

Theological Trends

From ashrams to dalits

The four seasons of inculturation

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THIS ARTICLE BEGINS IN A CHRISTIAN ASHRAM, a small monastic settlement, in South India. The name of the ashram, Śāntivanam, comes from the Sanskrit and means 'grove of peace' – which is precisely what is needed after forty minutes' hair-raising bus journey from the frenetic activity of Tiruchirappalli, a large city built on the banks of the River Kauvery. With its tiny hermitages dotted through the shady palm-trees and its chapel decorated and built in the style of a small Indian temple, it is not difficult to appreciate why Śāntivanam has become so well known. For several decades now it has been attracting visitors from all parts of the world, especially younger people searching for something of that elusive spiritual interface between Christian faith and Indian culture.

Śāntivanam is very much associated with Bede Griffiths, an extraordinary English Benedictine monk, who was teacher or *acarya* there for some twenty-five years until his death in 1993. His story has now been told in a fine biography by Shirley du Boulay.¹ Under Bede's charismatic leadership the ashram became one of the most prominent centres of the movement to inculturate Christian spirituality into India.² Today, it is undergoing a period of transition, as Bede's successors begin to emerge, but the influence it continues to exert is quite remarkable.³

Spirituality and inculturation

The object of this article is not to recount the story of Śāntivanam, or even to make a brief assessment of what has come to be known as ashramic spirituality. Śāntivanam is only a starting point for what is offered as a brief reflection on the place of spirituality in the process of inculturation. Let me begin by noting a certain ambiguity in responses to the 'Śāntivanam phenomenon'.

At one extreme, there are those, especially in India, who argue that ashramic spirituality is to be dismissed as an irrelevant bit of religious

colonialism, packaged spirituality for the irredeemably bourgeois tourist. On the other hand, there are undoubtedly those for whom contact, at whatever level, with Śāntivanam has been an enormously liberating experience. Does this represent no more than a division between western and Indian perceptions? There is, of course, the danger of the memory of any great teacher encouraging a narrow cult. On the other hand, inter-faith dialogue takes place at a number of different levels, each of which has its proper place in the movement to inculturate Christian faith. To put it another way: to criticize Śāntivanam is not to dismiss the ideals it stands for, but to recognize that the process of inculturation is never easy or straightforward. My point is that inculturation is not just a matter of the gospel 'finding a home' in a culture but of actively transforming that culture – a process which has political implications.

The founders of Śāntivanam

First, however, what is meant by 'ashramic spirituality'? Although popularly associated with the place where the *guru* dwells, and therefore sometimes translated as hermitage or monastery, the Sanskrit word *aśrama* refers primarily to what *happens* in the place, to the act of striving for release or *moksa*. Ashramic spirituality is concerned with the spiritual ethos or culture which is inspired less by the place itself – though clearly environment and atmosphere are crucially important – than by the central figure whose sole purpose in life is God.

Christian ashrams have existed in India since the Jesuit missionary, Roberto de Nobili, started his great experiment in inculturation by living as a holy man in the southern city of Madurai in the early seventeenth century.⁴ The founders of Śāntivanam, Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, were following in a long-established if neglected tradition. They were, however, very different characters, with very different ideas about how to engage in dialogue with Indian culture. Monchanin wrote, as he put it, 'In the name of the Church', whereas Le Saux, at much greater length, wrote 'In the name of India'.⁵ That immediately gives a flavour of their main concerns. Both took Sanskrit names. Monchanin had the title Swami Parama Arubi Anandam (literally 'joy of the highest formless one', or Holy Spirit) – though he seems rarely to have used it; Le Saux has always been known as Swami Abhishiktananda, 'joy of the anointed one', or Christ.

Monchanin was born in 1895, and was a priest of the diocese of Lyon.⁶ A man of rare intellectual gifts, he became well known in

ecumenical circles after the Great War and was a respected indologist. Not until 1939, in his mid-forties, did he realize a long-cherished desire to go to India. Not that he ever wanted to be a missionary in the traditional sense; he always insisted that his vocation was to work in an ordinary parish under the local bishop. He was convinced that the only way to root the Church fully in India was to enter into its contemplative life. He therefore looked forward to the day when he could found an ashram where his dream would be realized. This was impossible until he had a companion and could form a community. The Benedictine Henri Le Saux joined him, and in 1950, with the active support of the local bishop, they founded Śāntivanam.⁷ Le Saux was born in 1910 at St Briac in Brittany. He became a monk at the age of nineteen, but, like Monchanin, was always haunted by the thought of moving 'beyond', to India.

Monchanin was, in many ways, a tragic figure. No great communicator, dogged by poor health, apparently lacking in basic organizational skills, he died in 1957 – little more than a year before the Second Vatican Council was announced. For Abhishiktananda, on the other hand, the Council was a vindication of many of the ideas and practices which they shared in those first few years at Śāntivanam. In his letters he makes little mention of the Council. The seminal event in his life was a meeting with a Hindu holy man, Ramana Maharshi, soon after he arrived in India. He was struck by his holiness and by the fact that there was 'not a spark of Christianity in him'. This was Abhishiktananda's experience of the otherness of God, and it stayed with him all his life.

Abhishiktananda's relations with Monchanin were never easy. But he was not an easy person himself. He clearly resented having to occupy himself with the practical side of the ashram. After Monchanin's death he spent more and more time away, especially in a hermitage in the Himalayas. He is clearly an important figure in the history of the post-conciliar Catholic Church in India – if only because of the number of friendships he developed, especially with theologians. A foreigner, he did as much as any individual to develop a sense of an indigenous Indian Church. He died after a sudden heart attack in December 1973.

Theological visions

Monchanin was guided by an intense theological vision of a world already being 'assumed, purified and transformed' by the Spirit of Christ.⁸ That seems to be the key to his thought. He was not interested

in making converts, nor was he concerned with what we have become accustomed to call 'dialogue'. He wanted to evangelize the religious culture of India, to change it from within through the witness of personal holiness. He was not, therefore, trying to 'Christianize Hinduism' but – he insisted – to develop a more profound awareness of himself as Christian and to make present that personal witness to Hindus. He led a contemplative life of prayer and study, sharing the customs and culture of local people in the manner of an Indian ascetic.

In his lifetime he published relatively little. His writing is not systematic; in fact 'tortuous' is the word that springs to mind. Despite being temperamentally a 'theologian's theologian', he was always more concerned for living a life of faith rooted in adoration. This he saw as an anticipation of the inner life of the Trinity. His guiding conviction was that, without the contemplative, the Church would lose its vision of the ultimate future of a life shared with the divine Persons.

Monchanin's version of the contemplative vocation was to wait faithfully upon the completion of what is always God's work. Abhishiktananda was a restless explorer who committed himself to a more active engagement with Indian religion by soaking himself in the world of the *Upanisads*. The two of them had already introduced many aspects of Indian culture and practice into their daily living and prayer in the ashram. Abhishiktananda took the use of Indian scriptures in Christian worship for granted, but, like Monchanin, he also saw the need for serious study. 'Mere' translation is not enough; he insisted that an Indian rite will require a 'total transformation of the Church'.⁹

The dilemmas of inculturation

Here we come up against the basic theological dilemma of 'inculturation': the gospel is something new which is proclaimed for all people, but it still has to find a home in different languages and cultures. For Abhishiktananda the Church could not be fully catholic if its faith were not comprehensible in Indian terms. But would that not risk reducing Christian faith to one of the cults which had already found a home in Indian soil?¹⁰

If reading Monchanin, the judicious theologian, is like hopping gingerly from one stone to another across a muddy river, reading Abhishiktananda is like wading through a raging torrent. Monchanin's dilemma arises from his concern for the integrity of Christian faith. In the dialogue of devotional or *bhakti* currents and the monistic philosophy of Hindu *advaita* he found reconciliation in the Trinity: a

movement of love within the Godhead into which human beings are caught up by the Spirit of God. Abhishiktananda, on the other hand, is never interested in the polished treatise. He wants to convey a heartfelt conviction: that Hinduism and Christianity will only meet in contemplative experience. He is convinced that the biblical 'mystery of darkness and silence which Jesus has revealed to us as the bosom of the Father' and the upanishadic symbolism of the 'untouched, undivided Brahman' discovered in the 'cave of the heart' are set together as 'the very same mystery'.¹¹

Abhishiktananda is clearly – and I think deliberately – more daring and more ambiguous than Monchanin. There is no doubt about his deep appreciation of *advaita*; his writing is haunted by the 'great sayings' of the *Upanisads*: 'That art thou', 'I am Brahman' etc. Yet he too faces a dilemma. He is concerned for a personal assurance of *moksa* but knows he can do nothing to achieve it. In his diary he writes:

The Christian's inexpressible discovery of himself in the glory of God is analogous to that of the Hindu jñani at the moment of his disappearance in the glory of Brahman. And yet, for the Christian, there still remains something beyond even this. His faith will at last enable him to find himself in God, in the mystery of his own personal vocation which is peculiar to himself and wholly incommunicable – eternally *one* with Christ and his brothers in the Father's presence, and yet distinct and for ever unique in that Father's love.¹²

The hospitality of God

Bede Griffiths was a different figure altogether – a dignified Englishman to follow two passionate French intellectuals. If I am relatively brief in my account, it is only because his reputation depends less on anything he wrote than on his deep and warm humanity and his extraordinary capacity to inspire the pilgrims who flocked to the ashram. He arrived in India in 1955, spent some time at the Kurisumala Ashram in Kerala and moved to Śantivanam in 1968. For twenty-five years he lived there seeking 'the other half of his soul'.¹³ It was only towards the end of his life that he found fulfilment, not in the mystical experience of a dark night but in human friendship. Rather like Abhishiktananda who, in the years shortly before his death, established a deeply paternal relationship with a young Frenchman which brought home to him the real significance of the fatherhood of God, Bede found

in an Indian couple the feminine side of his own nature – and the feminine face of God.

It was the gentle humanity of the man which made such an impression. He was responsible for a properly Benedictine hospitality, not just welcoming people to the ashram but welcoming different religious experiences too. I met him at Śāntivanam once and was impressed both by the ease with which he spoke of a Christian faith inculturated into India and by his obvious and measured good sense. One day he took a group of us to a distant village where he had been invited to attend the blessing of the new temple. A tall striking figure, yet deeply humble and gracious, he was greeted with great honour by the local people as if he were a typical Hindu *sannyasi*. He was clearly much loved. If Bede had an answer to the inculturation dilemma, it was that Christian faith could not be explained in the language of another culture without being first rooted in human relations.

The seasons of Śāntivanam

Let that thought introduce what I hope is not a misleading metaphor for linking the three holy men of Śāntivanam with the wider context of Indian society and the whole process of inculturation. According to an insightful comment I heard when I was last there, Bede Griffiths may be referred to as the ‘summer’ of Śāntivanam, the period of expansive high success. His predecessors, Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, may be called the ‘winter’ and the ‘spring’ respectively. The former died before the pre-Vatican II Indian Church emerged from a period of dormant slumber; the latter, on the other hand, witnessed the beginnings of an extraordinary period of vibrant growth. The question which naturally arises is whether Śāntivanam and the Indian Church generally now face an ‘autumn’.

There is little doubt that, as ‘winter’ and ‘spring’, Monchanin and Abhishiktananda have brought enormous richness and new growth to the Church. They are figures still much honoured in India, without whom the modern renaissance of the Indian Church would not have been possible. They enabled Bede to enjoy the ‘summer’. But I would want to press the metaphor of the seasons not because I think it neatly tells their story but because it reminds us that cycles of birth and death rule all our lives. India, of course, does not live according to such a division of four seasons; but it does have a deep sense of the cycle of creation and re-creation, death and reincarnation. Nothing is ever forgotten or lost. Monchanin, Abhishiktananda and Bede are not figures

from the past. There is as much interest in the first two as ever. And Bede, who died only a few years ago, is clearly a significant figure far beyond the sub-continent.

But, putting such reassessment to one side, let the three and their attendant seasonal imagery stand for different stages or aspects of the complex process that is inculturation. If an Indian 'cyclical' version of the seasons is valid, it is that the four do not succeed each other in a straightforward linear fashion, but that each implies the other. How does this help us to understand the process of inculturation?

Critics of the ashrams

First 'the autumn'. Here I want to shift gear slightly, away from Śantivanam itself and towards the recent period of the Church's life, understanding it not negatively as a time of dying but more positively as a time of fulfilment and harvest.

My opening question was about inculturation and the social reality of India to which the Church is supposed to witness. Many theologians have become painfully conscious that ashramic spirituality addresses only the Sanskritic culture of the higher castes. The distinguished Śri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris, for instance, brings an experience of dialogue with the deeply ethical tradition of Buddhism to theology.¹⁴ He is critical of what he sees as the naïve Marxist-inspired activism of much 'imported' liberation theology, and of an equally narrow obsession with Eastern 'mysticism' which, he says, is also not true to the indigenous religious spirit of the vast majority of Indian people.

Pieris's writing is dominated by two recurring themes. Asia is characterized by poverty and by religious pluralism. Both of these dimensions, he insists, must be reflected in Christian theology and spirituality if the Church is to be genuinely *of* Asia rather than simply the Church *in* Asia. At the same time, he is not advocating a mildly syncretistic Asian Christianity in which a touch of *bhakti*-devotionalism and the mysticism of *advaita* are 'added' to the tradition. Pieris is more radical. He insists on recapturing the prophetic spirit of Christianity *through* its immersion in Asia. In other words, 'inculturation' entails more than entering into dialogue with the religious spirit of a people; it also means attending to the whole economic and political reality which they face. The Church will be true to its prophetic identity only by a critical engagement with the full social and political context of injustice and poverty.

Thus in recent years in India there has been a marked shift away from the movement of inculturation through the translation of the liturgy and by the renewal of a contemplative spirit through ashramic spirituality. In India particularly, as so many theologians and activists make clear, religion is an ambiguous force. It has often been used to entrench and justify the caste divisions which so much dominate Indian society. Thus from dialogue with the high-caste Sanskritic culture which so much occupied the three gurus of Śāntivanam, theologians have now begun to attend to non-Sanskritic religion and the pathos of the low-caste 'untouchables'. Today the ones at the bottom of the social hierarchy, whom Gandhi referred to as 'harijans', the children of God, refer to themselves as *dalits*, a word meaning broken, trampled or destroyed. The aim of the new movement of dalit theology is to give them back an identity of their own.¹⁵ In developing a theological reading of dalit experience, centred very much on the liberative praxis of the gospel story, a great deal of attention is paid to social analysis, the recounting of particular stories and incidents which illustrate the dalits' sense of grievance.¹⁶

It is not difficult to understand the reasons for this shift in theological attention. 'Culture' is not some disembodied aesthetic pursuit or even a set of symbols and traditional customs by which a people or group identifies itself. The term connotes a whole amalgam of practices, ways of acting and relating to others, which have distinctly ethical and political overtones. Inculturation, in other words, is more than the translation of words; once the wider social reality is encountered, it becomes a matter of a radically prophetic incarnation of the gospel message.

A more political dilemma

This new movement to confront the 'dark side' of culture represents a different version of the earlier dilemma. When to affirm and when to resist?¹⁷ The danger is that uncritical acceptance of cultural norms can be replaced by a critique which is fixated on the collusion of the culture in unjust and sinful structures. Much dalit theology, for example, seeks to overturn the brahmanical reading of history. This is based on traditions contained in the Vedic texts and law-books which make the dalits the inferior 'non-Aryan' element in Indian culture. The dalit version tries to reverse this by speaking of the domination of the 'original' pre-Aryan population by racist conquerors. The result is a largely negative reading of much of traditional Indian religion.

The aim of dalit theology is to develop a sense of dalit identity, to restore a lost dignity. But the more dalits are 'conscientized' and protest against their exploitation by an unjust social system, the more dangerous it is for the Church. This, rather than the common complaint among Hindu chauvinists that Christians are engaged in systematic destruction of Hinduism through a strategy of conversion, is at the heart of the persecution which the Indian Church has been suffering for the last few years. Education, in other words, disturbs the status quo. The Church will always be persecuted for speaking the truth and many men and women have suffered, some with their lives, in the current spate of reprisals against Christians in India. But the ethical dilemma remains: how to speak the gospel truth peacefully and not encourage violence? By supporting dalit culture must the Church inevitably oppose the 'high' Sanskritic culture? How to bring the two into a more creative dialogue?¹⁸

Spirituality and inculturation

These are some of the questions facing the Church in India at the moment.¹⁹ It is, of course, tempting to see the shift from the gentle peacefulness of ashramic spirituality towards the more confrontational approach to 'inculturation' of the dalit theologians as a decline into autumnal darkness. Such an opinion does not judge the facts correctly. Let me instead summarize a different argument.

It is a mere half century since two French priests started their experiment with a different approach to mission by the River Kauvery. For most of its existence Śāntivanam has symbolized a vision of a Church which seeks to reflect in its inner life the profound mystical ethos of India. Its gurus practised hospitality, thus witnessing to what the Church always aspires to be: not another tribe set apart behind its own boundaries but, in the best sense, a home for all people. In opening itself to another culture, however, the Church inevitably comes face to face with something else, with the injustice which lurks at the heart of all societies and all cultures. To refuse to collude with this darkness but to resist it with Christian integrity: this is no period of autumnal decay but a time for appreciating and courageously living out the mature fruits of the Church's prophetic life.

This is the Indian Church's experience, but it also contains a lesson for the Church elsewhere. The 'four seasons' are all necessary for an inculturation of faith which is first properly rooted, then allowed space to experiment, next takes time to celebrate, and finally finds strength to

face the challenge of an unknown future. Monchanin, 'the winter', was nothing if not a thoughtful, thorough theologian, carefully guarding the big issues; Abhishiktananda, 'the spring', was a wanderer, moving freely into new pastures; Bede Griffiths, 'the summer', was a warm and genial host, welcoming friends to the Lord's table; and with the autumn come the dalit theologians to face the dark side, fundamentalism and injustice, in society at large.

But, before allowing this excess of mixed metaphors to get completely out of control, it may be time to draw discreetly to a close. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the Indian experience of ashramic life and dalit theology, it is that good Christian spirituality does not lock faith and practice into neatly predictable categories. It reflects faith but it also generates faithful living. Just as the different forms of dialogue demand each other – the 'dialogue of life' needing theological reflection, the 'dialogue of common action' being underpinned by shared religious experience – so the process of inculturation goes through different stages, from prayer and study to hospitality and prophetic witness. Which is only to say that dialogue makes many demands. And the Christian in responsible dialogue with others cannot afford to neglect any of them.

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NOTES

1 Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the darkness* (London: Rider, 1998). Bede tells his own story up until his departure for India in *The golden string* (London: Harvill, 1954). The best of his later work is *Return to the centre* (London: Collins, 1976); and the more autobiographical *The marriage of East and West* (London: Collins, 1982).

2 The neologism 'inculturation' dates from the early sixties and became prominent in missiological thinking some ten years after the Vatican Council. For a brief overview of the development of the term see Peter Schineller, *A handbook on inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1990).

3 In Britain, for instance, the Bede Griffiths Sangha links a community of men and women who keep up the practice of contemplative prayer in the Śāntivanam tradition. They also host regular visits from Brother Martin, the present *acarya* at Śāntivanam.

4 Vincent Cronin's well-known biography, *A pearl to India* (New York: Dutton, 1959), owes a great deal to the scholarship of A. Saulière, *His star in the East*, revised and re-edited by S. Rajamanickam (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1995).

5 The titles of the opening chapters of a book they co-authored: *Ermîtes du Saccidananda* (Paris: Casterman, 1956).

6 The fullest biography of Monchanin is that by Françoise Jacquin, *Jules Monchanin, prêtre* (Paris: Cerf, 1996). Much briefer and in English is that by Sten Rodhe: *Jules Monchanin: pioneer in Christian-Hindu dialogue* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1993). The most useful collection of his writings in English is that by Joseph Weber, *In quest of the Absolute* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Studies, 1977).

7 The most successful account of Henri Le Saux is contained in James Stuart (ed), *Swami Abhishiktananda: his life told through his letters* (ISPCK: Delhi, 1995).

8 On these three terms, which sum up Monchanin's vision of a Christian faith in dialogue with Hinduism, see the report of a conference held on the centenary of his birth in *Pro Dialogo* (the bulletin of the Vatican's Council for Interreligious Dialogue) 91, pp 55-62.

9 Stuart, p 192.

10 See Stuart, p 217.

11 Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974), p 12.

12 Stuart, p 340.

13 Du Boulay, *op. cit.*, p 107.

14 See especially *An Asian theology of liberation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), and *Love meets wisdom* (New York: Orbis, 1988).

15 As 'local' theology, most dalit theology is available only in India. See the work of James Massey, especially *Towards dalit hermeneutics* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994); *Dalits in India* (Delhi: Manohar, 1995); and, edited with Bhagwan Das, *Dalit solidarity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995); Arvind Nirmal, *Heuristic explorations* (Madras: CLS, 1990); *A reader in dalit theology* (Madras: Gurukul, no date); M. E. Prabhakar, *Towards a dalit theology* (Delhi, 1988); M. R. Arulraja, *Jesus the dalit* (Hyderabad: Volunteer Centre, 1996); V. Devasahayam, *Outside the camp* (Madras: Gurukul, 1992); Xavier Irudayaraj (ed), *Emerging dalit theology* (Madurai: Tamil Theological Seminary, 1990). More easily accessible to western readers is a collection of articles in R. Sugirtharajah and C. Hargreaves (eds), *Readings in Indian Christian theology*, vol 1 (London: SPCK, 1993).

16 See, for example, Fatima Bernard, Vedamani Epsibai and Arul Mary, 'Faith walkers: dalit women's spiritual journey', *The Way Supplement* 93 (1998), pp 43-53.

17 The dilemma is well expressed by Robert Schreiter in 'Inculturation of faith or identification with culture?' *Concilium* 2 (1994), pp 15-34. Schreiter ends his article with three principles: the gospel is about *metanoia* and must enable change; the whole gospel must be heard, not just the parts that feel comfortable; communication must always mean rethinking emphases and nuances of meaning.

18 For criticism of the tendency to demonize the Sanskritic tradition in a way which ignores the 'complex processes through which a culture grows', see Michael Amaladoss, *A call to community* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1994), pp 90-94.

19 For a particularly clear and insightful account of the issues facing the Church in India today, which resolutely refuses to polarize positions, see Thomas Menamparampil, 'Christian response to harassment', *Vidyajyoti* 64, 5 (May 2000), pp 328-341.