

2017

Book Review: *Christian Ashrams, Hindu Caves and Sacred Rivers: Christian-Hindu Monastic Dialogue in India 1950-1993*

Daniel Soars  
*University of Cambridge*

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

Recommended Citation

Soars, Daniel (2017) "Book Review: *Christian Ashrams, Hindu Caves and Sacred Rivers: Christian-Hindu Monastic Dialogue in India 1950-1993*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 30, Article 22.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1674>

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](mailto:cbauman@butler.edu). For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact [omacisaa@butler.edu](mailto:omacisaa@butler.edu).

***Christian Ashrams, Hindu Caves and Sacred Rivers: Christian-Hindu Monastic Dialogue in India 1950-1993.* By Mario I. Aguilar. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London and Philadelphia, 2016, 200 pages.**

**THIS** recent addition to Mario I. Aguilar's corpus combines several areas of interest evident in his previous works. In these vignettes of five twentieth-century pioneers of interreligious monastic dialogue, he turns away from past forays into the history of the Church in Latin America and Africa, and trains his anthropological eye for detail on the individual stories of Roman Catholic contemplatives in India. The book delights in zooming in on the lives of Jules Monchanin (1895-1957), Henri Le Saux (1910-1973), Bede Griffiths (1906-1993), Francis Mahieu (1912-2002), and Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010), offering us a window into their personalities and idiosyncrasies, but Aguilar also manages to situate biographical and theological details in their broader socio-political currents; particularly those generated by the post-colonial contexts of India after 1947, and those set in motion within the Catholic Church by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

We get a clear sense of the important contributions made by these five men to the inculturation of Christianity in an independent India, and of how some of their bolder experiments in liturgy and theology were probably only possible in the wake of conciliar developments in the Church's approach to other religions. One of the most interesting aspects of Aguilar's work is that it leaves the impression not so much of five kindred spirits, as of distinctive personalities whose individual temperaments, abilities and subtly differing

monastic charisms led to different visions (and disagreements) about what exactly their call to Christian witness in India should involve.

The desire to show that Christian beliefs and practices could be translated into Indian idioms, along with the official encouragement of *Nostra Aetate* (1965) to discern truth in other traditions were, Aguilar argues, two key motivations which drew Monchanin, Le Saux, Griffiths, and Mahieu to India in the first place. They practised a form of mission-dialogue (one of the most thought-provoking aspects of the book is how any rigorous distinction between these often dichotomised concepts is frequently elided in the lives of these Catholic monks) primarily through prayer and contemplation. This is why ashrams came to be seen as ideal alternative spaces to the church or mission compound, "...where a Hindu way of life could be attempted by Western contemplatives" (25).

They each, of course, consciously forged these hybrid identities in different ways. Influenced by a similar experiment by the Bengali reformer Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), 'Saccidānanda' or 'Shantivanam' (Grove of Peace) ashram was founded in 1950 as a Benedictine home of prayer on Indian soil. This location provides the backdrop to much of Aguilar's story, as Shantivanam was first opened by Monchanin and Le Saux, and later taken over by Griffiths after he left the Kurisumala (Mountain of the Cross) monastery he had started with Mahieu in 1958. Indeed, so intertwined are the lives and movements of

these four protagonists, that an ‘at-a-glance’ chronology of key dates would have been a helpful *aide-mémoire*.

Of all the personalities uncovered in this work, Monchanin receives the least amount of discussion. There are, however, two fascinating chapters devoted to Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda). Aguilar paints a picture of a man whose commitment to a life spent in communion with God was total, even if this intensity at times made communion with his fellow Christian labourers in the vineyard less than straightforward. While he remained at Shantivanam for 18 years, Abhishiktananda’s interest in an institutional project gradually gave way to a yearning for radical solitude. The seeds of this desire for *sannyāsa* are planted early on by his visits to the sacred caves of Arunachala and his growing admiration for Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950). As a result of Ramana’s emphasis on Self-enquiry, Le Saux became more and more concerned with his own struggle to reconcile tensions between Vedānta and the ecclesiastical frameworks of Christianity. The years in between Monchanin’s death in 1957 and Abhishiktananda’s definitive departure from Shantivanam for a life of renunciation in the Himalayas are recounted in an illuminating chapter which reveals the significance of Le Saux’s friendships with Murray Rogers (an Anglican missionary), Raimon Panikkar, and Marc Chaduc, a French seminarian who would become his only disciple.

His successor in 1968 at Shantivanam was Bede Griffiths, who had originally left his monastery in England in order to explore “...the possibilities that India could offer in order to revive a somehow intellectualized Western Church” (83). At first, this had meant joining Mahieu in founding an ashram community in

Kerala, but from 1968 onwards, Griffiths spent the final 25 years of his life as the superior of what had by then become a flourishing monastic community at Saccidānanda. While it is clear that Griffiths had to tread a fine line in his attempts to enrich Catholic worship with Hindu texts and symbols to keep on the right side of ecclesial authorities, readers with more theological interests may be left wishing that Aguilar had developed some of his pregnant passages about the impact of Vatican II on these liturgical experiments and the intellectual histories of our five protagonists.

Mahieu comes across as the individual most attached to the ideals and habits of the community life he had previously known as a Trappist monk in Belgium. Inspired by what he knew of Monchanin and Le Saux, he arrived in India in 1955 and spent the next couple of years living at Shantivanam and travelling around the subcontinent. Eventually, however, his commitment to coenobitic religious life led him to found Kurisumala (originally, with Griffiths), a Cistercian monastery of the Syriac rite on the Malabar coast.

The ‘odd one out’ in this collection is Raimon Panikkar, since he was already ‘Hindu-Catholic’ by birth and upbringing. Nonetheless, Aguilar shows in two chapters how Panikkar’s contribution to dialogue between the two faith traditions was marked by similar emphases on spiritual experience and monastic contemplation. Along with his friendship with Abhishiktananda, Aguilar highlights Panikkar’s distinctively wide-ranging intellectual reach and prolific output, especially on the importance of silence in interreligious seeking.

Readers unfamiliar with the Christian ashram ‘movement’ may have benefitted from an analysis of the ambivalent reception these

## 138 Book Reviews

efforts at inculturation have sometimes received amongst Hindus, since Aguilar's rich descriptions suggest an almost unmitigated acceptance. Nor would this book be the first port-of-call for readers looking for a philosophical 'history of ideas' (we do not really know, for example, why so many of the main characters specifically chose Advaita Vedānta as their main Hindu conversation partner), but the author is clear from the start that he is offering more of a 'contextual' than a philosophical approach. As such, he surely succeeds in giving us an exploration of "the idea and practice of an ashram", as well as "the history of a contemplative experience that...led to ground-

breaking forms of Christian-Hindu dialogue" (25).

While it may be more accurate to nuance this summary of Aguilar's work by qualifying its 'Christian-Hindu' focus as being decidedly more *Catholic* and *Vedāntic* than anything else, he offers an exciting and thoroughly readable description of an "unexpected phenomenon" – namely, that these five men whose "initial motivation was to bring Christianity closer to Indians...themselves became transformed into practitioners of both religions" (14).

Daniel Soars  
University of Cambridge

***Vernacular Catholicism, Vernacular Saints: Selva J. Raj on "Being Catholic the Tamil Way."* Edited by Reid B. Locklin. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2017, xvii + 290 pages.**

**VERNACULAR** *Catholicism*, a posthumously published volume of Selva J. Raj's essays on Tamil Catholicism, is a dream come true as it brings to fruition the project of Raj himself, which was left incomplete due to his sudden demise in 2008. The fact that his American colleagues, especially Reid B. Locklin—the editor of the volume, would take it up and make the project see the light of the day speaks volumes for the high esteem Raj enjoyed among his American colleagues for his extraordinary scholarship on popular Indian Christianity. The book chapters unpack three important dimensions of Indian Christianity, especially of Tamil Catholicism, 'namely "vernacular" Christianity grounded in mundane concerns, its cultural embeddness, and the ritual dialogue' (xvii), as noted by Raj in his book proposal.

These grounded themes of Indian Christianity, passionately explored and relentlessly espoused by Raj in his writings, were seldom noticed by the scholars of Indian religion. It is Raj's singular research commitment to the grass-root phenomena of Indian Christianity that has earned for common peoples' lived Christianity in India a good deal of academic credibility. Practice-centred lay people's Christianity, unlike elitist institutionalized forms of Indian Christianity, had long been unduly jettisoned as an irrational set of beliefs and superstitious practices. Raj's work was a timely intervention that not only filled the long existing void in the scholarship of Indian Christianity but also added news pieces to the jigsaw puzzle of the complex reality of Indian Christianity as a lived religion.