

The Golden String

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BULLETIN OF THE BEDE GRIFFITHS TRUST

Summer 2008

ABHISHIKTANANDA SOCIETY CONCLUDES ITS WORK

The President of the Abhishiktananda Society, Swami Atmananda, sent a letter to members and friends of the Society in early February of this year, announcing its impending dissolution. Extracts from this letter follow.

“Since the year 2000, the Executive Committee has been reflecting on the continued relevance of the Society. On 7 December 2007, after considering all aspects, the General Body decided unanimously that the Abhishiktananda Society should cease to exist as a formal structure. This will come into effect on 29 February 2008. Prof. Raimon Panikkar, Founder and first President of the Society (1978-1988) had sent a letter of endorsement in this regard:

In 1978, a few years after the *mahasamadhi* of Swami Abhishiktananda, we were a group of friends interested in promoting Swamiji’s message. We naturally felt driven to give an official framework to that task and so we founded the Abhishiktananda Society of which I was the first president. Now after nearly thirty years the aims for which the Society was founded have been practically fulfilled. Swamiji is now well known and his message spread by itself, and he would have agreed that there is no need to maintain an institution once it is no longer necessary. All human institutions are only temporary and should cease to exist when the time is right. The Executive Committee of the Abhishiktananda Society has had the courage and detachment to see that now it is the correct time to dissolve the Society. . .

. . . A series of valuable and creative initiatives have been fulfilled by the Society over the years. Swami Abhishiktananda is now well known around the world. By venturing along an untrod path, Swamiji paved a way for all who seek the Absolute beyond any particular religious path. The Society has been able to help communicate what he stood for, what he wanted to convey to us and the steps he

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THE UNIVERSAL DESIRE FOR THE ONE WHO COMES Cyprian Consiglio

(Homily for the Feast of the Presentation at Shantivanam)

“Love surely must reside in the gap
between desire and fulfillment,
in the lack, not the contentment.

Love is the ache, the anticipation, the retreat...”

Kiran Desai, “An Inheritance of Loss”

On this feast of the Presentation, my mind immediately turns to these two humble old figures in the Gospel, Simeon and Anna, who “never left the temple but worshiped there night and day with fasting and prayer.” I think of them both as archetypes for the contemplative monk and nun. I thought of Mary Louise across the street who, when I was first here in 2000, spoke to me so eloquently about “the place,” that is, Shantivanam, and that how no matter who comes and goes now, the three founders left here a sacred space, a sacredness that cannot diminish. “If God were to grant me a thousand years,” she said to me, “I would stay here and watch and wait.” She reminded me of Anna. When I composed the oratorio, *The Song of Luke*, I had the two characters, Simeon and Anna, sing Simeon’s canticle together as they both seemed to embody this same sense of waiting. For our Camaldolese version of the canticle of Simeon that, as all of our psalms and canticles, has its own doxology, Thomas wrote the beautiful “With the just ones who have awaited the coming of Christ on earth, we sing to the glory of God.” And when I sing that I love to think about all the just ones through the ages who have patiently waited, who did not know the whole answer but were content somehow in the waiting, the rishis along the banks of the Ganga, and the bhikkus sitting under bodhi trees, the sages on the mountains of China, and the medicine men and tribal leaders in Africa, the outback of Australia and the wildernesses of America, waiting waiting waiting, maybe not even knowing that they were waiting. And somehow our tradition is bold enough to claim that Jesus is what they have been all waiting for.

A feast like the Presentation makes us wrestle with that, or at least it makes me wrestle with that claim that Christ is not just the glory of Israel, but the light of the nations. My philosophical mind wants to take refuge in the *logos*, and say that it is the Word that they are waiting for and whenever anyone encounters the Word through beauty or truth or goodness, they are encountering this second per-

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Abhishiktananda Society (Continued from page 1)

took to live and convey his message.

This is the culmination of the intuition that struck me in January: 'Everything has become clear.' There is only the Awakening. All that is "notional" — myths and concepts — is only its expression. There is neither heaven nor earth, there is only Purusha, which I am . ' [Ascent to the Depth of the Heart, Diary entry: September 11, 1973, p. 386].

The principal goal of the Society was to promote the publication of Swamiji's writings and to make available, for the first time, his spiritual diary and the articles and essays that had not been published during his lifetime. The original French version of the spiritual diary was published in 1984 and eventually the English in 1996. Another monumental task was to draw up a biography of Swamiji based essentially on his numerous letters. The considerable amount of research and translation needed for this project should not be underestimated. This was largely the work of Dr. James Stuart to whom we are forever grateful.

Another goal of the Society was to encourage the dialogue and the spiritual meeting between different religious traditions — Hinduism and Christianity in particular. For that purpose, three interreligious retreat-seminars were conceived and conducted by Dr. Bettina Baumer, the former president . . .

Over the years the Society has also preserved a special library, consisting of Swami Abhishiktananda's personal books as well as his papers and manuscripts. This resource has been much appreciated by scholars from around the world who have an interest in Swamiji and, more generally, in Hindu-Christian spirituality. .

Regarding the written works of Swami Abshiktananda, to date, ISPCK has always been the publisher of the English titles . . . Whilst ISPCK remains the publisher of the current English titles of Swamiji, moving forward, the task of publishing Swamiji's writings in English will be increasingly taken up by the *Delhi Brotherhood Society*. . . The task of promoting Swamiji's writings abroad will be continued by the D.I.M. or *Commission pour le dialogue interreligieux monastique* [except for English and Indian languages] . . .

As for the retreat-seminars which have generated much interest and fruitful discussion in the past, similar meetings are sure to continue to take place . . . There are plans also to have a programme of seminars to commemorate the birth centenary of Swamiji in 2010 in Shantivanam, Rishikesh and Delhi.

Another new initiative which has emerged is Ajatananda Ashram, an interreligious and intermonastic community in Rishikesh, to promote dialogue on the experiential level as envisioned by Swami Abhishiktananda . . .

. . . SETU, which was the bulletin of the Society, has been discontinued and the official website of the Society will no longer exist; however, there will be one or more new websites promoting Swamiji's message. . . " ■

Universal Desire (Continued from page 1)

son of the Trinity. Or it wants to hide behind the "Christ" and say that the Christ is different from the historical person of Jesus. But a feast like the Presentation asks us to actually have some devotion to this specific person, Yeshua ben-Joseph, this human being in whom we believe the fullness of the godhead dwelt bodily. I remember having almost the same rather uncomfortable discussion twice last year when I was here in India about Jesus being an avatar of Vishnu, specifically the eleventh. I suppose that is one way to make Jesus understandable and even acceptable, but it wasn't enough for me, if "the fullness of the godhead dwelt in Jesus bodily" as the Scriptures claim. And I would quote Monchanin and Abhishiktananda, and the reason they took the cosmic cross as their symbol: because not just the Christ, not just the Word, but the "Christ revealed in history," that is the person of Jesus, they said, "is the very Brahman itself, the object of all the contemplation of the rishis."

In a sense this is old-fashioned theology, a theology of fulfillment, though it is still a few steps ahead of many other Christians who think that everything outside of Judeo-Christianity has simply to be wiped out, and therefore never practice something like yoga or za-zen as a Christian. Paul Knitter explains it well in his book *Introducing Theologies of Religions*: there is "replacement theology" that says there is only one true religion that must replace all others; there is "fulfillment theology" that holds that there is one true religion that fulfills all other religions; there is the "theology of mutuality," that there are many true religions which are called to dialogue; and a "theology of acceptance," holding that there are many religions which have different ends completely. Peter Phan says, in his wonderful article "Praying to the Buddha":

More simply, theologies of religions are often categorized in three models: exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism. Exclusivism holds that there is only one savior and one true religion or church and that no salvation is possible outside of them. At the other end of the spectrum, pluralism holds that there are many saviors and different paths leading to salvation, none necessarily superior to the others. Inclusivism maintains that although there is only one savior and one true church, salvation remains possible outside them—though it is always ultimately dependent on them.

There are respected Christian theologians who advocate each one of these positions, making credible appeals to both Scripture and tradition to bolster their views. And, Phan points out, these three positions occur also among theologians of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism as well. The official teaching of the Catholic Church favors something like inclusivism while warning against the dangers of pluralism. We see things as not only pre-Christian, but pro-Christian, like this feast of the Presentation—everything is pointing to and leading up to Jesus,

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Universal Desire (Continued from page 2)

even the Bhagavad Gita and tribal rituals. A foundational text for me in understanding this is from Jacques Dupuis:

One cannot ... consider equal or even less practically identify the preparation of Israel for the event of Jesus Christ and that of the nations, even though also worked by God. The other religious traditions do not have an identical meaning in the history of salvation to that of Judaism; the reason is that they do not have the same relationship with the "Jesus Christ event." Nevertheless to such an event they are already oriented and, for that reason, are not only pre-Christian but "pro-Christian." They are all authentic "evangelical preparations," even if in an indirect way, and as such are destined by God, who directs all of human history to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. They represent true personal interventions of God in the history of the nations that point them towards the decisive intervention of God in Jesus Christ.

This goes back to Justin Martyr's thought that the *Logos*—Word of God — has been dispersed among human-kind as *semina verbi*—seeds of the Word and seed of the Truth.

But the thing is this: there is no way of convincing another about that intellectually if they do not believe it. Either you believe that the fullness of the godhead dwelt in Jesus bodily or you don't, and nothing I can say will change that. And furthermore, either you believe that the fullness of the godhead dwelt *uniquely* in Jesus bodily or you don't, and nothing I can say will change that.

And, as Origen taught, there can be no true *gnosis*—knowledge — without an intimate union with Christ. That's why for him the true model of the Gnostic was the Apostle John, resting on the breast of Christ. And somehow that is what this feast has come to be about for me, intimate union with Christ that brings true knowledge. There is something in the reading from the prophet Malachi that is read on this feast that struck me and resonated in the Gospel—the fire. "But who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire." Some time ago I came to understand that the fire of God, which we think of and is sometimes referred to as the wrath of God, and the fire of God that is the love of God, are not two different fires. They're the same fire, a refining fire. And Scripture says that that which seems like punishment to the enemies of God is healing for God's friends. So it is with the fire of God's love. It burns, but it also consumes and pervades and makes what it burns part of the fire itself. A friend and I were talking about inter-religious dialogue, and she told me that whenever people ask her where the limits are, where the boundaries are, she uses a passage from the book of the prophet Zechariah (2:5): "I will be a wall of fire around it." The boundary to enter into knowledge of God is that wall of fire, that wall of God's love, which is perfectly permeable; anyone can pass through if they are willing to be burned to a crisp.



One of the images that remains with me to describe the *sadhus* that I meet here in India is this fire in their eyes. I think of it in the face of St Francis and St Antony of the Desert too. And I think of it in the eyes of Simeon and Anna. It is the fire of desire. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna says "I am desire when it is pure desire," and the purest desire is the desire for God. And who does not suffer from desire, even this pure desire; is not all desire like a sword that pierces the heart? Like a mother longing for her son as he fulfills his life's purpose, like a son longing for the comfort of his father, like grandparents longing to see their children's children, the Bride in the Song of Songs wandering in the garden saying "Have you seen the one whom my heart loves? They have taken away my Lord!" But all that must be undergone in order for the fire to be brought to the earth, the ring of fire that this boy himself is and contains. And who will be able to stand the day of his coming? For he will be a sign of contradiction! His main way, even his yoga of compassion, is the way of death and surrender, the way of the seed falling into the ground and dying. This is the fire that he says he has come to bring to earth, the fire that purifies us and burns out of us all that is not God's own self. This is the fire that he comes to bring: the fire of the Holy Spirit who sings Jesus' own song in our hearts, the love song of Jesus to his Abba. And who can stand the day of his coming into our world and into our lives? For the Spirit is like a refiner's fire.

One of the characters in Kiran Desai's novel *An Inheritance of Loss* says, "Love surely must reside in the gap between desire and fulfillment, in the lack, not the contentment. Love is the ache, the anticipation, the retreat..." That's where we are always, or should be content to be, between the desire and its fulfillment. May that fire be in our eyes too, and this love for God in our hearts, the fire of desire that in some way already is what we desire when it is pure desire, in that gap between desire and fulfillment.

But for now, we are with Simeon and Anna, the faithful monks watching and waiting, standing in for all the *rishis* and *sadhus* and *bhikkus* and sages, all the just ones who have awaited the coming of Christ on earth, the marriage of heaven and earth, the descent of Spirit into matter, who believe that they have seen with their own eyes the fullness of the godhead dwelling on earth bodily. ■

When Pope John first summoned the Vatican Council he put before it three objectives. The first was the renewal of the Catholic Church from within; the second was the reunion of Christendom through the development of an ecumenical spirit in relation to the separated churches; the third was the manifestation of the mission of the Church to the world. . . each is implied in the other. The renewal of the Church has been shown to be intimately related to the ecumenical attitude toward separated Christians, and the mission of the Church to the world is . . . dependent on the development of a renewed and reunited Christianity. [Bede Griffiths, Christ in India, p. 243.] ■

HERMITS OF SACCIDANANDA (Mr. Vishvasam to Carrie Lock) (Part II, Concluding)

The memories of Mr. Vishvasam, friend and cook of Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, 1949 -1957, as related to Carrie Lock)

Monchanin (continued)

. . . Fr. Monchanin was silent by nature, calm, and he always wanted to live a serene life. I was with Monchanin from 30 March 1949 until he left in 1957. (His character) did not change at all during that time; the only thing that changed was his age. His heart and manner remained the same.

Monchanin lived his life as an apostle. *Parama Arubi Anandam* (Supreme Formless One): he was an *Arubi*. He had great faith in God, and never changed his mind or his words. Only his body was here, his soul was always rejoicing with God. Till the end, he was a holy man.

The 50 paisas

Fr. Monchanin hardly had any money and if anyone came saying that they hadn't eaten for the day, he would give what little money he had. I received a good salary of Rs10 a month. Monchanin received money from the Bishop in Trichy for conducting Mass. He received no other income. The villagers did not help him [financially].

Once, Fr. Monchanin needed to go to Trichy to see his Bishop. He didn't have enough money in his hand so he asked me for 50 paise. I used to laugh to myself, 'A foreign priest, how is it that he is like this?' The trip to Trichy cost 50 paise by bus and 60 paise by train, so he didn't even have that much money when he needed it. Will anyone believe this – a foreign priest asking money from me? [Laughing] People will say, 'How can a foreign priest not have money, not even 50 paise?' Fr. Monchanin always trusted in God. I was very happy that I was able to help Fr. Monchanin.

Sleeping by the Kavery

Once, Monchanin returned from Pondi late at night and he was trying to find his hut. He wandered around many times in the pitch dark, trying to find it. He could not find it, and so decided to go down towards the riverbank and sleep there for the night. He and Fr. Le Saux lived very simply.

Monchanin the contemplative

One day I went to Fr. Monchanin with a list of vegetables that I was planning to buy. I wanted to check the list with Fr. Monchanin and ask him for some money for the shopping. Fr. Monchanin was sitting with a book on his lap and looking up into the distance, contemplating. I gave Fr. Monchanin the vegetable list, which he took in his hand but then he returned to looking up and contemplating. He was absorbed in prayer. I called for Father's attention a few times but he did not give any sign of hearing me. This shows the fullness of his soul towards God. He lived in his hut abiding by the words of God. He did everything with the fear of God.

Two dozen French eggs

A well-wisher of Fr. Monchanin's brought two dozen eggs from France. After the well-wisher left, Fr. Monchanin asked me 'To whom shall I give these eggs?' I said, 'One woman who comes to our church is very poor, so in the morning we could give these eggs to her'. There was a woman who had three daughters and one son and her husband was working as a coolie. Fr. Monchanin agreed and requested that I give the eggs to that poor person. So I gave the two dozen eggs to that lady. She left feeling happy.

Asthma

Fr. Monchanin suffered from asthma, particularly during the (cooler) months of December and January. One day, by 10 am, he was gasping for air. I asked him, 'Shall I call the doctor?' But he said 'No, no problem'. At 2 pm I again went to him and asked, 'Shall I call the doctor?' and he said 'Let's see if it gets worse.' I felt very miserable. By 4 am in the morning, again I asked him, 'Shall I call the doctor?' Then, because of the unbearable pain, he said 'OK, call the doctor.' Around 4.30 am I reached Kulittalai and saw the *conpounder* (local unqualified doctor). At around 5 am we came back to the ashram and the *conpounder* gave Monchanin some injections and after that he was OK. If he was suffering from asthma when he came back from trips to Trichy, he would go and lie on the bank of the river Kavery.

Monchanin would not eat food when he felt sick because if he ate anything he could not digest it. Once, he suffered from dysentery and was admitted to the hospital. (At other times), if I asked him if I had to call a doctor, he would say no.

The Death of Monchanin

In August 1957, Monchanin went to Pondicherry and he stayed there for a week. His health condition was very severe and all advised him to go back to France. But Fr. Monchanin said, 'Even if my health becomes worse, I will die in India; I will die in Tamil Nadu.' And he strongly said, 'I won't go to France.' (He was worried that if he left India, he would not get a visa to return). The officials of Pondicherry assured him that he would get permission to return to India. Still he didn't want to go, but after he got that assurance, he left India. He sent a telegram from Pondi saying he was not coming back to the ashram.

I came to know of Monchanin's death from the telegram which was sent from Pondicherry to Fr. Le Saux. Fr. Le Saux and I were relaxing and talking to each other when the postman came and delivered the telegram to Le Saux. As soon as Fr. Le Saux read it, he cried aloud and went into his room with his head in his hands. The one person who cried for Monchanin was Fr. Le Saux. On seeing his reaction to the telegram, I understood that Fr. Monchanin had died. Le Saux did not say a word; he just cried aloud and went to his room. I then went into his room, closed the door and asked him what happened. I felt deep grief because Monchanin was not someone who was known to me for just a year or

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Hermits of Saccidananda (Continued from page 4)
two. I had been with him since 1949.

Le Saux
World War II

There is a custom in France that the eldest son in a family should join the military. As Le Saux was the eldest, he was sent to the military. This was during the time of the Second World War. Le Saux was one of 50 men who were captured by the Germans during the war. The others wanted Le Saux to escape but the fences were electrified, so all the people dug a tunnel beneath the fences and allowed him to escape. Fr. Le Saux ran to the forest. He passed through the forest by creeping on the ground because the enemy was flying over in planes, searching for escapees. Finally, he reached a village and there he knocked on the door of a house. The people in the house opened the door and Fr. Le Saux explained what had happened. They let him in and gave him food. They gave him a bicycle and he rode day and night until he reached his home.

Simple Living

Le Saux was like an Indian, wearing *dhotis* and a turban around his head. He didn't wear shoes in the ashram, only *chappels* (thongs). He lived a very simple life. He lived like the Dravidians (the aboriginal people of India).

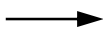
He had no money; he was poor, very poor. The only income he received was if the Bishop gave him some money. No money was to be got from abroad at that time. Whatever he bought was especially for the ashram chapel. His only income was in typing books for publication. So he suffered a lot like a very poor man. But, he was very happy; always he talked happily and laughed. Le Saux was a true *sannyasi*.

Friendship

Once I had a quarrel with the priest at Kulittalai and so I left and went to Bangalore [laughing]. After a week or ten days I came back. During that time, Fr. Le Saux and Monchanin managed without a cook. I returned one morning at about 4 am. Once Le Saux saw me, he hugged me and cried with joy and said, 'One day or another you would come back, I knew you would!' Fr. Le Saux was crying tears.

While I was away, I had grown a beard. Le Saux suggested I have a shave and then we both went to Kulittalai and bought some dhal, rice, chillie etc. and we prepared the lunch. We three (Vishvasam, Le Saux and Monchanin) then had lunch together.

In 1957, when I stopped working at the ashram, I started working at the sugar factory in Pettavaithalai (8 kilometres away). Fr. Le Saux helped me get the job in the sugar factory. After finishing my daily duties in the sugar factory, I would come back here to look after the ashram. Le Saux would go to North India, to Uttarkashi, and he would stay there for some time and then come back to visit. For two to three months at a time, I would be the only one at Shantivanam and I would maintain the garden.



Fr. Le Saux supported me to get married. In January 1961 I married. I didn't own a house of my own, so Fr. Le Saux gave us some land and built us a house and he also gave me Rs4000.

I helped look after Shantivanam until 1968, when Le Saux left Shantivanam. Le Saux would send me money for my family during that time but there was no work for me to do at the ashram as such.

I was with Le Saux at Shantivanam for nearly ten years. He always used to be kind to me.

The Departure of Le Saux

In 1968, Le Saux packed up all his things, took all his luggage and happily went to Uttarkashi. And there he stayed until his death in 1973.

No-one [no candidate] was willing to stay in Shantivanam. For the twenty years no-one wished to be here with him. When he left he was very sad [because of that]

This photograph [on the wall] was taken the last time I saw Fr. Le Saux; it was in August 1968. When Le Saux was about to leave Shantivanam to go to North India, he had this photograph taken of our family as a memento. The photo was taken near the Saccidananda bungalow, which was near the bridge [that leads to Tannirpalli on the Kulittalai side].

The photo was taken at 8-9 am and he left after finishing his lunch, at around 1 pm. We went to the Trichy railway station with him and stayed there. We saw him off on the 10 pm train for Chennai.

The Death of Le Saux

Early one Sunday morning [in October 1973], a telegram arrived at Shantivanam advising us of the death of Fr. Le Saux. Fr. Bede announced his death in the Mass but I was not able to understand what he said as he said it in English. But I guessed what he said, and understanding what had happened, I cried in grief. All the others took me away from the chapel. Everyone consoled me and Fr. Bede prayed for his soul. After [Le Saux's death], there was no one to help me.

Before he left for Uttarkashi, Le Saux took me to meet the Bishop of Trichy, Bishop James Mendoca. At Le Saux's memorial, the Bishop came up to me and asked me what I would do now that Fr. Le Saux was gone. "Who will help you?" he asked me in grief. What he said was true, never again has there been anyone [like Le Saux] to help me. He was very kind and showed his love towards me. He married us and gave us a house. He had strong faith in God.

A Special Relationship

Mr. Vishvasam ended with the words, "Monchanin and Le Saux were my friends. They never thought of me as the cook, or treated me as a servant, but they saw me as a friend, like a brother, till the end. There were no differences between us. I was happy."

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NEWS FROM OSAGE

- **Osage Transition Continues** The Benedictine sisters, with the exception of Sr. Pascaline Coff, have left **Osage Monastery** to rejoin other communities of their congregation. The monastery has become **Osage Forest of Peace**, “a lay prayer center, or contemplative ashram.” Sr. Pascaline will remain for a year as spiritual director of the new center. Emily Cox, who has been living at Osage since fall 2007, will serve as coordinator of the center. Emily, a native of Tulsa, is a graduate of Tulsa University and served abroad in the Peace Corps for two years.
- **Bede Mahasamadhi at Osage** The fifteenth anniversary of Father Bede’s death was celebrated on the weekend of May 23-24. On Saturday evening Fr. Bruno Barnhart spoke to the group on “The Mystery and Paradox of Sophia (Lady Wisdom)” and on Sunday evening his topic was “Wisdom and Prophecy in Bede Griffiths.” Sr. Maggie, the religious from India who had lived at Osage during most of May, offered a final *arati* (fire blessing) at the celebration, before her departure.
- **BG Trust Mini-Meeting** The three members of the Trust Board who were present at Osage for the Mahasamadhi celebration (Sr. Pascaline, John Douglas and Fr. Bruno) met to discuss ways of making newly available some important Bede Griffiths resources which are no longer being published. These include Shirley du Boulay’s biography, *Beyond the Darkness*, and the two video productions, *A Human Search* and *The Feminine*.
- **A New Website** is to be created for Osage Forest of Peace, to be linked with the present Bede Griffiths website.
- **Burma Relief** John Douglas, Treasurer of the Bede Griffiths Trust, sent a donation to Jesuit Refugee Services in Thailand on behalf of the Trust to help victims of Typhoon Nargis. ■

Help Sought to Rebuild Temple at Shantivanam

Saccidananda Ashram was established by Fr. Jules Monchanin and Fr. Henri Se Saux OSB on March 21, 1950, the feast of St. Benedict, on the banks of the river Kavery near Kulittalai, Tamil Nadu. Monchanin and Le Saux then built the original temple in the same year. In the 1980’s it was felt that the front portion (where the people worship) was too small to accommodate the many guests, so Fr. Bede extended it. The original foundation was very shallow and the pillars were made of mud. Engineers predicted that it would not last longer than ten years.

The badam tree adjacent to the temple has grown and was destabilizing the foundation. A large branch broke off during a heavy rain and fell on the roof, damaging it. The temple had been further damaged by the floods of the last

PROPOSED SPIRITUAL TOURS TO SOUTH INDIA, 2008-2009

Dr. Meath Conlan, director of **Diverse Journeys**, has announced the following proposed **Ashram tours to South India** during the 2008-2009 winter season.

1. Saturday 29th November 2008 to Thursday 18th December 2008 (19 days + 1 day for rest)
2. Friday 2nd January 2009 to Thursday 22nd January 2009 (19 days + 1 day for rest)
3. Saturday 24th Jan 2009 to Wednesday 11th Feb 2009 (19 Days)

Each of the tours will include sojourns at Shantivanam (the ashram of Bede Griffiths) and Tiruvannamalai (at Mount Arunachala, where Sri Ramana Maharshi lived), at Kodaikanal, the Zen meditation center directed by Roshi Ama Samy SJ, and at Madurai with its renowned temples. Tours 1 and 2 will begin and end at Bangalore and will include a retreat at the Art Ashram, *The Land*, at Bangalore, with an introduction to Indian spirituality through symbolism and mythology by Jyoti Sahi. Tour 3 will begin and end at Chennai (Madras).

Tour Cost will be advised on application

Deposit: AUD \$500

Early Bird Discount: \$200 if booking is made with deposit before 1 August 2008

Closing Dates for Bookings:

1. (29 Nov – 18 Dec 2008) Tour closes **15 September 2008**
2. (2 Jan – 22 Jan 2009) Tour closes **15 October 2008**
3. (24 Jan – 11 Feb 2009) Tour closes **31 October 2008**

Contact Information:

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Website: <http://www.diversejourneys.net>

Note: A minimum number of 6 persons will be required for each tour. If this minimum is not reached for a tour, all deposits will be returned in full on the closing date for booking that tour (as shown above). ■

few years and by the white ants.

The community has now decided that it is time to reconstruct the temple, taking into consideration the very sandy nature of the ground and the periodic flooding due to overflowing of the river. The original *sanctum sanctorum* with the *vimana* will be preserved and strengthened, as also the entrance *gopuram* (door) of the temple which was built by Monchanin and Le Saux. We intend to be sensitive to the vision of the founders; Shantivanam was the first Catholic ashram in India, and its heritage and message must be preserved.

Checks can be made out in the name of **Saccidananda Ashram** and mailed to: Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, Thannirpalli P.O., Kulittalai 639107, Tiruchirapalli Dist., Tamil Nadu, South India. ■

INDIA REVISITED

Elbina Rafizadeh

A sixteen-hour layover in Dubai, an eight-hour layover in Chennai, but the fatigue transforms into anticipation as the taxi drives through the villages of Kulithalai and Thannirpali before turning onto the dirt road that leads to Shantivanam. We pass dangerously close to oxcarts and bicyclists, not before the driver swerves to avoid a collision while sending a blatant car horn warning. This time I am calm, unlike the year before. Instead I welcome the sight of barefoot men in dhotis, women in colorful saris and children playing in the open canal. This third-world vibrancy reminds me why I have returned.

I arrive at Sr. Mary Louise's ashram, which is across the road from Shantivanam. She welcomes me with fresh-squeezed orange juice and introduces me to the hut where I will live for two weeks. It overlooks the Kavery, one of India's sacred rivers that lies past scattered palm, banana and coconut trees that surround the ashram. When Frs. Monchanin and Abhishiktananda first arrived over fifty years ago, the river had reached the edge of the ashram. As the years passed and as a result of climate changes, the river has receded and now lies several hundred meters away. There are a couple of egrets resting in the shallow waters. At dusk, when the temperature cools, villagers will gather at the bank of the river.

Beneath the hut's covered porch, cooling breezes sweep my face when I sit in the late evening with only fireflies igniting the darkness. I spend hours of contemplation in this hut, in desert solitude, alone with a few books and a writing pad, stripped from my scheduled life of internet, lunch and office meetings. Like the year before, the emptiness of time envelops me. Yet this serenity is subject to an onslaught of suffocating heat and rampant mosquitoes, not to mention the constant caution towards what I eat and drink to stave off the dreaded traveler's curse, which in Mexico is called "Montezuma's revenge." Daily I pump my own water, wash my own clothes, and bath at five a.m. from a bucket of cool water. This brief period when I live without amenities is purifying. I'm suddenly intensely aware of how the *have-nots* hunger for what the *haves* take for granted. Yet, who is really missing out?

Birdcalls wake me before dawn, an hour before Morning Prayer. I lie for a few minutes before rising from the protection of my mosquito net to enjoy that space of full emptiness. Fr. Bede also appreciated that pause before daybreak, meditating before Eucharist. And because of the day's extreme heat, early mornings and evenings were invaluable. Having lived in the even temperature of coastal California most of my life, this short detour from Santa Cruz made me wonder about the founders of this ashram, who also came from industrialized western countries. Fr. Bede was from Britain and both Abhishiktananda and Monchanin were from France; all three had made the radical decision to

move to the more primal life in India. The fruits of their journey, their answer to God's call have resulted in the founding of this sacred place where thousands of pilgrims journey in search of Truth.

From Australia, Europe, Canada and America, the pilgrims return year after year. They arrive individually, in small groups, or by the busload. Each has either met Fr. Bede personally, or read his works. Some tell me they don't know what it is they experience in the ashram, but whatever it is, it sustains them. Are they describing the inner stillness absent in their own world, where they are constantly bombarded with marketing messages, political propaganda, and technological wizardry? Even with the lack of physical comfort, with daily exposure to extreme heat and relentless mosquitoes, do they prefer to endure all this because finding the stillness overcomes earthly suffering?

I think about the temple, which had been torn down two months earlier. The morning after my arrival, I stood on the barren site where the temple had stood. In that temple I had attended Mass with sangha friends, and prayed and meditated in solitude. In that temple Fr. Bede had celebrated the Eucharist. In that temple, I had enjoyed looking out past the walls at the banyan tree, meditating on the twist and turns of the trunk's form as dawn evolved to daylight. Today the tree still stands majestic, providing shade for the founders' graves, but I wonder if the loss of the temple will deter future visits by those who had once been faithful to the ashram. Though there are plans to build another temple, the original had also served as symbol and memory of Fr. Bede.

On many occasions pilgrims have expressed to me their longing to find fulfillment, which is met in some capacity through the ashram, which offers a life of simplicity and stability through the daily practice of prayers and meditation. In addition, the ashram's social justice causes have found support amongst those who have expressed a desire to participate in God's work through charity. Needless to say, everyone seeks the peace and joy of the cave of the heart. For this alone, I believe that Shantivanam will continue to flourish.

Fr. Paul reminded me, "Loss lies in the path of our spiritual journey. We must seek the beyond, especially past the worldly things to which we cling. We must seek the beyond to find God." The experience of loss, in other words, participates in our journey to find the Divine. Perhaps I might boldly venture to speculate that even Fr. Bede would probably say, "Do not cling to me, instead look beyond me, to God." ■

. . . *The question of the relation of the Church to other religions is perhaps the most fundamental problem of all, because it concerns the very nature of the Church and divine revelation It seems clear that what is required is an extension of the principle of the ecumenical movement among Christians to the sphere of our relations with other religions . . . [Bede Griffiths, Christ in India, pp. 145-146.]*

LITURGY IN A CHRISTIAN ASHRAM Cyprian Consiglio

As with any culture and country, trying to describe the practical execution of the Eucharistic liturgy in India in a broad sweep and general statements is fraught with difficulty. India is home to both the Syro-Malankar and the Syro-Malabar rites, of Syrian and Persian origins¹, for example; and it is of course also home to the Roman Rite. I shall limit my remarks here to my main experience, with the Eucharist celebrated according to the latter and the liturgies of the hours (known as *samdhayas*) in Christian ashrams, and specifically in the ashram of my monastic congregation, Shantivanam, Saccidananda² Ashram in Tamil Nadu, South India³.

Christians adapted the idea and lifestyle of the ashram, as many of the elements about which I will write here, from the Hindu tradition. Hinduism is actually best understood as an umbrella term for a variety of beliefs and practices. In addition, as with Judaism, for instance, Hinduism is often as much a cultural descriptor as a religious one. So the distinction between when one is borrowing from a different religious tradition and when one is borrowing from the native culture is not a clean one.

Very early on after Vatican II an entire Indian rite was composed and compiled, incorporating many Indian sacred texts and ritual gestures. Though some elements of it were approved and others worked their way in and/or stayed without approbation or contest (especially in the ashrams), the entire rite was never formally approved. What was known as the Indianization of the liturgy also came to be known as the Sanskritization of the liturgy since the rite was written out both in English and in Sanskrit. Similar to discussions about the liturgical use of Latin, in some circles this was not seen as a true Indianization of the liturgy because Sanskrit is not the language of the people but the language of the priestly caste. Hence, replacing Latin with Sanskrit to some seemed like replacing one priestly language with another. On a similar note, though there were efforts to make Hindi, which is very close to ancient Sanskrit, the official language of India, that effort met great resistance especially in the south where Tamil is spoken, which some consider just as ancient and venerable. At the same time, whereas at the ashrams I visited the common spoken language was always English, as one finds throughout India, the chants are sung in a variety of Indian languages as well as Sanskrit with ease.

One enviable thing about the Indian culture, especially from a liturgical musician's perspective, is the ease with which congregations of Indians break into unaccompanied song; that is, chant. From the dialogue of the Syro-Malabar rite—a call and response between priests and assembly with interpolations on the part of the acolyte—to the chanting of the Roman Rite in native Tamil in South

India, through the singing of *bhajans* (devotional songs, in the north known as *kirtans*⁴), I witnessed an embodiment of what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [the Vatican II *Constitution on the Liturgy*] hoped for. *SC #119* was optimistic enough to recognize that “in certain countries ... there are people who have their own musical tradition,” which plays a great part in their religious and social life. And so it asked that “*their* music should be held in proper esteem and a suitable place is to be given to it, not only in forming their religious sense but also in adapting worship to *their native genius*... [emphases mine]” Another little known document, “The Letter to Bishops on the Minimum Repertoire of Plain Chant,”⁵ gave us another attractive phrase, which has been a sort of manifesto for this liturgical musician. Where vernacular singing was concerned, the Church no longer emphasized the imposition of a type or form of chant on a culture or a people. Rather, the liturgical reform challenged poets and musicians of every local church to “put their talents at the service of such a cause, *so that a popular chant may emerge*.”⁶ This has indeed happened naturally in India.

My own working definition for “chant” is “essentially vocal music,” *i.e.* music that may be accompanied by rhythm or harmonization but can stand on its own without either. Most of the music that I encountered in India would then fall into this category. Often the *bhajans* are accompanied by hand drums or other percussion instruments, or by a harmonium (a small hand-pumped organ), but for the most part they stand on their own with merely vocal execution. Many of these *bhajans* are structured in call-and-response fashion, the leader calling a line out and the rest of the congregation answering exactly, though some are also in a more typical song or litanic form. Though more an aural tradition than a written one, what also impressed me is the musical intelligence of many of the folks I heard singing in response, complex rhythms and short melismatic passages answered with ease⁷.

Sanskrit mantras are also sung regularly in the ashram. The texts generally come from the Upanishads which are the late Hindu texts of the Vedic era and deal much more with the interior journey of meditation than theistic devotional praises of deities and so can be sung in almost any religious context. One common example is: *Asato ma sad gamaya! Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya! Mrityor ma amritam gamaya!* “Lead me from falsehood to truth! Lead me from darkness to light! Lead me from death into life!”⁸ The simple chanting of all the mantras is always done on three reciting tones common to all of India.

One startling but beautiful practice that is common in our ashram and others throughout India is the reading of non-Christian sacred texts at the beginning of the liturgy or just before the liturgy begins. The original proposed Indian rite had suggested using Indian Scriptures within the liturgy itself, at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Word and not *before* the liturgy. The explanation of this practice given in

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the introduction to the draft version of the Indian rite taught that even if we recognize “only ‘seeds of the Word’ in these scriptures,” the final manifestation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ “did not render the ‘seeds’ pointless and irrelevant,” since Jesus came to fulfill, not to destroy, just as the New Testament did not abolish the Old but helped us to discover richer and deeper meaning in it. The non-Christian scriptures, “even if they represent only a cosmic revelation, still form part of the dynamism of the Word and are better understood when placed in this context.”⁹ One might wonder at the use of the word “only”: “only seeds of the Word” and, especially, “only a cosmic revelation”! What is not mentioned is that not only are these scriptures “better understood when placed in the context of the Bible,” but the Bible too may be better understood when placed in the context of the cosmic revelation and the “seeds of the Word.” This is a practice especially dear to ashrams, which are always open to peoples of all faiths.

I can merely name a few of the many beautiful native gestural elements incorporated in the Indian liturgies, forming a common ritual vocabulary between Christians and their Hindu compatriots: the use of a *puja*-offering stone as an altar; the surrounding of the Eucharistic elements with flowers while chanting various titles of Jesus; worshipping while seated on the ground throughout the liturgy in some form of meditation posture; the beautiful native iconographic vocabulary used in the visual arts; the full prostration before the Holy of Holies, that is, the Blessed Sacrament, in the evening or often simply upon entering the chapel; the marking of the forehead thrice daily —in the morning with yellow sandalwood paste as a sign of purification, at noon with red *kumkum* powder to mark devotion, and in the evening with the *vibhuti*-ash as a sign of repentance. But by far the real signature gesture of worship in India is the *arathi*, which is the reverencing of a sacred object or holy person by the waving of light in front of it or them. Oftentimes this includes the smoke of incense and garlanding with flowers as well, and is almost always accompanied by singing. One can see this gesture being offered to shrines of various deities constantly throughout India, or to a sacred mountain or river such as the Ganges. In the Catholic context this reverence is offered to all the sacred articles in the worship space in much the same way we in the West would use incense, most especially for the Blessed Sacrament whether in the tabernacle or present on the altar during the Eucharist itself. At our ashram, similar to common practice throughout India, after venerating the tabernacle the *arathi* flame is then offered to all present for them to take it into themselves with a wave of the hands.

My favorite chant for the *arathi* was one composed for the visit of Pope John Paul II to Kerala in the local language Malayalam, and these words in some way summarize my abiding image of liturgical worship in the

ashrams of India:

Arathi, arathi aradhana
Atmavin kshethrathil aradhana
Anjali anjali pranavarchana
Manasakkovilil hridayarchana

Homage and worship,
Worship in the temple of the Spirit.
Homage with the sacred word,
Heartfelt worship in the temple of the mind.

Notes:

1. In the 16th century there was an ill-fated encounter with the Portuguese colonialists, and in the 17th century the Keralese Catholics took an oath not to accept any more Portuguese bishops, and so aligned themselves with the Syrian Church of Antioch, exchanging the Syrian Rite for the Antiochean. The Antiocheans were called the “Jacobites” after Jacob Baaradai, who separated from the church of Rome in 451 and organized a church in West Asia. A reconciliation with Rome did not happen until the foundation of the Catholic Malabar Syrian Church in 1930 and, some years later, the Syro-Malabar Church.
2. *Shanti-vanam*, “Forest of Peace,” *Sat-Cit-Ananda*, “Being, knowledge and bliss,” a common Hindu description of the godhead employed by Christians who see in this an intimation of the Trinity; hence the ashram is known in English as the Ashram of the Holy Trinity.
3. An ashram (from the Sanskrit *asrama*, a sitting place or, more generally speaking, a hermitage) is a cross between a monastery and a retreat house. It is both a dwelling of one or more monastics and a place of hospitality, but specifically — and this often affects the liturgy — a place of hospitality to people of all faiths. So one might also say that an ashram is an ecumenical place of contemplative life.
4. Many of these *bhajans* are borrowed directly from the Hindu tradition with a change of words; *OM nama Shivaya* very easily becomes *OM nama Christaya*, for instance.
5. Issued by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship in April 1974.
6. I was in another place, Alaska, immediately after my third trip to India and found the opposite to be true — the native genius was not respected, and a popular chant did not emerge out of it. In the late 19th and the early 20th century the missionaries had forbidden the use of the native Yup’ic chant, a rhythmic chant accompanied by a type of frame drum, which is still sung in the potlatch gatherings in the villages, and replaced it with maudlin, musically dubious pietistic songs. Now the potlatches are full and the churches are empty.
7. I saw a few collections of these *bhajans* for many different occasions, and heard from other Christian denominations praise for the Roman Catholics who had done the hard work of collecting and compiling them. There is also a little book of liturgical songs from America and England that circulates mainly in formation houses and in some parishes in India called “With Joyful Lips.” It is a good teaching tool for young religious learning English but is, by far, not the best music that America and England have produced for the liturgy and I have found it a poor substitute for the solidity of the native music.
8. From the *Bridharanyaka Upanishad*, a text incidentally adapted by the World Council of Churches as the World Prayer for Peace.
9. *New Orders of the Mass for India*, CBCI Commission for Liturgy, National Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, Bangalore, 1974, p. 13-14.

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