changed because of his exposure to Advaita. However, he concludes that Abhishiktananda's success in bridging Catholic belief with Advaitic experience is wanting. To begin, Abhishiktananda's thought was shifting and inconsistent. Further, it had a strong acosmic aspect. Friesen looks askance at acosmism, believing, although he points out that Abhishiktananda himself was not callous, that acosmism contributes to a callous disregard of the world's suffering.

Dissatisfied with Abhishiktananda's attempted resolutions, Friesen introduces a topic outside of the usual discussions of

Abhishiktananda's life. Friesen wrote prior studies of what he calls the "Christian theosophical tradition," which includes figures like Jacob Boehme, Franz von Baader, and Herman Dooyeweerd. Friesen argues that this tradition could have provided Abhishiktananda with the answers he needed. He believes that this tradition does a much better job of holding in balance seeming oppositions, such as non-duality and the reality of the world. In a similar vein, Friesen likewise states that Ramanuja's theology could have eased Abhishiktananda's struggles.

One could challenge Friesen's suggestions. Abhishiktananda was torn between a spirituality that called him to plunge into pure consciousness beyond name and form, and one that called him to identify with the concrete roles and identities of a Catholic priest and monk. The core of his problem was existential rather than intellectual. His problem was that of learning to live in both worlds. He experimented

with a variety of intellectual resolutions throughout his two decades in India, but felt that they did not speak to his situation. In places, he suggested that it is not a matter of finding a better resolution, but that the intellect simply cannot bridge these two different worlds. One instead should simply hold onto both, living with the tension between them.

Friesen's book is a comprehensive study with an engaging thesis. It should be an essential component of the library of an Abhishiktananda scholar. In addition, the way Friesen maps out a variety of positions under categories like "transcendence" and "non-duality" is helpful. Many potential readers would appreciate these clarifications, in addition to the insight that they may gain into Abhishiktananda's thought.

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***Ramana Maharishi: Interpretations of His Enlightenment.* By J. Glenn Friesen. Calgary: Aevum Books, 2015, 312 pages.**

TWO highly revered Hindu figures of the modern era were Ramakrishna Paramahansa in north India, and Ramana Maharishi in south India. Many scholars have written on written on Ramakrishna, due to his role in the Bengal Renaissance, and due to the intriguing nature of his visionary experiences. In comparison, very little scholarly material on Ramana has been produced in the West. An important exception is Andrew Fort's 1998 study, *Jivanmukti in Transformation*. J. Glenn Friesen's *Ramana Maharishi* breaks further ground.

According to the classic account, Ramana originally had had minimal knowledge of spiritual and religious topics. However, one day, as an adolescent, he had a sudden fear of death. He imagined himself dying, and by retreating within himself, he found that there was nothing to fear, for he discovered that there is something within that does not die. According to the classic account, he was thus enlightened, lost all interest in his home life and school life, and ran away to the temple and holy mountain at Tiruvannamalai. There he gradually acquired a reputation as a holy man. For the sake of the