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# Swami Abhishiktananda and the Possibility of Christian *Sannyāsa*

SUMMARY – The article looks at the possibility of Christian *sannyāsa* from two sources: the life and writings of Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda, 1910–1973) and conversations and interviews with Indian Christian practitioners conducted over the past decade. It begins with a summary of the understanding and meaning of *sannyāsa* within its Indian context before analysing the life and teachings of Swami Abhishiktananda. It concludes with a critique of his position from the contemporary standpoint before essaying the possibilities of this form of life within the Christian context.

The Nature of *Sannyāsa*

The Sanskrit term *saṃnyāsa*is comprised of two elements: *saṃ*, united with and*nyās*, renunciation or abandonment.[[1]](#footnote-2) In early Sanskrit texts such as the *Upanishads* and the *Laws of Manu* it is seen as the final *āśrama* or stage of human life which is traditionally seen as lasting 100 years and divided into four stages of 25 years each: *brahmacarya* (the initial period of discipline and studentship), *gṛhasta*(the householder stage),*vānaprastha*(loosening of bonds from the householder stage and preparation for old age) and finally *sannyāsa–*the absolute renunciation. As understood in the *Laws of Manu* and most early texts these phases were usually limited to certain castes and often only men.[[2]](#footnote-3) Thus from its very beginnings the term raises a problem that we shall return to throughout this article: how far must it be understood solely in its original Indian context and how much can it be adapted for contemporary seekers, especially for those from beyond the traditional Hindu folds such as Christians. In its early context it is understood as a state that is only achieved after the first three stages have been completed: one must have undergone student formation and discipline according to Vedic principles, raised a family and lived the life of a householder performing necessary duties as a good citizen to benefit society and then undergone the period of withdrawal as a ‘forest dweller’ on the outskirts of the village, assisted by members of one’s family, before the final total renunciation of *sannyāsa* is possible.[[3]](#footnote-4)Yet another debate arises in the Indian sources – is *sannyāsa* a fourth *āśrama*or stage of life or is it rather beyond all *āśramas*? This latter view has usually been the attitude to *sannyāsa* taken by the Christian ascetics with whom I have discussed it. Might we put a new paragraph in here?

Indian Christian religious have traditionally undergone a Western-style religious formation: that is a period of training and studentship, *brahmacarya* in Indian sense, before taking the traditional Christian vows of, for example, poverty, chastity and obedience. In so doing the Christian ascetics I have encountered have generally not undergone a *gṛhasta*(householder) or*vānaprastha*(forest dweller) stage but leapt straight into what could be termed Christian *sannyāsa*.[[4]](#footnote-5)Such Christian *sannyāsis* may adopt the life of wandering ascetics, such as the late Swami Sadanand or settle in an ashram such as Fr Thomas Kochumuttom CMI, the guru of the Jeevan Dhara ashram in the Himalayas, or Fr Francis Vineeth CMI, the founder of the Vidyavanam ashram in Karnataka. Amongst women *sannyāsinis* the same variation is seen between those who start ashrams such as Vandana Mataji (founder of Jeevan Dhara where Fr Thomas is now the guru), forest dwellers such as Prasanna Devi of Rajkot, Gujarat and Paulina, a wandering *sannyāsini* of Rishikesh. For Fr Perumpallikunnel CMI, a Carmelite priest living in Kerala, *sannyāsa* is a matter of right relationship with God and the world – he compares it to Ignatian ‘indifference’ where a compassionate attitude is adopted towards all people and all things. In this respect for him right disposition is the most important thing rather than the actual circumstances of one’s existence.[[5]](#footnote-6) For Fr Kochumuttom all Christians consecrated to the religious life are, by definition, *sannyāsis/ sannyāsinis*,yet he distinguishes the Christian path from that of, say, Hindu or Buddhist asceticism, as a work of collaboration between the seeker and God. The seeker must undergo the necessary ascetic training or *tapas* but they must also be cognisant, as Christians, that such spiritual attainment is dependent upon the action and collaboration with God. What is good in the non-Christian traditions should be adopted, he advises, but always with right discernment to the wider Christian perspective.[[6]](#footnote-7)

This initial survey gives us some idea of the disputed issues around *sannyāsa* and draws out the key areas this article proposes to assess concentrating on the life and writings of Swami Abhishiktananda seen through the eyes of present-day practitioners such as those already introduced. The key questions that need to be assessed can be summarised as follows:

1. How far must the Christian *sannyāsi* follow the traditional Indian *āśramas* or is *sannyāsa* beyond the*āśramas*?

2. At what point does inculturation into a practice such as*sannyāsa* end and the form of Christianity become so misshapen as to be unrecognisable as such?

3. How might Christian *sannyāsa* be lived out today?

From these questions, and the ensuing discussion, I shall outline varying understandings of Christian *sannyāsa* before concluding by essaying the possibility of their development in the contemporary Christian milieu.

### Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktananda

Born in 1910 to a poor Breton family, Henri Le Saux had a long interest in India and Indian spirituality joining the minor seminary at Châteaugiron in Brittany at an early age in 1921 before entering the Benedictine order at the Abbey of Sainte-Anne de Kergonan in 1929. In 1948 he sailed to India to begin a monastic community with his fellow French priest, Jules Monchanin, their aim being to live the ancient Western monastic life within the frame and ambit of classical Indian ideas, philosophy and spiritual practice. The monastery they founded in Tamil Nadu, normally called Shantivanam(The Forest of Peace), survived their passing and today flourishes, however while they both lived there it largely remained (as both priests liked it) a quiet and empty hermitage. Both priests began wearing the *kavi* of the Hindu renouncer in the 1950s at which time Henri Le Saux took the name Abishikteśvarānda (throughout this article I have used the normal English version of his name, Swami Abhishiktananda, omitting the diacritics).[[7]](#footnote-8) In 1968, Swami Abhishiktananda decided to head north to the source of the Ganges where he spent the final years of his life alternating between a small hermitage he had built there and seeking to convey his message to a new generation of seekers to India.

Still controversial today nearly half a century after his death in 1973 there are elements in his life and writings that pre-empt our twenty-first century concerns in a prophetic fashion. From the point of view of this article his life and writings anticipated most of the questions raised at the onset and an examination of his view on*sannyāsa* will help draw conclusions on the central question of this article: is Christian*sannyāsa* possible and what form may it take? As implied by our second question above, however, the nature and scope of Christian *sannyāsa* is bound up with wider cultural and inter-faith questions as to the nature of Hindu-Christian relations and from this perspective it is worth examining the nature of Le Saux’s own encounter with Hindus and Hinduism during his 25 years in India.With his fellow Catholic priest, Fr Jules Monchanin, he had struggled for most of his adult life to reconcile the demands of the lifestyle of the Hindu ascetic with those of his Catholic inheritance and position. The problems and issues that beset him during his relatively short time in India stay with us and if anything have become even more relevant in a world rent by sectarian violence and religious extremism. Le Saux’s dilemma: *How can I be true to my origins whilst reaching out and befriending the ‘other’, in particular the ‘other’ in religious and cultural terms*?remains our contemporary dilemma too.

### A Note on Sources

The testimony to Swamiji’s journey is held in three sources. First, there are the accounts of Swamiji by writers and commentators, many of whom knew him personally and most of which we shall refer to here. Secondly there are his numerous writings to a vast and multifaceted public, in particular his books and his letters. The former were published at intervals throughout his life, mostly in French and English, and were usually later derided by the Swami who grew out of their opinions almost as soon as they were written, becoming increasingly convinced that what he was seeking could not be articulated in traditional prose and discourse. Ultimately he expressed satisfaction only with the more autobiographical accounts of his encounters with various Hindu mystics and sages such as Sri Ramana Maharshi and Sri Gnānānanda. Finally, there is his ‘confession’ – his spiritual diary which he kept assiduously from the first stirrings of his encounter with the Hindu other. In the fire of Swamiji’s confession we enter into the crucible within which his faith was forged. As with so many personal confessions and utterances from spiritual masters over the centuries, we also have to ask ourselves: *should* we be reading them? Were they meant for us to read? How far can we use them to draw conclusions about the nature of the beliefs of those who wrote them? As Raimundo Panikkar, who edited the diaries, concurs:

This Diary was not written with a view to publication (…) Is this not highly indiscreet, a kind of profanation of what, out of respect for the experience of a spiritual man, ought to remain hidden? (*Diary*, xiii)[[8]](#footnote-9)

And in fact the first editor of his diary, his follower Marc Chaduc, seemingly took the liberty of removing many of the personal references in the later parts of the text. Panikkar, on the contrary, recognised that the personal ‘fire’ of the diary was indeed part of Swamiji’s legacy. For if we simply read the theological treatises that he left us we shall probably miss the main event – the personal encounter in, what he loved to call, ‘the cave of the heart’.[[9]](#footnote-10) For, as Panikkar states, the text of the diary:

Gushes up from the author’s being, as he lets his pen run freely. This Diaryis, so to speak, the laboratory of an alchemist; the forerunner of something unknown. The author is feeling his way, searching for himself, following endless meanders as experience at every level invades his life. (*Diary*, xiv)

Although he possessed a fine theological mind Swamiji grew increasingly unhappy with theology as a source of wisdom of the divine. As he wrote somewhat acerbically in his diary on 22nd January 1956:

There are two kinds of people who are at peace:

Those who have understood nothing of the mystery of God and yet think they have understood it: the theologians.

Those who have ‘realized’ and admit they know nothing of God.

What an agony when everything in yourself calls out for realization and when theologians and priests around you – even more, the theologian and priest that you bear within yourself, that you are – threatens you with an ‘essential loss’ if you leave the path of the intellect. And yet Jesus said: ‘only the one who is ready to lose his soul will find it’. (*Diary*, 142)

As we review his life and writings we shall observe the struggle he underwent, especially with his own ‘internal priest and theologian’, to express the mystery of *sannyāsa*that he developed whilst in India.

### The Hindu-Christian Encounter

There is no doubt that the young Père Henri, fresh from France, was keen to follow in the footsteps of his missionary forbears and convert Hindus to Christianity. As he wrote in an early entry in his diary on 31st March 1952, he saw Hinduism and Christianity as two distinct religions of which Christianity was definitive (*Diary*, 28) and eventually, he was sure, ‘Hinduism will merge into Christianity’. This he came to refer later to as his ‘fulfillment’ view of the relation between the two ancient faiths:

It is a matter of incorporating into my Christianity all the positive values of Hinduism, thought, worship, devotion, while rejecting only what is clearly and surely incompatible, and of re-interpreting in Christian terms whatever cannot enter just as it is. (*Diary*, 31st March, 1952, 28)

For the deeply intellectual and sophisticated Le Saux and Monchanin this would revolve around the appropriation of the ancient Hindu traditions of prayer, meditation and renunciation and a deep and introspective study of the Sanskrit scriptures, especially the Vedas and Upanishads. And in these early days at Shantivanam later this is given without italics so perhaps remove italics here (and never dropped by Fr Monchanin) there was the emphasis of the Christian ‘colonisation’ of the Hindu tradition through incorporation of what was considered compatible while leaving aside that which was considered a little too distasteful. ‘They [the Hindus]’, he wrote to his father back in France on 16th September 1948, ‘cannot understand that it is obligatory to have a definite faith, a fixed creed, and to belong to the Church. The nearer I come to these Hindus, the more I feel them at the same time close to me in their loyal search for God, and far from me in their psychological inability to admit that Christianity is the only authentic means of coming to God’(*Letters*, 28).

This was all destined to change for Le Saux a year later as he had his first fateful encounter with the ageing Hindu seer, Ramana Maharshi, in 1949. Born in 1879 in simple circumstances in Tiruchuzhi in Tamil Nadu, Ramana had first received his experience of *advaita*, or ‘non-duality’ at the age of seventeen[[10]](#footnote-11)whilst having to deal with a violent fear of death.[[11]](#footnote-12)He was left with the fundamental question, ‘Who am I, really, really?’ which he would constantly get his followers to ask themselves, so stripping self-image until all non-essential conceptions of self had been removed. Shortly after this realization the seer had withdrawn to the holy mountain of Arunāchala in Tamil Nadu which turned out to be not so far from Le Saux’s new Christian ashram ofShantivanam.[[12]](#footnote-13) Encouraged by their enlightened Bishop, Le Saux and Monchanin paid a visit to Ramana’s ashram in January 1949. Yet, Le Saux’s first encounter with the ageing guru was, he confessed, an anti-climax:

I felt let down, and in my disappointment sadness filled my heart (…) Surrounded by this ritual, these prostrations, the cloud of incense, and the crowd of people sitting silently 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. I did not know what to make of him. (*Secret*, 5-6)[[13]](#footnote-14)

Despite this disappointing first encounter, and considering the young Le Saux’s views on Hinduism such a negative reaction was probably to be expected, a seed had been planted within his heart. This would become something of a pattern in his life and his encounter with the ‘other’: initially his intellect would place barriers but meanwhile unconsciously, in ‘the heart’, other forces would move slowly and silently with later unexpected consequences.

Six months later he returned to Arunāchala only to discover that Ramana was dying of cancer and all audiences had been restricted. As he waited for the *darśana* with the Maharshi he learnt more of his message from his followers.[[14]](#footnote-15) He was told that:

The most central point in Srī Ramana’s teaching is the mystery of the heart (…) Find the heart deep within oneself, beyond mind and thought, make that one’s permanent dwelling, cut all the bonds which keep thisheart at the level of sense and outward consciousness, all the fleeting identifications of what one *is*, with what one *has* or what one *does.* (*Secret*, 14)

And was given a verse of the Upanishads to meditate upon which would remain central to his search for the rest of his time on earth:

Heaven is within the inner chamber,

The glorious place,

Which is entered by those who renounce themselves!

(*Mahānārāyana Upanishad* 12:14)

This cave, or *guha*, of the heart would become a constant trope in Swamiji’s later writings. As well as the metaphorical cave Swamiji took this opportunity to acquaint himself with the actual caves of Arunāchala and to ‘meditate in the Indian way’ (*Letters*, 31). As he would later write in his diary:

The caves of Arunāchala are the *guhā*, Brahman inhabits the *guha* of the heart, as the Upanishads say (e.g. Katha Upanishad 11:20). Here it is the *guha* of Brahman himself, not so much where he abides in me as where I abide in him. (*Diary*, 7th March 1953, 61)

The seed of Arunāchala and Ramana would begin to germinate and for the rest of his life Swamiji would not forget these encounters (Ramana himself passed away two years after Swamiji’s visits in 1952). Later he would write in his diary, in conscious reflection of the poems of St John of the Cross, during the silence of his 32 days at Mauna Mandir in November 1956:

You have ravished me, O Arunāchala!

Like a young girl to whom someone has made love,

And you have left me here, like this, before you (…)

They all stare at me, and they laugh at me (…)

O Arunāchala! Since you have ravished me, carry me away,

Or else finish me off!

Since you have wounded me, kill me, or else heal me! (…)

Your face brushed against mine, your arms were extended,

And I offered my lips and held out my arms,

And You, You laughed at me, and withdrew it,

Your Mystery,

Beyond my reach! (*Diary*, 15th November 1956, 163)

This encounter with Arunāchala and its mystic heart would be, he would later admit, the turning point of his life, especially as to how he regarded the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity, and Ramana would remain his ideal of an Indian *sannyāsi* for the rest of his life. From the pre-Arunāchala days of Christian fulfilment of Hinduism he had been plunged into a dangerous and whirling dance of the two faiths which threatened to capsize him. As he later wrote to Odette Baumer-Despeigne, the editor of his posthumously published *Secret of Arunāchala*:

The confrontation between Christianity and Vedanta has been at the centre of my life since the caves of Arunāchala. Itwas first expressed in *Guhantara*, which you did not think much of (…) The intuition which was worked out in *Sagesse* came to me towards 1960; but the further I went, the more impossible it became to bear the strain of maintaining this insight (nothing physical or psychological, but rather like a ‘count- down’ of an extreme tension). (*Letters*, 23rd December 1970, 242)

From this time onwards then, an unbearable tension was established in his life which he could rarely confess to unless in his diary or to his closest friends in letters and conversations. In 1969 he would write to Anne-Marie Stokes:

I find it more and more difficult to see how to integrate Christianity with Hindu experience – and yet this is essential for catholicity (…) How to carry through the present mutation of Christianity without obscuring its essence? (*Letters*, 24th August 1969, 218)

And crucial to resolving or at least understanding this tension was Swamiji’s attitude to the one he called his ‘*sad-guru*’ – his root guru – Jesus Christ.

### Whom Do You Say That I Am?

One of the most challenging aspects of Swamiji’s journey, even today, is the development of his understanding of what he constantly referred to as his ‘*sad-guru*’ (e.g. see *Diary*, 3rd April 1952, 31 and 23rd March 1970, 310) – that is his root or source guru – Jesus Christ. Before the Arunāchala experience his view, as noted above, was more or less that of a conventional French priest of the mid-twentieth century. However, the secret encounter of Arunāchala began a long questioning process that had unexpected results. In 1954 he began to confess to being tormented by ‘his two loves’ (*Diary*, 85): Christianity and Hinduism. As he meditated on the nature of Christ he felt he had two choices: either to consider Christ ‘simply as his chosen symbol to express the transcendent mystery (*ishtadevanta*)’ or to see him as ‘simply a manifestation at the level of phenomena (*nāmā rūpā*)’ of the ‘Ultimate Unknowingness’. The notion of Christ as the manifestation in *nāmā rūpā* (in name and form) of the God beyond concepts was Swamiji’s answer to the challenge of a notion central to the teaching of the Upanishads, that God is ‘not this, not that’ – *neti, neti* – and that any attempt to apply a concept, name or form to God is mistaken. Thus as late as 1970 he could write in his diary that: ‘Jesus is the *sadguru*. By that very fact he leads beyond his form. He constantly refers to the Father. He is only the Father’s echo’ (*Diary*, 23rd March 1970, 310). Refining this a few months later:

Jesus is that mystery that ‘grounds’ me, that ‘sources’ me, in the abyss, in the bottomless *guha* – the mystery (as we say) of the Father. (*Diary*, 24th December 1971, 336)

In a perceptive thesis, the Indian priest Santhosh Sebastian Cheruvally has developed the idea that within Abhishiktananda’s life and work two Christologies are apparent.[[15]](#footnote-16) In the 1960s, culminating in his 1965 work *Sagesse Hindoue, Mystique Chrétienne* (published in English in 1974 as *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*),[[16]](#footnote-17) Abhishiktananda relates the Christian notion of the Trinity to the ancient Indian designation of God as *sad* – *cit* – *ānanda*, ‘being, consciousness and bliss’. If the Father is the source of being beyond existence (*sad*) the Son brings consciousness to us of that being (*cit*) whilst the Holy Spirit is the delight, the *ānanda*of consciousness of the Father’s being in ourselves. As he puts it in *Saccidananda*: ‘the spirit – *ānanda*issues from *cit* (consciousness) and being (*sat*) and it is only in *ānanda* that one attains to *sat* and *cit*’.[[17]](#footnote-18) Yet, not long after the book was published Abhishiktananda all but renounced this notion of God as *saccidānanda* preferring the more explosive notion of Christ as that beyond ‘name and form’ which leads us to God.[[18]](#footnote-19) Such a Christ for the later Abhishiktananda, what he refers to as the I AM, ‘will be simply the I AM of my (every) deep heart, who can show himself in the dancing Shiva or the amorous Krishna! And the Kingdom is precisely this discovery – of the “inside” of the Grail! The awakening is a total explosion. No Church will recognize its Christ or itself afterwards’ (*Letters*, 350). As he wrote in his diary at this time: ‘Do I call him Christ? Yes, within one tradition, but his name is just as much Emmanuel-Purusha. Can he be Krishna? Rāma? Shiva? Why, if Shiva is in Tamilnadu the form of that archetype which seeks to become explicit at the greatest depth of the human heart?’ (*Diary*, 360). For commentators such as Cheruvally this is thepoint in Swamiji’s Christian inculturation into Hinduism where he has gone too far: for the unique and all-embracing salvific power of Christ has been reduced to that of a ‘symbol’ on a par with other ‘deities’ such as Kṛṣṇa or Śiva– what he calls Abhishiktananda’s ‘Self-Awakening Christology’.

Abhishiktananda himself described it in a letter to the Indian theologian Raimundo Panikkar at this time: ‘Christ shares the transitoriness of the world of manifestation, of *maya*. Finally he disappears’ (*Letters*, 10th July 1969, 217). Thus, Christ ‘may be useful for awakening the soul’, like any guru, but ‘is never essential, and, like the guru, he himself must in the end lose all his personal characteristics’, for ‘no one really needs him’: ‘whoever, in his personal experience (…) has discovered the Self, has no need of faith in Christ, of prayer, of the communion of the Church’. This is strong stuff and suggests why Swamiji suffered so much for so many long years after his Arunāchala encounter all those years before. If this really had been the nature of the revelation of Arunāchala no wonder it had blown a hole through his pre-conceptions of Christ and the Church and led him to the dark cave of the abyss. In a later letter to Sr Sara Grant he reiterated the theme emphasising the relative ‘unimportance’ of Christ from an *advaitan* perspective:

Why then call him only Jesus of Nazareth? Why say that it is Jesus of Nazareth whom others unknowingly call Shiva or Krishna? And not rather say that Jesus is the theophany for *us,* Bible-believers, of that unnameable mystery of the Manifestation, always tending beyond itself, since Brahman transcends all its/his manifestations. (*Letters*, 26th January 1971, 244)

In many respects Swamiji’s dilemma was inevitable and stands at the heart of all those who live and practice on the interface of academic theology and lived spirituality. From this perspective his life and writings throw down a gauntlet to all of us who come after him. On the one hand he suggests that the manifestation of Christ as the immanent in the realm of *nāmā rūpā* places Christ on a par with other manifestations such asKṛṣṇa or Śiva, whereas the desire to avoid this by stressing the unique nature of Christ means for Swamiji that Christianity loses its catholicity (*Letters*, 217). ‘I do not see’, he concluded in his 1969 letter to Panikkar ‘how one can escape from this dilemma’. As Cheruvally puts it ‘the historical value of Christ seems to be only as of one name among the many found in different religious traditions’.[[19]](#footnote-20)

Panikkar himself in his ‘The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man’, written shortly before Swamiji’s death in 1973, followed through the implications of Swamiji’s position to present a daringly radical and original interpretation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Like Swamiji he saw the Father as the ‘abyss’, beyond names, the ‘*a-nama’*:

One can call this Absolute brahman or one can call it tao. But tao, once named, is longer tao and brahman, if known, is no longer brahman. The God that is seen is no longer the God (*o theós*) for no one has ever seen God; ‘no one can see him and live’. His transcendence is constitutive and he alone is authentically transcendent.[[20]](#footnote-21)

From the perspective of the ‘unknown Father’ Panikkar asked the rhetorical question (no doubt stimulated by his encounter with the Vedic tradition), ‘is it possible to conceive a religion based exclusively on our “relation” with the Divinity?’[[21]](#footnote-22) to which his answer was: ‘I do not think so, for the simple reason that no relationship is even conceivable with the Absolute as immanent’. But, instead of excluding immanence from the experience of religion he proposed that ‘this dimension of immanence’ is the ‘horizon from which the God of the “religions” emerges’.[[22]](#footnote-23) This manifest form is for him ‘the Son’ – Christ. With regards to other religions than Christianity he states:

It is not my task to discuss the other names and titles that have been accorded to this manifestation of the Mystery in other religious traditions. The reason I persist in calling it Christ is that it seems to me that phenomenologically Christ presents the fundamental characteristics of the mediator between divine and cosmic, eternal and temporal, etc, which other religions call*Iśvara*,*Tathāgata*, or even Jahweh, Allah and so on.[[23]](#footnote-24)

Christ thus becomes for Panikkar (at the time of writing ‘Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man’) the nexus where this revelation of the immanence of God finds its fullest expression. Therefore, in relation to other religions, Christianity is not claiming that it is ‘*the* religion for the whole of mankind’ but rather that it is the place ‘where Christ is fully revealed, the end and plenitude of every religion’.[[24]](#footnote-25) Panikkar’s insight to base his interfaith encounter within the Trinitarian structure of Christianity is one that was taken up by both Archbishop Rowan Williams and Professor Gavin D’Costa[[25]](#footnote-26) and still continues to influence contemporary interfaith dialogue from a Christian perspective. In the words of Williams:

The language of the first Christian theologians, Paul and John above all, assumes that *Christ* is a word that has come to mark out the shape of the potential future of all human beings, while remaining at the same time the designation of a specific person. The event of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is not (or not only) an external model to be imitated. The important thing about it is that it has created a different sort of human community; professing commitment to Jesus as Lord connects us not only to Jesus but to one another in a new way.[[26]](#footnote-27)

For D’Costa the ‘exclusivist emphasis on the particularity of Christ and the pluralist emphasis on God’s universal activity in history’ are especially reconciled through the individual acts of ‘serving God and neighbour and living the Good News’ by Christ’s followers today in his living community, the Church.[[27]](#footnote-28) Cheruvally, on the other hand, whilst happy to accept Abhishiktananda’s description of the Christian Trinity as *saccidānanda*,rejects the Swami’s latter notions of a cosmic Christ of ‘I AM’ as ‘theologically inadmissible from the Christian point of view of faith and tradition with its unity of historicity and eternity’.[[28]](#footnote-29)

This theological scrutiny of his work over the past half century would probably not have surprised Swamiji himself. As he himself wrote on 5th December 1970 towards the end of his life:

In *Sagesse*I attempted a meditative approach within the framework of classical theology. The last chapter shows that the problem is unresolved. The best course is still, I think, to hold on under extreme tension to the two forms of unique ‘faith’ until the dawn appears. For *advaita* and theology are on two levels. (*Letters*, 209)

In his final years he seems to have had less and less time for theology as traditionally practiced as he developed a new praxis for living the Christian life in the modern world. As he wrote in his last diary entry on 12th September 1973:

The Trinity can only be understood in the experience of *advaita*. The Trinity is an experience, not a *theologoumenon* (theological formulation) (…) The Trinity is the ultimate mystery of oneself. But in thevery depth of this discovery of the Self-Trinity there lies the paradox: in the mystery of the non-source, who still speaks of the Source?

At this point in his journey language itself begins to break down for the Swami, leading to the final statement in his Diary:

The non-awakening, the not-born is manifested by a – what? – a brilliance, a light, a glory that envelops everything, that transcends everything, that seizes one and takes one beyond everything. A sense of ‘Beyond’, of the Beyond (…) (*Diary*, 12th September 1973, 388)

It is as though the final stage of his journey becomes the inexorably passage into silence itself. As he approached the end of his life this process would find expression in his last writings on *sannyāsa*, collected together after his death in the final volume *The Further Shore* of 1974. In these last writings the ancient Indian practice would become for him the ultimate expression of his move beyond theology to a life dedicated to following his ‘sad-guru’, Jesus Christ.

### Abhishiktananda’s Way

Abhishiktananda and his fellow seekers epitomise a dilemma that lies at the heart of religion. On the one hand the need to codify and direct its manifestations into the channels of civilised life – epitomised by the academic pursuit of theological understanding, on the other the wild frontiers of the experience which, in a way, can never be tamed. In later life as he encountered the *rishis* and *sadhus* of old India on the banks of the Ganges with their wild dreadlocks and crazy ways he felt he was encountering once again the original, and dangerous, face of religion. As he wrote to his protégé, the Carmelite sister Thérese in 1969:

Remember the hermits of Blessed Albert. The Church needs that witness, which cannot be codified and institutionalized. The deep reason for the present crisis is the exaltation of human laws above the Lord and of theology above experience of God. (*Letters*,26th July 1969, 215)

At its heart, for the Swami, the spiritual journey becomes a move away from the Western, and what he would often call ‘Greek’, codification of ideas *about* God towards the encounter with the living mystery of God – the turning or repentance that Christ had proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry. At root this turning, for Swamiji, lay at the centre of the modern crisis of faith and religion. As he put it to towards the end of his life as he lived as asolitary hermit by the banks of the Ganges at Gyansu in Uttar Pradesh:

To write? To write? What is most true cannot be written, as I have just found by experience at the Phulchatti ashram. When the time comes the Spirit will dictate what should be said. To express that ‘beyond’, theology is no longer sufficient; it requires poetry or its equivalent. (*Letters*, 267)

The cosmos certainly conspired to reinforce his new-found resolution when his expensive French typewriter was shortly stolen from his hermitage – he was never able to use it again. From this time onwards the awareness of what he termed ‘I AM’ replaced all ‘christo-logy’ (Letter to Murray Rogers, 2nd September 1973, 310). The fatal turn in Christianity had been, he considered, its infection by the Greek ideal of conceptualisation at the expense of experience:

The Gospel does not exist to teach *ideas*, but to confront each one’s attitude in face of the mystery with that of Jesus. That is existential and real. It is the Greeks who have turned the Gospel into a *gnosis*. By means of India’s *jñana* we must throw out this gnosis and rediscover the freshnessof the experience of Jesus, freeing ourselves in the process also from our Vedantin formulations – which are just as limiting as those of the Jews and Greeks. (Letter to Marc Chaduc, 21th January 1973, 284)

His dissatisfaction with Christianity was such that he could confide in his diary in 1955: ‘I no longer find any consolation in the Church, not even any help. I keep up the cult out of duty and so recite the formulas I am bound to recite’ (*Diary*, 26th August 1955, 117). Yet as he lost his identification with traditional Christianity after his Arunāchala experience he still felt alienated from the Hindu world. As he wrote in 1955: ‘Dislocation. Too Hindu to form Christian monks, too Christian to be totally at ease in Hinduism’ (*Diary*, 15th September 1955, 126).The dislocation at this time in the mid 1950s became so extreme he even felt he could not go on living:

I can no longer live as a Christian monk here; and I cannot live as a Hindu monk. May the Lord take pity on me and cut short my life! I cannot take any more. (*Diary*, 21th March 1956, 148)

I often dream of dying, for it seems there is no way out for me in this life. I cannot be at the same time both Hindu and Christian, and no more can I be either simply Hindu or simply Christian. So what is the point of living? How little heart it leaves me for living. (*Diary*, 12th April, 1957, 203)

Yet out of this fierce cauldron, torn, as he wrote, ‘between Arunāchala and Rome’[[29]](#footnote-30) he was ultimately able to forge a new way. Based, as we have seen, not on theology (which at this stage in his journey he found largely unhelpful) but his experience of God especially as conveyed in meditation and prayer. In his later years he would describe himself as a ‘bridge’ between *advaita* and Christianity, even if, like all bridges, he would have to take the strain of maintaining the tension between the two. Even though his mind, as we have seen, sought an intellectual resolution of the quandary he felt himself in, his heart was slowly drawn to live with the ‘bridge’ experience and the necessary, and hopefully creative, tension that it brought. As he wrote in 1967:

We have to accept ourselves as the Lord made us. I can neither have a brown skin nor speak an Indian mother-tongue. Instead of lamenting the fact, each has to infer from it where his own vocation lies. (*Letters*, 190)

This ‘bridge-vocation’ would, he suggested, communicate ‘the Hindu message to Christianity and the Christian message to Hindus’ (*Letters*, 190). This, I would suggest here, is how Abhishiktananda ultimately came to understand the vocation of Christian *sannyāsa* – that as a bridge vocation between one culture and another. Like the Sufi mystics of old he would stand on the threshold of the temple but not enter it.

### Abhishiktananda’s *Sannyāsa*

His eyes twinkled. That struck me immediately. His bright, sparkling gaze. And the comical nimbus of white hair. A jester in the court of God, I realized him to be, then, in that first impression, with his disorganized simplicity (…)

At the mouth of the *guha* (cave) Swamiji did know mirth. The encounter deep within the speechless silence of himself did not eclipse or deflate the garrulous human reality where, doggedly less than absolute, we pursue our foolish way. Swamiji knew that paradox, the comical disproportion between *advaitic* experience and the ordinary, daily world.[[30]](#footnote-31)

This description of Abhishiktananda shortly before his death by Kenneth Sharpe certainly accords with the many characterisations of the wandering Christian *sannyāsi*that have come down to us, not only from the published accounts but personal stories still told by his fellow Christians in India today. Following his Christological ‘atomic mushroom’ of the I AM, Swamiji moved in this final stage to a period of life that he cheerfully referred to as ‘Christian *sannyāsa*’ adumbrated, as we have seen, in his final essay published in *The Further Shore*. Here he sees *sannyāsa*as embodying the total poverty – mental, spiritual and physical – that the Swami saw now as the ultimate expression of his following of Christ. From as early as 1952, shortly after his encounter with Arunāchala, Swamiji became fascinated with this expression of ascetic surrender that symbolised the final phase of earthly life. As he wrote in his diary in that year:

The*sannyāsī* has no friends in the proper sense of the word. He has effectively renounced all affections, familial and other (…) that is why the *shastras* forbid the *sannyāsī*to stay more than a few days in the same place. His heart should not be caught by any snare (…)

I will not be a genuine*sannyāsī* until the day when I am able, without the least distress or fear, to see the loss, in a strange if not downright hostile environment, of all help, all affection, all respect. And that too, on the supposition that I could no longer return to my other life (with its friendships, the priesthood and financial and moral support). (*Diary*, 4th April 1952, 33)

This striking, if not grim, description of *sannyāsa* pits its demands against every certainty and comfort the young priest had ever known and it was an ideal he would pursue in these final years, spurred on by the discovery of a late disciple, the French seminarian Marc Chaduc, whom he would initiate into*sannyāsa* in an ‘ecumenical’ Hindu-Christian ceremony on the banks of the Ganges at Rishikesh in 1973 shortly before his death.[[31]](#footnote-32) From an early stage Abhishiktananda asked the question: ‘Does Hindu *sannyāsa* really have an equivalent in Christianity?’ (*Diary*, 7th January 1954, 88) and it was to exploring this end that much of the rest of his life was dedicated, especially as explored in his diary and later writings. In this final stage of his life he became increasingly preoccupied with the silence, solitude and poverty which he felt lay at the heart of *sannyāsa*, which for him became a complete stripping, a complete emptying:

*Sannyāsa* involves not only withdrawal from society, from the social and religious framework, from social and religious obligations etc. but also a fundamental commitment beyond the intellectual framework of one’s life. (*Diary*, 7th January 1954, 88)

It could be argued that Abhishiktananda’s *sannyāsa* was even more extreme than the Hindu version that we described at the beginning of this article. The Hindu tradition involves a ritualised stripping away prescribed for certain castes (and indeed gender) only.[[32]](#footnote-33) What Swamiji was advocating, even at this early stage, was something far more radical – it was a ‘*sannyāsa* beyond *sannyāsa*’ – a stripping away that also included the stripping away of all (what he saw) as unnecessary religion accoutrements. In 1954 he wrote in his diary that the *sannyāsi*renounces ‘the*nāmā rūpā* of himself and of God (…)*sannyāsa*, in its total renunciation and its total liberation, is incompatible with ecclesial Christianity, which does not admit the possibility of itself being transcended’ (*Diary*, 7th January 1954, 88).In 1954 it was the transcendence of Christianity that preoccupied him. Twenty years later in his last written essay, *Sannyasa*, he prescribes *sannyāsa* as the ‘renunciation of renunciation’ – it would for him ultimately go beyond every religious form, including Hinduism. At this last stage of his life, it is ‘beyond all *dharma*, including all ethical and religious duties’(*Sannyasa*, 18). His*sannyāsa* was that of the ‘old ones’ ‘the hairy ones’ (*Keśi*) described in the*Ṛg Veda* who predate the niceties of the Upanishads and their fine tuned Brahminic teaching. No doubt this attitude was inspired by the wild (and possibly psychotic) swamis he met on the banks of the Ganges in his own final period of renunciation. At this stage there is no theology or learning left, such a person has become what he calls a ‘fire Sannyāsi’ who ‘becomes indifferent, on that very day he should go forth and roam’ (*Nāradaparivrajaka Upanishad*, 3:77 quoted in*Sannyasa*,22). For Swamiji in these last writings Christian*sannyāsa* is thus no ‘fourth asrama’ (*Sannyasa*,4) but goes beyond ‘every state of life’ for ‘Sannyasa is the witness to the final state in which man wakes up’ (19) that must be enacted in a form of funeral rite (20). Ultimately Abhishiktananda’s ‘acosmic’ spirituality was thus becoming a spirituality beyond all spiritualities. This would take him beyond all religious structures, whether Hindu or Christian, to the place he variously called ‘the source’, ‘I AM’ or the ground. All that was left for him was what he called the ‘osmosis of prayer’ where ‘the ultimate correspondences – Upanishads – are revealed between the mystery of Christ and that of the Purusha’ (Letter to Marc Chaduc, 21th January 1973, 284). Ultimately his goal was a ‘stripping’ – mentally, physically and spiritually – until nothing was left except the raw encounter with the source:

Be ready to live in my cave to the end of my life, with no one taking any special care for me or showering me with marks of esteem and honour, obliged to beg each midday for my handful of rice. (*Diary*, 4th April 1952, 34)

Thus in his final months Abhishiktananda saw the life of *sannyāsa* as one stripped beyond all religious forms, living in simplicity in what he repeatedly referred to as the ‘Fire of Christ’. As he wrote to another disciple, Sr Thérèse de Jesus, referring again to his favourite image of Christ being baptised by John the Baptist:

It seems in his Baptism he (Christ) had an overwhelming experience; he felt himself to be Son, not in a notional, Greek fashion, but that he had a commission given by Yahweh to fulfil; and in this commission he felt his nearness to Yahweh (…) It is the reduction of the mystery of Jesus to a Jewish or Greek concept that makes the dialogue of salvation with non- Christians so difficult. One culture has monopolised Jesus. He has been turned into an idea. People argue about Jesus – it is easier to let yourself be scorched by contact with him. (Letter to Sr Thérèse, 16th January 1973, 283)

Ironically, Swamiji was destined to receive his own ‘scorching’ shortly after writing this letter. In July 1973, having initiated his disciple Marc into *sannyāsa* on the banks of the Ganges he spent some days of ecstatic communion with him in a deserted Shaivite temple. On 12th July he went into Rishikesh to buy provisions for the two when he suffered a near fatal heart attack as he ran for a bus. He was fortunately spotted by another French lady some time later and was to be nursed for the next few months before dying in December 1973. Shortly after the experience, which he later described as being beyond life and death, he wrote a poem to his beloved disciple:

MARC,

Shiva’s column of fire

brushed against me

Saturday midday

In the bazaar at Rishikesh,

and I still do not understand

why it did not carry me off.

Joy, the serene one,

OM tat sat (That – Brahman – is the Real)

*Ekadrishi* (the one-pointed gaze)

*Ekarshi* (the unique rishi)

Oh!

The crowning grace

OM!

With my love

(*Letters*, 306)

It is poignant that as he lay dying in hospital in Indore, having received his long awaited realization on the banks of the Ganges, he now returned to his Celtic and Breton origins by referring to the encounter as the ‘discovery of the Grail’(*Letters*, 308). In ‘the Grail’ he found the perfect symbol for that which, as he saw now, went beyond the concepts and theologies not only of Christianity but also of Hinduism. As he confided in one of his last diary entries:

I have found the Grail. And that is what I keep saying and writing to anyone who can grasp the figure of speech. The quest for the Grail is basically nothing else than the quest for the Self. A single quest that is the meaning of all the myths and symbols. It is yourself that you are seeking through everything. And in this quest you run about everywhere whereas the Grail is here, close at hand, you only have to open your eyes. (*Diary*, 11th September 1973, 386)[[33]](#footnote-34)

Three months later, on 7th December 1973, he underwent what he termed ‘the great departure’ – *mahāprasthāna*– to the abode of great silence ‘beyond all signs’. (See *Diary*, 387 and *Sannyasa*,50-51).

### Abhishiktananda’s *Sannyāsa* – A Step Too Far?

Abhishiktananda’s way thus became the ‘path beyond all paths’. In his lonely journey he set out to transcend all religious forms. Yet this path seemed to some others harsh and inhuman. The Swiss ambassador to India, Jacques-Albert Cuttat, had met Swamiji in the early 1960s and asked him to initiate a series of conversations between Hindus and Christians, sponsored by his office, which were later published. Yet the discussions ended abruptly in 1963. Commenting on Abhishiktananda and his way, Dr Cuttat later wrote:

Suddenly I realised that something essential was lacking in this *jnanic* way to the Supreme. Everything whatsoever was pervaded with joy and bliss centred in my own Self, the whole reality was luminous and transparent, yet all this happiness was without *love.* There is in this way neither love for God nor love to the other, both are not loved as *others*. Swami Abhish. lives in a happy world of *sacred solitude* (…) I became incapable to follow again the way of Swami Abhish.[[34]](#footnote-35)

As we have seen it turned out that Abhishiktananda himself had difficulty living in isolation at Gyansu as a *sannyāsi*, spending half the year there and the other half teaching and travelling in the Plains. His disciple, Marc Chaduc, for whom much of the last essay *Sannyasa* was written (and which he edited) attempted to live the ideal of the ‘*sannyāsa* beyond *sannyāsa*’ only to vanish in 1977 and never be heard of again.[[35]](#footnote-36) To this day no-one knows what happened to him and theories still circulating include the possibility that he underwent ritual suicide, was murdered or indeed may still be alive. Likewise Sr Thérèse vanished with no explanation some years later. As we have seen, Christian theologians such as Cheruvally and D’Costa have reservations about the later Christology that Swamiji would expound which led to his life of *sannyāsa* and the Hindus themselves have often not looked favourably on the type of*sannyāsa* presented by Swamiji and his fellow pioneers Monchanin and Bede Griffiths.[[36]](#footnote-37) Yet, I think it would be mistaken to dismiss Abhishiktananda’s ‘experiment’ in Christian *sannyāsa* as a total failure.

James Stuart, in his review of Swamiji’s last books suggests that at this stage in his life Abhishiktananda had three tasks to perform (*Letters*, 171-172). First, to share with others, especially non-Hindus, the spirituality of Hinduism and *advaita,* the ‘bridge-vocation’ of *sannyāsa*mentioned earlier*.* Secondly, a form of ‘*ressourcement*’ – the call popular from the 1950s onwards for Christians to return to their spiritual and theological roots which, Stuart argues, was his response to the late twentieth century spiritual crisis of the West – no doubt magnified by his encounters with the spiritually hungry, but lost, young hippies he met on the banks of the Ganges during his final years.[[37]](#footnote-38) Finally, suggests Stuart, he was trying to work towards a ‘theological integration’ of Hindu and Christian experience. Yet, as argued above, and as Stuart himself admits, this final aim was abandoned not long after his book, *Sagesse,* was published, no doubt for the reasons outlined. Rather, we can see the last years of his quest as being dominated by a different triad which Swamiji himself repeatedly mentions: silence, solitude and poverty (see *Letters*, RP 11th December 1969, 223; and 29th October 1969, 221; *Diary*, 4th April 1952, 33).

As a Benedictine monk Abhishiktananda had always valued ‘the sound of silence’ and it had long been incorporated into his daily routine. Not, of course, the silence of ‘keeping the mouth closed’ but rather the cultivation of a silence of the spirit such as described by the contemporary writer John Chryssavgis. Drawing on the tradition of the Western Desert Fathers and Mothers who were the original inspiration for St Benedict, he describes this monastic silence as:

A way of waiting, a way of watching and a way of listening (…) it is a way of interiority, of stopping and then of exploring the cellars of the heart and the centre of life (…) Silence is never merely a cessation of words (…) rather it is the pause that holds together all the words both spoken and unspoken. Silence is the glue that connects our attitudes and actions. It is fullness not emptiness, it is not an absence but the awareness of a presence.[[38]](#footnote-39)

Such a silence had always been part of Swamiji’s life, but in 1956, partly inspired by the meeting with his second Hindu guru, Sri Gnānānanda earlier that year, he spent five weeks in total silence at Mauna Mandir (‘The Temple of Silence’) at Kumbakonam. Such was the level of the isolation he did not even see the face of the person who brought his food every day, only their hands as they placed it on the turnstile. The experience had a profound impact on him as outlined in his diary. Such was its power that when the door was finally opened at the end and he met his helpers he burst into tears. Later in a letter to the Millers in 1970 he felt that the ‘real solution’ to the situation in which he found himself, poised between *advaita* and Christianity, was ‘to learn the language of silence’ even if he admitted he was ‘too Greek to be able to free myself from speculation, even though everything around invites me to do so’ (*Letters*,229). The admission of his ‘Greek failure’ is touching as though as his pilgrimage came to an end he had begun to accept his vocation to follow Christ’s command ‘as the Lord had made him’. Thus Abhishiktananda’s silence becomes an attempt ‘to sensitize people to the questioning by the Spirit through India, in an effort to awaken the Christians’ (*Letters*, 228). His was indeed a *ressourcement*, as Stuart suggests, but a *ressourcement* to the springs of Christian mystical theology where the name of the Father is unspoken and unknown. Faith, in this respect, becomes ‘simply the acceptance that there is something beyond the rational’ (*Letters*,229).

### A Final View of *Sannyāsa* – Some Conclusions

I began this article by posing three questions:

1. How far must the Christian *sannyāsi* follow the traditional Indian *āśramas*or is *sannyāsa* beyond the*āśramas*?

2. At what point does inculturation into a practice such as*sannyāsa* end and the form of Christianity become so misshapen as to be unrecognisable as such?

3. How might Christian *sannyāsa* be lived out today?

Following our review of the life and writings of Abhishiktananda, and drawing upon the discussions with contemporary *sannyāsis* with which we began this article, it may now be possible to draw some tentative conclusions. Reviewing the three questions from the perspective of Swamiji’s life it seems clear that the ‘*sannyāsa* beyond *sannyāsa*’ that he proposed seems to go beyond that which is acceptable to most Christians today. The mysterious end of the ministries of his two disciples, Marc Chaduc and Sr Thérèse, and the theological objections to some of his later statements on the nature of Christ seem to suggest that some invisible line of inculturation had been passed in his final years. Yet, as I outlined in the previous section, the Swami’s life showed throughout a serious dedication to the ideals of silence, solitude and simplicity in the call to follow his *sad-guru* Christ. This, as suggested earlier, may be a key to understanding how *sannyāsa* may evolve within the contemporary Christian context.

Writers such as Paul Pattathu have stressed the need for Christian *sannyāsa* to take place within the context of a Christian ashram.[[39]](#footnote-40) Again, influenced and developed as we have seen by pioneers such as Abhishiktananda, Bede Griffiths, Jules Monchanin and Fr Francis Acharya, the Christian ashram movement has grown considerably in India in recent years. The ashram itself, as practitioners such as Fr Thomas Kochumuttom describe it, is based on ancient Indian spiritual traditions but has at its heart two basic foundations. First, in keeping with the Indian tradition it is based on the spiritual example of individuals – the original guru or holy man/woman – rather than the rules and regulations of an institution. Secondly that it reflects in its everyday life the values and culture of ‘village India’.[[40]](#footnote-41) Clearly influenced by the pioneering work of Abhishiktananda (not least in the ashram liturgy which incorporates texts and *bhajans* written by the Swami), Fr Kochumutton adds an extra dimension to Swamiji’s three values of silence, simplicity and solitude, namely openness. In contrast to the Benedictine tradition from which Swamiji came, Fr Kochumutton sees in the ashram ‘no place for enclosures’. For him ‘there is nothing either in the persons or the house or the personal rooms that others should not come to know and understand’[[41]](#footnote-42) so that ‘one is ready to open one’s heart or mind (as well as one’s room) to anyone who asks’which requires ‘utter honesty and transparency, sincerity and straightforwardness’. On a practical level the ashram should be furnished simply with cheap furniture and fittings – which would neither be attractive to potential thiefs nor require much money to replace if stolen! At Jeevan Dhara ashram Fr Kochumutton puts this practice into action and with the three other virtues of silence, solitude and simplicity creates a stable and peaceful environment where the contemplation of the divine *sat-cit-ānanda* can proceed day and night.

As stated above, for Fr Kochumutton all Christian religious, by virtue of their vows, become *sannyāsi/ini* yet for vowed or non-vowed, religious or lay, the stable environment of the Christian ashram, centred on the liturgy and the teaching of the guru, seems to offer a secure place where the more wayward demands of *sannyāsa*can be practised.[[42]](#footnote-43) Abhishiktananda was certainly a pioneer and his example continues to inspire many Christian seekers in India today. Yet, in a curious way he teaches as much by his failures as his successes. For Christians practising *sannyāsa* in India today have learnt that the ‘further shore’ of *sannyāsa*, when it is practised in Christian context, needs to be held by the context and support of the ashram or wider religious community. In the Indian tradition, as we have seen, the*sannyāsi* ‘owns no place and no person and has to be by definition a solitary wanderer’.[[43]](#footnote-44) The Christian, in contrast, by virtue of their consecration to Christ, remains in service to the world even though they do not identify with the world’s goals and aims.[[44]](#footnote-45) Yet, in spite of the differences between the extreme Hindu version of *sannyāsa* (as attempted to be practised by Abhishiktananda) and the Christian versions of active holiness it is possible to see both Indian *sannyāsa* and Christian spiritual life as two aspects of the final encounter and relationship with the ultimate goal of human life – our encounter with the limit of human mortality. Thottakara calls it ‘the Yoga mind’ that integrates apparently bi-polar realities and he mentions Fr Francis Vineeth CMI, founder of the Vidyavanam ashram near Bengaluru, as an example of a modern *sannyāsi* ‘who tries to awaken the religious-spiritual consciousness of the *sadhakas* and develop in them a soul culture that is deeply rooted in the age old principles of Indian spirituality and in the immensely rich Christian spiritual traditions without at the same time negating the positive values of matter, body and this world’.[[45]](#footnote-46) Which is not to say that there is no longer any room for the wandering Christian ascetic in today’s modern India.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the rich life of Swami Sadanand, a Christian*sannyāsi*, who died in 2016. This remarkable Christian ascetic had spent his whole life, since taking the robe of a *sannyāsi*, pursuing justice and truth for the poorest and most alienated in India whilst also practising the deep ascetic and meditational life of a *sadhu*. He famously befriended the murderer of a Catholic nun, Sr Rani Maria, whilst he served his time in prison so that when he was released, and repented his crimes, he was accepted into the late nun’s family. Such was the fame of this reconciliation that Pope Francis invited Swami Sadanand, the nun’s murderer and family to Rome in 2014. I had the great good fortune to meet Swamiji shortly before his death and his presence and life were indeed a convincing testimony to the possibility of Christian *sannyāsa* in the twenty-first century. To experience his smile, won despite a lifetime of hardship and suffering, was to experience the loving blessing of the Saviour.

At heart, then, what Indian *sannyāsa* and Christian spiritual life have in common is that for both renunciation, whether of the world or the ego, must be connected with love and surrender to the creator. In this way both Indian and Christian traditions embrace on the threshold of the infinite.

I began the article by asking, ‘how far must the Christian *sannyāsi* follow the traditional Indian *āśramas* or is *sannyāsa* beyond the*āśramas*?’ By adopting some of the order and setting of mainstream consecrated life there is always the danger that contemporary Christian *sannyāsa* might lose one key aspect of the traditional Indian fourth *āśrama*: that it was essentially a development from ‘lay’ status and in fact was intimately connected with the development of the rounded individual through the passage from student to householder to renouncer as described at the beginning of this article.

Another Indian Carmelite, Fr Kurian Perumpallikunnel CMI, developed this idea with me in a recent conversation where he emphasised the need for the Christian *sannyāsi/ini* to cultivate the ideal of *samadhi* as described by Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutra*. Fr Francis Vineeth explains that the term derives from the Sanskrit terms *sama* (equal) and *dhi* (mind) describing it as a ‘steadiness of mind obtained not merely by the mastery over the faculties through which distractions enter but more by being in touch with the Divine, the Lord who abides in the cave of one’s heart’.[[46]](#footnote-47) Perumpallikunnel interprets this as a compassionate attitude towards all creatures and all humans whilst not being possessive. In this case, the disposition of the practitioner is the most important matter rather than the state or way of life. In this respect Jesus Christ displays the ultimate manifestation of *samadhi* in the Gospels, not least in his Passion. For Vineeth *samadhi* leads to genuine freedom, the sign of true spirituality, a person in this state ‘is no more a slave of his impulses, not even of “good” desires. He submits himself totally to the divine will’.[[47]](#footnote-48) ‘How does one achieve that state?’ asks Vineeth, to which he replies: ‘It is because he has crossed over to the other side of life and discovered the true hidden treasureof his life. He is a *thirthankara*, one who has crossed over the river of life. It is on this side of the river, in the world of objects whether of senses or mind, that we are pulled hither and thither’, but once we have crossed over we inhabit ‘a world of light and delight as one experiences the Lord as the ultimate source of all bliss and beatitude’.[[48]](#footnote-49) From this perspective Christian *sannyāsa*, as the relationship to the Trinity through the bliss of the Spirit, becomes a possibility for all Christian seekers, not just the vowed religious.

I stated at the outset of this article that Le Saux’s dilemma remains our contemporary dilemma: *How can I be true to my origins whilst reaching out and befriending the ‘other’, in particular the ‘other’ in religious and cultural terms*. The analysis of Christian *sannyāsa* in this article, exemplified through the examination of the achievements and failures of Swami Abhishiktananda, has illustrated how a religious practice from one tradition is in the ongoing process of being adapted by another. Such a task is not easy, as illustrated by the limitations of some of Swamiji’s approach, yet that it can ultimately present a way forward through dialogue for a world riven by sectarianism and fundamentalism holds a promise to us all.

In an earlier article for *Studies in Spirituality* the Australian academic, Professor David Tacey, suggested that we are in the midst of what he terms a ‘spirituality revolution’. He describes it as ‘the emergence of the sacred as a leading force in contemporary society’, which is not to be confused with ‘the rising tide of religious fundamentalism’. ‘Spirituality and fundamentalism,’ he explained:

Are at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. Spirituality seeks a sensitive, contemplative relationship with the sacred and is able to sustain levels of uncertainty in its quest because respect for mystery is paramount. Fundamentalism seeks certainty, fixed answers and absolutism, as a fearful response to the complexity of the world and to our vulnerability as creatures in a mysterious universe.[[49]](#footnote-50)

Under the lens of such an analysis Abhishiktananda’s struggle can be seen as a search for spirituality against the divisive forces of fundamentalism – both our own and those of the encountered ‘other’.Thus faced with the dilemma with which we began this article the lessons and teachings of Abhishiktananda suggest a way forward – the encounter in silence, solitude and poverty of the Divine in the ‘cave of the heart,’ embodied in the ‘bridge vocation’ of Christian *sannyāsa*. As contemporary Indian Christians continue to develop the notion in the ways we have described, whether in consecrated life, the ashram or beyond, it is clear that by his bold, imaginative and above all truthful example Swami Abhishiktananda provides prophetic insights into this most important calling for 21st century Christians.

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1. For more on the origins and meaning of the term I refer to T. Kochumutton, *Christian life amidst many religions*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram, 2015, 81-111;J. Rajan, *Bede Griffiths and sannhyasa*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1997, 10-45;P. Pattathu, *Ashram spirituality: A search into the Christian Ashram movement against its Hindu background*, Indore: Satprakashan, 1997, 91-98; and M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English dictionary*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2012, 1148. I have also drawn on personal conversations referenced throughout the article. I am particularly grateful to Prof Gavin D’Costa, Fr Thomas Kochumutton CMI and Fr Kurian Perumpallikunnel CMI for reading and commenting upon earlier drafts of this article. In common with standard English works on the subject I have chosen to use the term *sannyāsa* rather than *saṃnyāsa.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See A. Thottakara, ‘*Sannyāsa*: Dynamics of a life of renunciation’, in: S. Chackalackal (Ed.), *New horizons of Indian Christian living*, Bengaluru: Vidyavanam, 2009,560. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In Vedic tradition, as Thottakara points out, the phase of the householder is one of the most revered as he is the one who protects and nourishes people at all the other three phases, providing a safe and stable environment within which the other spiritual work can take place. As it is stated in the *Laws of Manu*, ‘Of all these four the householder, who performs Vedic and *Smrti* rituals, is the noblest. He indeed protects all the other three. As the rivers find their rest in the ocean, so all the states of life find their support in the householder’ (Manu, cited in Thottakara, ‘*Sannyāsa*’, 567). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Although I have encountered Indian Christian ascetics who have undergone the householder and forest-dweller phase too but, by and large, they have never been part of a Christian religious order. There also Indian Christian ascetics who have left vowed religious life to get married and then moved back into celibate ascetic life later. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Personal communication with the author, see also K. Perumpallikunnel, ‘Mystical experience: Fount and raison d’être of *sannyāsa*’, in: Chackalackal,*New horizons of Indian Christian living*, 663-684. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Personal communication with the author, see also Kochumutton, *Christian life amidst many religions*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Le Saux attracted many sobriquets and epithets whilst in India, including ‘Swamiji’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Published works referred to, including abbreviations, are listed in the bibliography appended to this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Panikkar follows this line in entitling the published *Diary*, ‘The Ascent to the Depth of the Heart’. The original source of the phrase for Swamiji is from a French translation of an Upanishad dedicated to Ramana Maharshi: ‘au sein du fond, au coeur d’Arunachal’. The phrase, ‘au sein du fond’ was a translation of ‘hridayakuh aram adhye’ in Sri Ramana Gita II. See Diary: 81, fn. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See S. Du Boulay, *The cave of the heart: The life of Swami Abhishiktananda*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. I take this working definition of *advaita* from Panikkar’s *Opera Omnia*, Volume 1: ‘nondualism (*a-dvaita*). Spiritual intuition that sees ultimate reality as neither monistic nor dualistic. The recognition that the merely quantitative problem of the one and the many in dialectical reasoning does not apply to the realm of ultimate reality. The latter, in fact, possesses polarities that cannot be divided into multiple separate units; not to be confused with *monism*’ (R. Panikkar, *Mysticism and spirituality*. Part 2:*Spirituality, the way of life*[*Opera Omnia*. Vol. 1.2], ed. M. Carrara Pavan, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014, 331). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. The name Arunāchala, literally ‘the rosy one’, refers to the beauty of the mountain in the early dawn light. It had become in Tamil lore a watch-word for enlightenment and awakening. Dedicated to Lord Śivait is near the town of Tiruvannāmalai in Tamil Nadu. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. The *Secret of Arunāchala* was one of the few autobiographical accounts that Swamiji prepared for open publication. Many of its passages are directly taken from the *Spiritual Diary*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *Darśana*, literally‘a seeing’, has in the Sanskrit tradition the nuances of seeing, blessing and benediction. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. S. Cheruvally, *Jesus Christ: Quest and context of Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux OSB)*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. New Delhi: ISPCK, 1974/1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. *Saccidananda*, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. What he would often refer to as the ‘nuclear explosion’ or ‘mushroom cloud’ of Christ. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Cheruvally, *Jesus Christ*, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. R. Panikkar, *The Trinity and the religious experience of man*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Panikkar, *Trinity*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Ibid., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Ibid., 550. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. R. Williams, ‘Trinity and pluralism’, in: G. D’Costa (ed.), *Christian uniqueness reconsidered*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990, 3-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Williams, ‘Trinity and pluralism’, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. D’Costa, *Christian uniqueness reconsidered*, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Cheruvally, *Jesus Christ*, 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. *Diary*, 1958; Du Boulay, *The cave of the heart*, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Description of an encounter with Swami Abhishitkananda a year before his death given by Kenneth Sharpe in July 1972. Originally published in the *North Indian Churchman* and quoted in *Letters*, 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Described in *The further shore*, 52,where he compares it to Jesus’ immersion in the Jordan with John the Baptist and with which he ends the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. See Thottakara, ‘*Sannyāsa*’; andR. Tagore, ‘The fourfold way of India’. Reprinted in:*The English writings of Rabindranath Tagore*.Vol III, ed. S. Kumar Das, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996, 667-679. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. For more on the Celtic origins of the symbol and its psychological significance to Swamiji I refer the reader to my forthcoming *Confession: The healing of the soul* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Dr Cuttat to Ilse Friedeberg and Murray Rogers, 8th July 1972, the Murray Rogers Collection quoted in Du Boulay, *The cave of the heart*, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. See Du Boulay, *The cave of the heart*, 229-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. For an excoriating critique see Sita Ram Goel, *Catholic Ashrams: Sannyasins or swindlers?* New Delhi: Voice of India, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Still sadly to be found with depressing frequency at the spiritual circus that Rishikesh has latterly become, complete with white-water rafting. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. J. Chryssavgis, *In the heart of the desert: The spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers*, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Press, 2003, 45-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. See Pattathu, *Ashram spirituality*. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Kochumutton, *Christian life amidst many religions*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Ibid., 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Thottakara, ‘*Sannyāsa*’, 561. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Although, as Thottakara notes, in recent years Buddhists, Hindus and Jains have all taken to more communitarian models of *sannyāsa* imitating in many ways Christian monastic models of service to the world, the poor and downtrodden (Thottakara, ‘*Sannyāsa*’, 562). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Thottakara, ‘*Sannyāsa*’, 558. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. F. Vineeth, *The Asian vision of God*, Bangalore: Vidyavanam, 2004, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Ibid., 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. D. Tacey, ‘Rising waters of the spirit: The view from secular society’, in:*Studies in Spirituality*13 (2003), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)