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# Missionary Styles and the Problem of Dialogue

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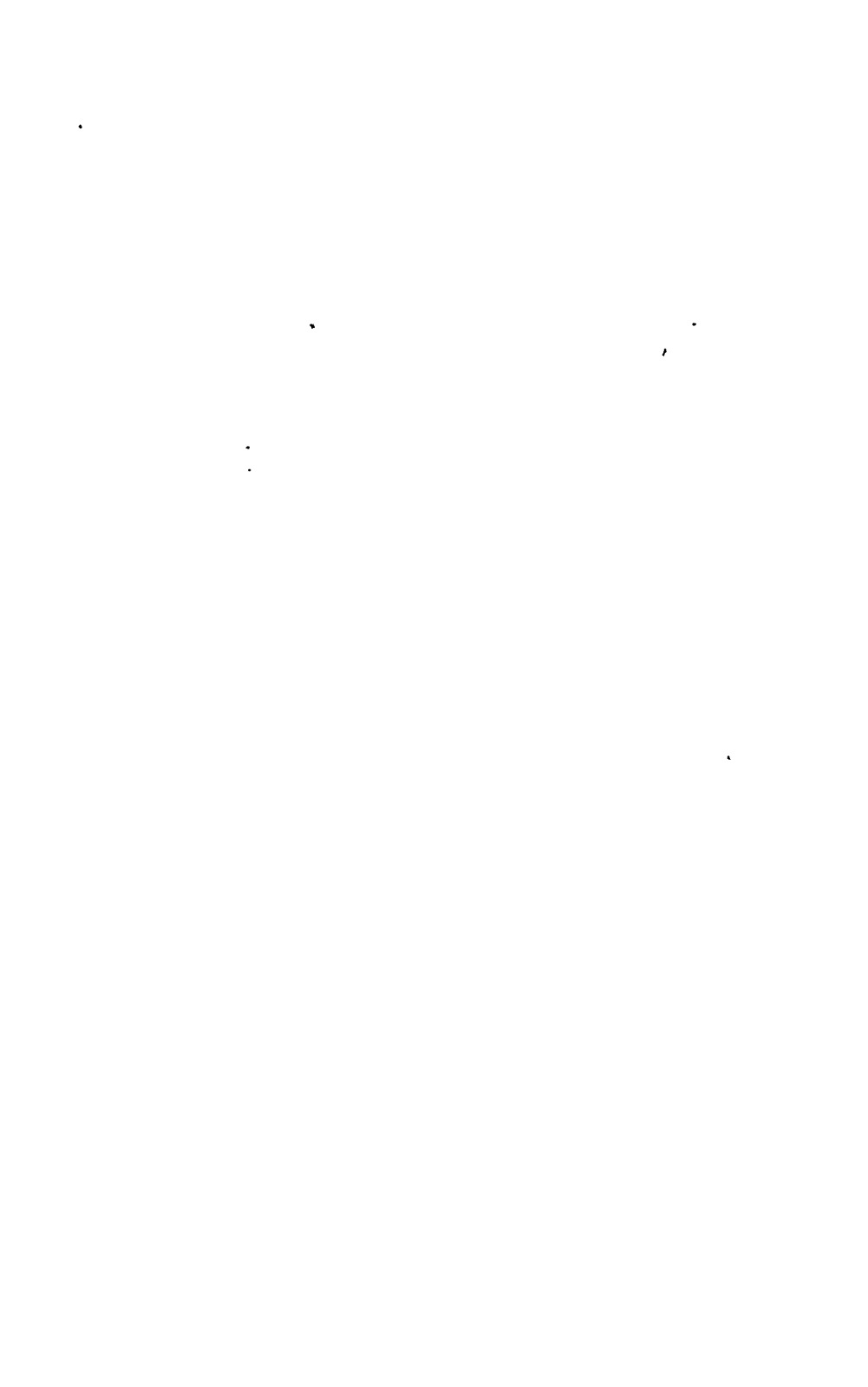


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MISSIONARY STYLES  
AND THE PROBLEM OF DIALOGUE



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# Missionary Styles and the Problem of Dialogue

Susan Visvanathan

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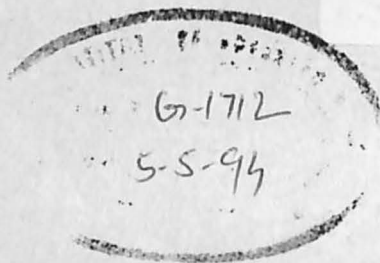
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## FOREWORD

The project on 'Socio-Religious Movements and Cultural Networks in Indian Civilization' was formulated by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in 1991-92 as a part of the celebration of its silver jubilee. The basic purpose of this project is to study religious movements, cultural centres and interpretations of sacred texts, which have influenced, and still influence, millions of people in the Indian subcontinent. The scholars associated with the project seek to explore the sociological as well as the ideological dimensions of the subjects of their study. Through these studies we hope to create a substantial corpus of humanistic literature dealing with the social and cultural history of Indian civilization. As a spin off, this literature would throw light on the contemporary scene.

Over a score of scholars working on the project are expected to complete their monographs by the end of 1995. A comprehensive bibliography is being prepared for publication at the same time as the monographs. A volume containing an overview of the main theme of the project would also be published. Two seminars with direct bearing on the theme will be held in 1993 and 1994, in addition to the seminars normally organized by the Institute every year. The proceedings of these seminars too will be published. The scholars working on the project meet periodically to discuss the progress of their work and the papers they prepare in connection with the project. Six of these 'occasional papers' were finalized in 1992. They are now all published.

I have enjoyed reading this paper by Dr. Susan Visvanathan on 'Missionary Styles and the Problem of Dialogue'. I feel sure that it will be of great interest to the general reader as well as the social historian.

April 13, 1993.  
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla.

J.S. GREWAL





## MISSIONARY STYLES AND THE PROBLEM OF DIALOGUE

Charles Henry Robinson, in his *History of Christian Missions* describes certain missionary styles that were utilized for the purpose of conversion.<sup>1</sup> He argues that the success of Christian missionary activity depended upon such factors as the diffusion of missionary influences over wide areas as opposed to concentration at strategic points, the qualifications and temperament of the missionary appointed to the field and the state at which it is judged best for an autonomous church to appear and stand by itself in a non-Christian country.

Francis Xavier, for instance adopted the diffuse method, and he baptized thousands of Christians whose language he did not master. Schwartz on the other hand spent fifty years in South India, but his missionary style also depended on a diffuse method of dissemination. For Robinson, the greatest achievement was that of William Carey. Though Carey had no financial or political support, he was able to establish a mission station at Serampore and engage in work which makes him a celebrated figure in missionary history. Carey was refused permission to work in the domains of the East India Company when he arrived in Bengal in 1792. So he was forced to go to Serampore which was a mission station abandoned by the Moravian missionaries, and which belonged to the kingdom of Denmark. Carey's trusted companions were Marshman, a school teacher, and Ward who was a printer. By the beginning of 1800 Carey had translated the new Testament into Bengali, a literary exercise which affected Bengali prose writing by the use that it made of Sanskrit words. In 1801 he was appointed by Lord Wellesley as Professor (of Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi) at the college in Calcutta set up for the training of Anglo-Indian officials. Carey more than any one believed in concentrating

<sup>1</sup> Robinson, 9.

missionary activity, and believed that the success of evangelization lay in the education and training of Indian teachers. He left not many thousands of converts, but a solid foundation to be built on by those who were to follow him.

In Travancore, a similar triumvirate was setting the base for evangelization.

Colonel Munro was the British Resident at the Court of Travancore and Cochin (1810-19). The St. Thomas Christians who traced their spiritual ancestry to Thomas, disciple of Jesus were seen to be impoverished and in need of succor. With a view to reforming this church Benjamin Bailey, Henry Baker and Joseph Penn arrived in Kerala between 1816-18. The work of these missionaries aimed at changing the liturgical beliefs of the St. Thomas Christians in slow and gradual ways. Bailey concentrated on the translation of the Scriptures and the Book of Common Prayer into Malayalam, made two dictionaries of Malayalam and engaged in printing tracts and translations. Baker gave himself to the setting up of village schools where scriptural instruction in Malayalam was given. At Kottayam and Mavelikkara, 'superior grammar schools' were set up where English was also taught and these were intended as feeders to the Seminary. The work of the Seminary or Old College which was specifically concerned with the training of the Syrian clergy was in the hands of Mr. Fenn. The students studied Latin, Greek, Syriac, Mathematics and the specialized knowledge constituting their vocation as priests.

In the early decades of the 19th century, the relationship between the Syrian clergy and the missionaries was cordial.<sup>2</sup> However in 1835, the Syrians were visited by Bishop Wilson who laid down to them certain codes of conduct. These were annoying for the Syrians and by 1840, the Christians of St. Thomas had officially severed their contacts with the British missionaries. Wilson had 'recommended' that those who should be ordained by the Metran should do so only after they had been instructed in the college, and had received certificates of learning and

<sup>2</sup> Visvanathan, 20.

good conduct from the principal of the Mission College; secondly, that all the lands, funds and other property belonging to the Syrian church should be examined and an account of them sent to the Resident so that he could check them; thirdly, that salaries should be paid to the clergy so that the corruption of collecting mortuary and other fees could be stopped, and other reforms such as the multiplication of schools, the explanation of the gospel on Sunday, the vernacularization of the prayers used by the clergy so that the lay were not excluded by the secret language of prayer, that all official letters on church affairs should be signed conjointly by the Metran and the senior missionary.<sup>3</sup> The Bishop recorded in his journal, 'Never in my life, I think I was permitted to render a greater service than to these dear Syrian Churches', but the St. Thomas Christians refused to comply to his recommendations, returned the thousand rupees that had been left to them as a gift, and things went from bad to worse, till finally there was a formal dissolution of the partnership between the Syrians and the CMS. Milne Rae quotes missionary sources as saying: 'These ancient Christians must now seek us, not we them. We sought them for twenty years, and the separation was at their instance not ours. Our schools and churches cannot but be open to all, and our clergy will use their discretion as to admitting such as may desire it to our communion on proper evidence. But no attempt at anything like proselytism must be thought of either as to clergy or laity.'<sup>4</sup>

The changed attitude of the missionaries from paternalism and accommodation to hierarchy and control has been briefly recorded by me in an earlier work. The Rev. Peet and Woodcock asserted a colonial and violent missionary attitude as opposed to the hope for reform articulated for example in the life and work of Benjamin Bailey.<sup>5</sup> I will now attempt to consolidate this impression of a hierarchizing colonizing Christianity of the later 19th century, by looking at reports of a Missionary Conference. I accept that this is a selective representation and that

<sup>3</sup> Rae, 302.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* 302.

<sup>5</sup> Visvanathan, 22.

there are possibilities of variation. However stands taken at the Missionary Conference are representative of the official missionary world view. The document that I use here is specifically the 'Report of the Centenary Conference on the Protestant Missions of the World'. This was held in London in June 1888. It was an attempt at balancing accounts, at finding out over discussion tables 'What is the practical result of so vast an expenditure of effort?'<sup>6</sup> The editor asks 'What conquests has that great Missionary army made?' Sixteen hundred members were enrolled for the conference, though the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge did not participate, probably because of 'high Church proclivities'.<sup>7</sup> The imperialistic military fervor of the Conference is captured in this letter to the editor from the Director of the Swedish Missionary Society: 'Our ancestors used to go out on their Viking wars in order to lay waste and destroy. Now, yearly, numbers are sent out from the North armed with the Spirit which is the word of God in order to plant the banner of the Cross, especially where the name of Christ is not known in truth, or even named.'<sup>8</sup> The organizers felt that despite the absence of the two oldest societies in London 'every Protestant Missionary Society in the World may be said to have cordially given their adherence to the Conference'.<sup>9</sup> The editor however could not stop himself from hierarchizing within Christianity in the West itself, arguing for the racial superiority of the Saxon race. He called attention to the fact that '.... almost the whole evangelistic work in heathen lands in the hands of the races derived from the great Saxon stock.....We cannot but notice here the great change that has come over the Latin race in regard to the conquest and colonization of the world. In heathen times it was the great colonizing and conquering race, but since it became subject to the Roman Catholic Church they have ceased to have much weight either in conquest or colonial

<sup>6</sup> *Report of the Centenary Conference on the Protestant Missions of the World, 1888*, vii.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* xiv.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* xv.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* xv.

enterprise.<sup>10</sup> Spain and Portugal according to him debilitated themselves by plunder, rather than invasion for conquest, and further they lost their identity by 'intermarrying with the feeble races'. Therefore, it is to the race which is sending the blessings of Christianity to the heathen to which God is giving success as the 'colonizers and conquerors of the world'.<sup>11</sup> There was a complaint about France too, who 'infidel at home, is a zealous propagator of Popery abroad, and insists on her own language being taught to the children of naked savages in mission Schools'.<sup>12</sup>

While seeing themselves as ancillary to colonialism, the missionaries represented themselves as the conscience keepers of capitalism. No wonder the novels of E.M. Foster and Edward Thompson represented the missionaries as marginal, outside the power hierarchies, mediating between the commonplace world of the natives and the corridors of British imperialism. According to Sir William Hunter, who spoke on June 11th 1888 at the Conference, 'The political conscience of England had awakened to the wrong that was being done in the name of the nation', and with this awakening, the Christian conscience of England also awoke. At that time Missionary impulse 'was associated with the national resolve to do what is right to the peoples who have been committed to our care. I recognize in Missionary work a great expiation for the wrong which the white man has done to the dark man in the past'.<sup>13</sup> Taking Christianity to the exploited would condone the ills of exploitation, for the meek would surely inherit the earth. But it was no simple matter. 'During the last hundred years a new study has arisen in Europe, the study of the history and science of religion.' This showed that simple minded zealots, ignorant but faithful, would not succeed against the poetry and sacred knowledge of the Eastern religions. Thus it was important to be knowledgeable about these 'other' religions, and to know 'the great masses of superstition and of learning, and of

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* xvi.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* xvi.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* xxxix.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* 14.

traditions which are arrayed against us'.<sup>14</sup> Dialogue with these other religions was then a strategy.

Sessions followed which dealt with the theology of Hinduism and Buddhism, and their bearing on Christianity. Hinduism was for the colonial missionary a profound deep, 'a masterpiece of human error'.<sup>15</sup> The Rev. E.F. Ellenwood argued that one of the greatest problems the missionary faced while preaching Christianity was the 'subtlety and evasiveness' of the Hindu philosophic mind, who found in divine revelation, incarnation of God in man, and the Trinity subjects familiar to his own experience and understanding.... 'There is nothing which is not embraced in his religious system' Ellenwood tiredly exclaims that the Hindu welcomes Jesus and does not doubt that 'an exhaustive search through Hindu literature would find him among the incarnations of Vishnu'.<sup>16</sup> A native told Ellenwood 'We Hindus are naturally Christians and do not need it. But without its restraining influence your people would have eaten the world clean up to the bone long ago'.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps moved by the delicacy of many of the arguments represented by the Hindus through missionary voices someone sent a poem to the Chairman which described the vulnerable state of the missionary mind. Could they be converted by the 'subtlety' and wealth of Hinduism? This must have been a danger that they constantly faced; could conversion be a dialogue of religions, the answers to which men could not know the consequence of?<sup>18</sup>

Should all the forms that men devise  
Assail my faith with treacherous art  
I call them vanity and lies  
And bind the Gospel to my heart.

The Chairman closed the session with the imperialistic remark that all the chief heathen religions were now represented in the British Empire - Brahmanism (by

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* 15.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* 50.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* 54.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* 55.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* 68.

which preceding sections suggest that what is meant is monotheism), Hinduism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and Mohammedanism. The Empress of India rules over more Mohammedans than any Moslem ruler. 'These countries were a sacred trust to the British and surely this vast empire was held not just that the prestige, commerce and wealth of Great Britain may be increased?'<sup>19</sup>

There was no embarrassment in missionary voices about the relationship between commerce and mission: rather it was a bond to be celebrated. 'What does commerce owe to missions? Why, it owes everything. They have been most instrumental in opening up the highways and the byways of this country to trade.' Herbert Tritton argued that usually the missionary preceded the trader: 'Thank God the connection between commerce and missions is not only theoretical, it is practical and of every day importance.'<sup>20</sup> Commerce in beating down tracks facilitates the treading of missionary feet, and together with the enlightenment, the mastery of communication which the 19th century made possible they must cooperate to repay the debt 'which we owe to our master'.<sup>21</sup>

While translation of the Bible was seen to be one of the major functions of missionary presence, education was seen to be its most important corollary. Why provide translations of the Scriptures if people could not read? The Rev. W.T.A. Barber of London spoke at the Ecumenical Missionary Conference held in New York in 1900 on 'Education as an Evangelistic Agency'. First of all he said that Christianity sends its 'ambassadors' with the intention of changing heathendom, of building up a Christian State. '....the individual, the home, the village, the city, the state are to realize a new motive, a new power.' The individual soul can only be changed by the 'Christianising of the nation'.<sup>22</sup> This attempt to take over, to colonize, to conquer the whole man was because 'God saves a man. He

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* 72.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* 112, 113.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* 113.

<sup>22</sup> W.T.A. Barber in *Report of the Ecumenical Missionary Conference 1900*, 112.



does not sub-dichotomise him'. The school was necessary for the growth of the Church itself, for the value of western education was clear to all the youth of non-Christian lands, who soon found themselves 'wishful to sit on benches in the missionary school, even at the price of sitting by the pariah and submitting to the foreigner. He recognizes the justice of the theory of education which counts morality an integral factor, and he makes no objection to the scripture lesson. To him there is nothing higher under heaven than the teacher, and he has placed in that venerated seat the missionary, the preacher of the creed of Christ....What an opportunity is thus gained? How eagerly does every true evangelist seize this strategic position!'<sup>23</sup>

Rev. George Patterson, the Secretary for the Christian Literature Society for India said that his society supplied 264 school books on his catalogue, some so popular there was a steady demand every year for 50,000 copies each. Such books 'put what I may call the thin edge of the Christian wedge into secular schools in India'.<sup>24</sup> These books brought in much pecuniary profit which further fed other branches of missionary activity, namely the publication of 'general Christian literature' which hardly made any sale. 'We are dealing there with a literature which we are more anxious to press upon the people than they are to have it, and we must therefore, sell it for what we can get, or give it away'.<sup>25</sup>

However there was some consideration given to the effects of tract publication and scriptural and vernacular education,

'Missionaries have established vernacular schools in every village where they have obtained a standing and the multitude of readers is increasing day by day...the leaders of Hinduism are filled with alarm at the activities of the missionaries and the result of their labours. Hindus in different parts of the country are forming societies for the protection of their religion and they are imitating the ways

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* 115.

<sup>24</sup> *Report of the Centenary Conference on the Protestant Missions of the World, 1888.* 47.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* 47.

of the missionaries. They have their street-preaching in squares and public places – and they issue their tracts'.<sup>26</sup> But Patterson came to the conclusion that such reaction was only helpful to the cause of Christianity, 'for they stir men's hearts, they set men thinking and inquiring, and lead men to search for books that shall tell them of the life of Christ'.

The role of the native agents became an important issue for discussion. Colonial missionary activity was acutely dependent upon the native catechist. He supported the missionary in the work of evangelization, of pastoral engagements and involvements, in education work as native teacher or master, in medical work as doctor and dresser, as translator and colporteur, and of course in *zenana* work, as native Bible woman, teacher and visitor. But as Rev. H.M.M. Hackett, former missionary of the CMS pointed out, the relationship is fraught with ambiguity for there are three sides, an official, a personal and a social relationship.

The native agent consolidates and provides the basic infrastructure of all missionary work, 'for he is the center of all permanent work', for missionaries are few and expensive while native agents are cheaper and more numerous. The missionary initiates, guides and controls the work, while the native agent obeys and carries out daily routine tasks. Hackett warned the new missionary of believing that the native agent is an angel, or on the other hand one never to be trusted, always suspected and despised. In this relationship between colonial missionary and native agent the worst sort of missionary was one who tries to exalt him far above his station and position if life. 'They ignore all social and educational conditions and spoil him by praise and injudicious treatment. They wish no difference to be made between native and European.'<sup>27</sup> He took the example of one case where a native agent was paid the same as an Englishman in the same position. 'He has been laying up money ever since. His expenses do not amount to one-fourth of those of a European.'<sup>28</sup> In

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* 63.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* 252.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* 252.

conclusion the missionary said that 'in actual work' the native evangelist was a fellow labourer, 'but socially a difference undoubtedly has to be made'. To take a person out of his social place was as injurious in India as in England and affects 'the best interests of the work' (i.e. the dissemination of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth). However, if both 'are united by the tie of faith and devotion to the one Father, the one common Lord and Saviour, if both are anointed by a longing desire for the salvation of the souls of men, then the relations between missionary and catechist will always be satisfactory and difficulties will be unknown'.<sup>29</sup> In the next section I will show the nuances of the relationship between native and missionary.

## II

Dennis Hudson in a remarkable monograph on the life of Krishna Pillai, a Tamil Christian poet, chronicles the manner in which Christianity and Hinduism conversed in the problematic web of conversion. Krishna Pillai's story epitomizes the central concern of this paper; how to look at dialogue between religions as a problem of consonance and dissent, of turbulence in faith and given precepts of life, of ultimate questioning, often without resolution.

Krishna Pillai accepted the job of a Tamil Munshi at a missionary station at Sawyerpuram, in Tamilnadu in 1853.<sup>30</sup> As a practising Vellala Hindu who observed strict rules of purity and pollution, there were problems in accepting a job at a missionary station, since many of the residents were low status Nadar. However he received an income of seventeen rupees per month (which contrasted with the income of the missionary Rev. Huxtable who was paid 170 rupees a month) and the job provided him a permanent income since the British and their schools were well established and 'clearly there to stay'.<sup>31</sup>

For four years Krishna Pillai's life was steadfast in its ritual purity. 'He faithfully performed the daily rituals

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* 254.

<sup>30</sup> Hudson, 207.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* 213.

required of him, fasted on the appropriate days of the month, made the new moon pilgrimage to the temple and carefully observed the social distinctions of purity.<sup>32</sup> Gradually, through his conversations with Huxtable, to whom he taught Tamil, he became interested in Christianity, to the extent that he began 'to develop doubts about Sri Vaisnava teachings'. In the beginning Krishna Pillai wanted to refute Huxtable's teaching and so he began to read the Bible and he found it so convincing that in his conversion account he wrote that 'all such items which are spoken of in the Saiva and Vaisnava Samaya Treatises are completely fabricated, are old stories and embellished pomp'.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly the form of Sri Vaisnava beliefs which Krishna Pillai followed, like Protestantism, laid much stress on the sinful condition of man's being and his need for a Saviour.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile his brother Muttaiya Pillai converted to Christianity and while Krishna Pillai had been maintaining quiet over the inner turmoil that he had experienced in his religious life, it was not possible to do that any more. Huxtable summoned him immediately and asked him 'What barrier is there now to your becoming a Christian?'<sup>35</sup> Krishna Pillai was angered by this and told the missionary that it was his pleasure whether he became a Christian or not.<sup>36</sup> Further, he resigned from his post as Munshi, but was persuaded by the missionary to return. Muttaiya Pillai had a friend Danushkodi Raju, who had converted to Christianity at the same time, and he gave Krishna Pillai a set of Christian books, one of which was the *Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>37</sup> Further Danushkodi Raju instructed him in a meditative reading of the Bible. Hudson writes that none of the categories were strange to Krishna Pillai - incarnation, expiation, salvation - yet how did Christ's act of expiation impart salvation to men?<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* 214.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* 216.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* 218.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* 255.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* 255.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* 256.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* 258.

The explanation came not from the missionary but from Danushkodi Raju who had been a Sri Vaisnava himself, and shared a similar conceptual vocabulary. Krishna Pillai found the explanation satisfactory: Christ conquers through death through a faultless act of merit; being a perfect being he builds up an infinite score of merit, the power of which he distributes; since the divine being dwells in all souls, this infusion is possible.

Krishna Pillai wrote a poem of praise on that day, where he called upon God as being 'O Sea of Grace, O sun that dispels the work of Darkness....I offer my heart to only you, the form of Dharma....'<sup>39</sup> Hudson writes here that Krishna Pillai does not name his God. Once Krishna Pillai had accepted Christ he had to think about how to make his external life consistent with his change of soul. Slowly he began to be less rigid about keeping the rituals and fasts, those daily observances which had been so precious to him. When his wife discovered his motive, she threatened to kill herself, and he had to defer the time when he could publicly announce his conversion to Christianity.<sup>40</sup>

In 1858 Krishna Pillai received baptism which he saw as a break with the old life, with birth and movement to the 'realm of divine grace'.<sup>41</sup> He saw his old life as stubborn, wicked, 'infatuated with the manifest world' a 'sphere of mental darkness', and a 'time of delusion'.<sup>42</sup> There followed a period of tremendous conflict between his wife and himself, and the larger family of which he was a part. These were reflective of the way in which Hinduism and Christianity appeared in relation to each other, the contrasts and negotiations that were part of this religious interaction.

On one hand the missionaries were earnest that there must be outward symbols of this change of beliefs. The missionaries wanted their Tamil converts to shave the kudumi, that tuft of hair which signified high status, and separated them from Muslims, Christians and low castes.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* 260.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* 261.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* 272.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* 272.

The missionaries believed that this was a symbol of the adherence to idolatry. There were other customs which the missionaries abhorred, some examples being, the celebration of puberty among Tamil Christian girls, the use of cow dung and rice flour for decorative purposes, oil baths on Saturdays and Wednesdays, chewing betel, expressing relationships of honour through the use of sandalwood, flowers and betel.<sup>43</sup> Were these questions of religious significance, or merely cultural habits?

Muttaiya Pillai, the brother of Krishna Pillai, wrote a forceful treatise on the nature of difference, which *iyati* expressed and why the symbols of difference were important to maintain. Christianity was not like Judaism or Hinduism 'for it does not speak of the manner or performing rituals, nor of the way of regional practices, nor of the order of *iyati* practices - it teaches only the *marga* of salvation which is common to all countries and to all peoples, and which is necessary for the saving of the soul. Therefore, no single *iyati* practice had been established applicable to all people. There is thus no place for teaching that each Christian should give up his regional practice and adhere to others. Just as Christians in every country retain the regional and *iyati* practices of those countries, so Christians of Indian (*intu*) regions will naturally conduct themselves according to Indian regional and *iyati* practices. Dennis Hudson argues that Muttaiya Pillai eliminates the problematic concept of purity and pollution and focuses on the hierarchical divisions followed in the pattern of the universe. Thus hierarchy becomes a theologically neutral concept.<sup>44</sup> This preoccupation with hierarchy as the basis of life translated itself in the Vellala Christian demand that they be seated separately from lower castes like the Nadars in the church, that they be buried in separate grave yards, have caste titles read at marriage services and so on.

Hudson chronicles the complex web of caste networks that ramify a convert's experience of social life. How may a native Christian continue to live as a Christian amongst

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* 445.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* 455.

his own people? How do you distinguish between the social and the religious? Looking at Krishna Pillai's poetry, Hudson analyses both the continuities with the past in terms of a shared mystical vocabulary between Sri Vaisnavism and Christianity; and the rupture that Krishna Pillai elaborates through his verse, where he describes, as he believes, the delusions of his former religious life and the clarity of the Christian *marga* which he has chosen for the *moksha* which it must give at life's end.

### III

This experience of conversions shows the irreducibility of two world views. One cannot be understood in relation to the other, but only in opposition. Was this dialogic? It certainly presumed a theory of identity, of self-delineation, of marking out boundaries and differences. Hudson points out that the missionaries were very insistent that the newly converted should eat beef, thereby symbolizing their break with the past. Further Krishna Pillai's mother on accepting conversion, nevertheless found the idea of drinking wine abhorrent, and resisted the Eucharist until there was a compromise, whereby she could be communicated privately.

It is as Raimundo Panikkar writes that 'the problem of pluralism arises only when we feel - we suffer - the incompatibility of differing world views and are at the same time forced by the praxis of our factual co-existence of survival'.<sup>45</sup>

In this section I shall look at the life of another missionary Dom Henri Le Soux, a French Dominican monk who came to India in 1948. His life is in striking contrast to the missionary stereotype whom we described in the earlier sections of this paper who were sometimes benevolent, usually hierarchical, believing in a society which was racially separated and divided, where some were more equal than others; yet repudiating ethnocentrically the inegalitarianism of caste society in the name of Jesus Christ. I offer this paper as a tentative

<sup>45</sup> Panikkar, 209.

fractured analysis of a notion of mission and dialogue very different from the archetypal notion of hierarchical missionary Christianity. Henri Le Soux experiences conversion, like Krishna Pillai does, as a transformation of the heart, but the dialogue that he has as a Christian with Hinduism is full of tolerance, as he tries to live in both worlds simultaneously. The two worlds, as Krishna Pillai saw were represented as mutually exclusive, and to identify as one you had to leave the outward symbols even, of the other – which determined a person as being of one religion or another. As for belief, and doctrine, the lines were clearly drawn. There was no possibility of translation (the translation of categories was in fact seen by the colonial missionary to be a dangerous exercise which could falsely put Christ and Krishna or the Trinity and the Trimourti in problematic conjunctions), comparisons were always made to the detriment of one or the other. Henri Le Soux had a mystic experience that broke down the doctrinal exclusiveness between Hinduism and Christianity. The manner in which he sought to do this was a life time experiment, a voyage, singularly lonely and yet full of laughter and mistakes and friendship. I shall draw extensively from James Stuart's substantial biography of Abhishiktananda to tell his strange story.

Henri Le Soux was born on 30th August 1910 in a small town called St. Briac on the northern coast of Brittany.

He discovered the monastic vocation very early, at the age of sixteen, and joined the monastery at Kergonan a Benedictine order. In 1935 he was ordained a priest, interestingly on the Feast day of St. Thomas, Apostle of India. Till 1948, Henri Le Soux was involved in his life at Kergonan, engaged in teaching and official responsibilities as Librarian and Senior Ceremoniary. The 'call of India' which had germinated as early as 1934 centered around either participation in the establishment of a contemplative life in India or in leading a contemplative life in some hermitage in India.<sup>46</sup> In the years while he waited for his call to be realized he prepared himself in the study of Indian scriptures. In 1947 he had written to the Bishop of

<sup>46</sup> Stuart, 12.



Tiruchirappalli 'asking permission to settle somewhere around Tiruchl so that, living in some hermitage he might live a contemplative life like the monks of early Christianity in as close a manner with the traditions of Indian Sannyasa'.<sup>47</sup> His letter was given to Fr. Monchanin, a brilliant and erudite priest who had a similar vocation for life and mission in India. Monchanin's objective was, according to Abhishiktananda, to prepare for the awakening among Christians of the contemplative life in an integrally Indian form and to attempt to develop in a Christian milieu the age old contemplative urge of India.<sup>48</sup>

In January 1948 Fr. Monchanin was appointed to the parish at Kulittalai, twenty miles from Tiruchirappalli, and it was here in 1950 that Fr. Monchanin and Dom Le Soux began their *ashram*. Fr. Monchanin in his letter to Henri Le Soux asked that the latter should have three gifts which the Spirit would give him 'unshakable courage (because you will have disappointments) complete detachment from the things of the West, and a profound love for India'.<sup>49</sup> Henri Le Soux received this missive with great joy in Kergonan for he was on the verge of abandoning 'English, Tamil and the Upanishads' since it seemed less likely that his vocation was to be realized.<sup>50</sup> He wrote 'you can imagine what it meant to discover someone whom the thought of the *atman* leads to the contemplation of the divine Paraclete, and who behind the superficial pantheism discerns the extraordinary intuition of the Spirit reached by the great seers of the Upanishads'.<sup>51</sup>

When Henri Le Soux began this 'experiment' in dialogue there was no doubt that he began as a 'missionary' in the conventional sense of the word. '... eighteen years of Benedictine life have made me deeply attached to the "holy rule" and (that) I dream of giving our blessed Father new children who will fashion a Europe'.<sup>52</sup> It would be a mystic

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* 13.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.* 15.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* 16.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* 17.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* 18.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* 20.

order to which Hindus were drawn. They would follow the path of de Nobili and Brito who lived as *sannyasis* following traditional rules of life and austerity. He dreamed of the day when fully Tamilian in dress, life and customs 'sitting in choir for the psalms in the lotus position - if indeed we ever manage to acquire it' - they would take their meals on banana leaves, seated on the ground.<sup>53</sup> On the 15th August 1948, Henri Le Soux was in India.

There began a period of transition for him, a change from European ways to Indian - A year after his arrival he wrote 'more and more I am giving up the use of a chair except for writing, and struggle to accustom myself to living on my mat. Would that I had began this exercise at the age of six months.'<sup>54</sup>

In February 1949, he bought his first saffron cloth, abandoning his Benedictine habit. The parishioners brought him thirty rupees to have a habit stitched because they thought he went barefoot and in saffron because he was too poor.<sup>55</sup> His mannerisms and dress were strange indeed for a European priest and 'one day he set out alone and returned with a party of forty six' curious individuals.<sup>56</sup>

Very soon Monchanin and Henri Le Soux realized that they needed to visit Hindu *ashrams* to learn from them the codes of Sannyasa. They went to the neighbouring Ramakrishna Ashram soon after Dom Le Soux's arrival, and the latter realized almost immediately '... how far these people are from us; they speak of Christ with admiration and read the Bible; but for them Christ is only one of the many manifestations of God on the earth - Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Ramakrishna. They cannot understand that it is obligatory to have a definite faith or a fixed creed and to belong to the Church. The nearer I come to the Hindus, the more I feel them at the same time closest to me in their search for God; and far from me in their psychological inability to admit that Christianity is

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* 22.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* 26.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* 27.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* 29.

the only authentic means of coming to God.<sup>57</sup> Monchanin commenting on the same visit wrote that the more spiritual a Hindu becomes, 'the further in a sense he distances himself from Christianity.'<sup>58</sup> It was soon after that Henri Le Soux made a visit to the *ashram* at Tiruvennamalai. This paper will attempt to analyse this encounter between Hinduism and Christianity as captured in *The Secret of Arunachala*, Henri Le Soux's book about his meeting with Ramana.

He writes that long before his arrival in India he had heard of Sri Ramana Maharshi, some pamphlets and articles about him having appeared in various magazines including *Etudes Carmelitaines*. In January 1945 he and Fr. Monchanin hired a bullock cart like the other pilgrims to the *ashram*. When they arrived at the *ashram*, Monchanin was recognized by some of the Brahmins, one of whom arranged a room to rest in, food, to eat and 'then introduced us to the presence of the Maharshi'.<sup>59</sup> Sri Ramana was at this time in his seventieth year and physically weak. Fixed hours of *darshan* were imposed on his devotees against the Maharshi's will who asked 'why insist on imposing one's will on the visitors, many of whom come from far?' But he gave into his well wishers for his 'tapas' had become to offer no resistance. So he allowed himself to be enthroned and treated by the brahmans of the *ashram* as if he were a *murti*.

Henri Le Soux and Monchanin approached him, saluted the Maharshi respectfully and took their place amongst the crowds. Le Soux felt extremely disappointed. Everything seemed at odds to him – the 'liturgical' atmosphere, the term 'Bhagavan' (but why not, he reasoned, if lord and Monseigneur can be used in secular contexts?) and yet as he asks in his remembering 'Why should we be surprised that the penetrating vision of spiritual India should unhesitatingly perceive him and identify him by name in all that manifests him?'

'Surrounded by this ritual, these prostrations's the cloud of incense, and the crowd of people sitting silently

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* 32.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* 32.

<sup>59</sup> Abhishiktananda (1988), 2.

with their eyes fixed on him, this man seemed so natural, so "ordinary", a kindly grandfather shrewd and serene, very like my own, as I remembered him from my childhood.'

They had a meal with the community of pilgrims, the Bhagavan sitting at the end of the room, the guests placed, in parallel rows at right angles to him. Monchanin and Le Soux sat immediately in front of the Maharshi, Monchanin introducing Le Soux to Ramana. The Maharshi replied with a gesture of the hand accompanied by a smile filled with a kindness that was impossible to forget.<sup>60</sup> Le Soux spent most of the meal looking for Maharshi's halo. 'In vain I strained my eyes trying to see it. All my efforts were useless.'<sup>61</sup>

Next day Henri Le Soux woke with a fever, went nevertheless to the *darshan* and found himself unmoved. A European acquaintance told him 'You have come here with far too much baggage' so accordingly Le Soux emptied himself and listened to the chanting. 'When the Vedas began again, their spell carried me off much further from things and from myself than had been the case on the previous evening. The fever, my sleepiness, a condition that was half dreaming, seemed to release in me zones of para-consciousness in which all that I saw or heard aroused overwhelmingly powerful echoes ...; it was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. It was a call which pierced through everything, rent it in pieces and opened a mighty abyss.'<sup>62</sup>

The fever continued after his return to his own *ashram* – a period of dream and powerful images where the Maharshi constantly appeared to him.

The next time he went to Tiruvannamalai, six months later, Ramana was grievously ill, the crowds immense, for it would be perhaps the last *darshan* of Bhagavan. In the spring of 1950 Abhishiktananda planned to go to Ramana's *ashram* but in April as he made ready to leave, he discovered that Ramana had passed away on Friday

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* 6.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* 6.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* 9.

14th, just three days before. In the later part of 1957, Henri Le Soux went to Ramana's *ashram* and was shown the hermitages – the caves – on the mountainside of Arunachala. The mountain called to Henri Le Soux 'If Ramana was indeed great how much more so must be this Arunchala which drew Ramana to himself....'<sup>63</sup>

In 1952, from 29 March to 8 April and 19 May to 10 August Henri Le Soux responded to the call of Arunachala. He describes his coming to the mountain with some prosaicness and some laughter. Kadirvel the watchman received the new monk with delight. 'Only then did I realize what a marvelous windfall seemed at that moment to have fallen at his feet, straight from heaven. A sadhu with a white skin – such a one must be well supplied with cash and all ready to distribute it. Besides, crowds of people are bound to come and surely drop a generous tip in the hand of the faithful watchman'.<sup>64</sup> In his diary he entered on 30th March 1952 the feeling that 'Now I am ready, if the Lord wills to remain for ever quite simply – a Hindu Christian monk.'<sup>65</sup> Along with celibacy, which he already practised as a Christian monk, he adopted strict vegetarianism, and more surprisingly the code of silence so that he could meditate on Arunachala. Suddenly his position came across to him clearly – the honesty which he expressed about the triviality of his desires came across with great clarity: supposing he was to live here in these caves *for ever*, and did not possess the means when he had enough to catch the train whose lights he could see from the hill top; supposing no one knew he was here, or cared nothing; supposing no one visited him or bowed before him or took any interest in his *tapas*, suppose there was no one to feed him, or that he had no 'small change' to purchase the various things he might need; suppose he had to beg daily for his needs and be humiliated by the charity of his fellow being. In spite of these thoughts he felt only exaltation; a completeness of joy; and understood this to be the call to total dispossession.<sup>66</sup> Following this

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* 23.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* 25, 26.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* 26.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.* 28.

was the call to silence which he kept for two weeks, then for a whole month. He knew this to be a small symbol but for him it was an important one. During his first experience of solitude he read a great deal but more and more he found himself freed from all desire, all possibility of boredom as he entered that state of meditative calm which came from his contemplation of Arunachala.

He would go to the *puja* celebrated every Friday at the *ashram*, a long ceremony lasting almost three hours, the recitation of the three hundred names of Shakti, then the thousand and eighth, then the hundred and eight, each punctuated by praise and prayer. At the end, with the distribution of *prasad*, Henri Le Soux would begin to move away, but one day the priests called out to him, they had saved flowers and a piece of coconut for him.<sup>67</sup> There were occasions when he was absent, and one day Kittu the priest of the *ashram*, gently told him: 'You really must come...when you are there I feel that I have more strength to call upon the divine Shakti.'<sup>68</sup>

By the end of July he knew that his peaceful days at the cave of Arunachala were numbered for he saw that a country cinema, with its loud speakers that allowed everyone around without discrimination to hear the music and dialogue of the films was to be set up just below his cave. In any case what did it matter where a *sadhu* stayed; where he came from or where he went? He found another cave, further away, beside Mulaippal Tirtham and Arutpal Tirtham. Water had to be carried three to four hundred yards over rocky paths, but it was a hermitage.

He had to return to the Kavery in August 1952, but he came back to Arunachala whenever he could in 1953, 1954 and 1955. His friends could not understand the call of Arunachala. Monchanin wanted to know what Tirunelveli could offer without Ramana, but Henri Le Soux remained steadfast. Going back again and again he discovered Arunachala, the mountain which was the form taken by Shiva to make himself visible to men. This Shiva *lingam*, the mountain, became for Henri Le Soux the

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* 44.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* 45.

ultimate symbol of his own now-advaitic search. Shiv, the symbol of Unity, became *aruna*, the rays of the rising sun, the rising of fire, the burning bush of Moses, the consuming fire of the Hebrews, the Light of the world, the Supreme light, the joyful light.<sup>69</sup> Entering into the heart of Arunachala, was to enter the caves, the heart of the mystery, to enter the depths of the self, to live in the centre of his heart. Once one enters into these depths of the self, the *atman*, everything disappears even Arunachala. But, as Abhishiktananda wrote 'the depth of the cave of the heart is indeed more difficult to reach than those which are hollowed in the rock'.<sup>70</sup>

As time went on Abhishiktananda found that he preferred to stay in his hermitage and cook a meal of millet on fire made of dry twigs. But twice a week it was his custom to go and receive *bhiksha* at the home of two Brahmins. On one occasion though he found that he had to receive *bhiksha* at several houses on the same day, and as a *sannyasi* he could not refuse the heartfelt services of these devout people. At the end of several gargantuan meals each following the other from which there was no escape, Abhishiktananda wrote that till the next evening he was forced to fast, 'Shiva had caught me properly'. He had not kept the fast of *ekadasi*, 'and so Shiva found a way to make me keep an even stricter fast on the following day.'<sup>71</sup>

In this brief account of a chapter of Abhishiktananda's life – the years or interludes at Arunchala – I have merely tried to show the quality of an experiment, the possibility of participating in another world view, another state of being while holding on to one's own identity and religious faith. Like an experiment, this was something which Abhishiktananda took upon himself – both the lambent period of literary preparation in those caves where he was a monk at Kergonan as well as the years when he wandered as all Sadhus must, for the spirit blew him here and there. Sannyasa for him was the calling, the height of self-realization which made a man become a solitary

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* 52.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.* 54.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.* 65.

wanderer, a knowledge that put an end to all activity, to Karma itself.<sup>72</sup> Sannyasa was the stage which was beyond all stages transcending all life crises and yet 'immanent in all without any duality'.<sup>73</sup> Thus no one may ask the Sannyasi 'What is your name? From where do you come?' In several places Abhishiktananda records this aversion to questioning about his past. Dennis Hudson notes in personal conversation (April 30, 1992) that the years at Kergonan from 1934-1948 coincided with the years of Nazism and war in Brittany. What were the conflicts that Henri Le Soux faced during those years? What was it that drove him so incessantly to a life free of all roots, all mooring, free to wander as the calling took him? Secondly it is clear that Le Soux was not attempting to reduce the two religions into some synthetic order. It is not even clear whether he believed that one could be translated into the terms of the other. There was a certain parallel order that he sought to bring in a textual concordance, bringing synchronicity between two different scriptures using key themes. The whole problem of the selection of texts becomes increasingly clear here as one central to deciphering Abhishiktananda dialogical method. Advaita and Trinity were the central realities, and he lived his entire monastic life living out their realities as he experienced it. Often it seemed that the Eucharistic mystery which he continued to celebrate were foot notes in his life. Robert Vachon, a monk who persuaded Abhishiktananda to meet with and talk to him in the Rishikesh years said (personal communication Feb. 28, 1992) 'Swamiji, you are more Hindu than Christian. Why don't you admit it?' But Abhishiktananda laughed (laughter for which he was famous and which no doubt was part of his charisma) and would say nothing. He would perhaps have said, 'If Christianity is to maintain its claim to universality it has to accept the challenge and integrate this experience (I do not say the Indian or Buddhist formulations of it) lest it (Christianity) be reduced to a particular religious sect which would be remembered in

<sup>72</sup> Abhishiktananda (1984), 3.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.* 4.



history as having usefully catered for twenty centuries to the religious needs of one area of the civilized world.<sup>74</sup>

In spite of this yearning for the transcendental and the advaitin reality of being without dualism, Abhishiktananda knew that there were dangers at every step. It must be recorded that Fr. Monchanin could not accept Abhishiktananda's deeper entry into Advaita without at least dissuading him. Abhishiktananda himself wrote in early 1956: 'What a conflict, when one has deeply lived the Christian sacrament. Here you are "far away" from signs. No reading, no prayer, no *puja* ... only sustained *dhyana*.'<sup>75</sup> At Tapovanam Ashram where he was learning from his *guru* Sri Gnana-Ananda, he could not celebrate the Eucharist and the breviary was said extremely privately in an hour at mid-day. 'Once the *res* (the being, reality) is attained, the sacrament recovers all its meaning, but when you are all alone in the undefined space between the sign and the *res*, unresistibly attracted by the one, and not feeling justified in abandoning the other....'<sup>76</sup> He asked himself how he was to explain to the Greeks 'which is what Christians are') how he understood God to be? 'I shall try to write about it for the very limited circle of those who could understand it. But now it is a matter of penetrating beyond signs.... Blessed Feast. Celebrate Easter through the signs, you who still can.'<sup>77</sup>

It is doubtful that Abhishiktananda ever really managed to communicate what he had known and seen. What became important about his life and work however was that he inspired a community of theologians and scholars to continue his search and the means by which it could be expressed or communicated. Words banalized this experience, and yet there was in the people who believed in him a conviction that 'I and Thou', Martin Buber's dialogical Universe had been captured and abbreviated to something even more fundamental: the *I am* of Advaita and of Jesus' Life. Could western Christianity come to terms with such spiritual reductionism of different ethos?

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.* 115.

<sup>75</sup> Stuart, 100.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.* 100.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* 101.

Conversion, as a principle of mere statistics would die an immediate death, but conversion as metanoia, as a change of heart and being was always now possible, dialogically. One could by a process of seeking and possible revelation understand the spiritual experience of the other, be perhaps drawn into the whirlpool of osmosis, separated from the stability and ossification of unrepudiated unquestioned world views – one could begin to understand the other.

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