

Out of India Towards a More Inclusive Spirituality

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[This is the edited version of a lecture – a reflection on a sabbatical spent in India and Sri Lanka – given in the old Library of Bristol Cathedral on June 18th 1998]

How easily one agrees to things – particularly when the date is a long way off! I was glad to be invited by the Diocesan Director of Training last summer before I had gone, to speak on my forthcoming visit to India. He asked me for a title. With my concern to glimpse something of the contemplative traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism in mind, I rather nervously suggested: “Out of India, towards a more inclusive theology?”. I hoped at the time that that would do – time enough later to mull it all over.

Well one year later and I am “out of India” feeling overwhelmed by a huge kaleidoscope of impressions of this vast sub-continent that we travelled in both north and south. Overwhelmed by the wealth of its many cultures and the turmoil and chaos created by its huge populations; and above all for me, amazed by how it still holds together as one country at all, considering that it is absolutely shot through with divisions ...of language, of ethnic origin, of state, of caste, of wealth, of religion. Out of India and out of Sri Lanka where we were for our last fortnight, with a jumble of thoughts and tantalising partial understandings and out of India with a brief first-hand encounter with its ancient spiritual traditions, from which we hoped to, and did, learn.

And not just two traditions – Hindu and Buddhist – which is what I had somehow expected to encounter (though of course there is Islam as well – the Muslim minority in India is huge), but three. We also met the “tribal” tradition of India - the rich tapestry of ancient religious myths and stories that underpin and inform the lives of India’s aboriginal people who still live – no less than 120 million of them – in the hills across the central area of the sub-continent.

So to return to my title: “Out of India – towards a more inclusive ... “theology”? On reflection that last word won’t do. If we

focus the search for a greater inclusiveness in the area of “theology”, then I’m very doubtful how far we shall get. It seems to me that we must move beyond the claims and counter-claims of theologies, of different understandings about God, which always divide; to the questions not so much of theology but of spirituality, which unite: how can we learn, how can we receive from one another and from our different traditions of praying so that we may directly know the Mystery of God Himself, and be found – and find one another, in Him? That is the question that I would like to try to touch on. So for “theology” in the title, please substitute the word “spirituality” ... and to explain more clearly why, listen to this personal account of a meeting written by the German Theologian Klaus Klostermaier from his beautiful little book that explores the Hindu/Christian dialogue, called *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban*.

I wanted to see a famous man in Benares a sagacious philosopher, feared by many as a merciless critic of Christian theology. I had my own reasons for paying him a visit. He was polite, invited me for tea and then mounted the attack. I let him talk his fill, without saying a word myself. Then I started to talk about things I had begun to understand within the dialogue – quite positively Christian. We got into a sincere, good, deep discussion. He had intended to send me away after ten minutes. When I left after two hours, he had tears in his eyes: “If we insisted on our theologies – you as a Christian, I as a Hindu” (he said) – we should be fighting one another. We have found one another because we probed more deeply, towards spirituality. (pp 98-99)

So then “...towards an inclusive spirituality”. Perhaps I can begin with the purpose of the Sabbatical. It was to both glimpse something first hand of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions – but also to spend some focussed time re-connecting with our own Christian contemplative tradition, which I have increasingly felt to be getting lost and forgotten, not so much on the edges of the Church, for example in the burgeoning Retreat movement, but in the noisy, activist, wordy and perennially anxious institution of the Church itself, in the minds of its bishops and priests, and in the activities and preoccupations of its

parishes and its diocesan boards and committees where I have served over the last 25 years. Talk about treasure getting buried – I think we have very largely forgotten where it was – that is I fear the seriousness of our predicament – and I realised I needed to do my own share of hard digging.

So the Sabbatical began in mid September, and I sent myself off on three weeks of silent Retreat – two weeks alone in a silent Monastery and one silent but guided week organised by the World Community of Christian Meditation, exploring Buddhist-Christian connections. And then seven weeks, with Sam my wife, in India and Sri Lanka.

Now I suppose you don’t go in for this kind of use of your time without many influences beforehand that have prepared the way, and above all for me, it has been the influence of the American Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton whose writing has influenced me more than I can say, and about whom I have written myself. As a long time student of Merton, I was very conscious that he, as a catholic contemplative, had, in the last phase of his life, not just been profoundly influenced by encounters with Eastern faiths and particularly Zen, but at the very end of his life (he died unexpectedly in Bangkok) had embarked on his own Asian pilgrimage. I was keen to follow in his footsteps, and particularly to visit the ancient city in Sri Lanka of Pollonaruwa where, standing before some huge and ancient carved statues of the Buddha just a few days before he died, he had a kind of overwhelming mystical experience. He wrote how for an extraordinary, visionary, explosive moment he felt he “got beyond the shadow and the disguise...”

Merton speaks to so many in our time because at the heart of his quest is the question of identity ... of selfhood. In a world where so many falsehoods and fictions are peddled which trap us he relentlessly pursued the very contemporary question - Who am I? Merton believed the answer to that question could only ultimately and fully be found in and through a religious search where we find or discover our selves, what he called “our true selves”, in the Mystery of the Divine Life, what he called “The Hidden Ground of Love”. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, published in 1961, he writes:

There is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace, my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.

"If I find Him I will find myself ..." Increasingly throughout his writings, although I have never come across the word itself there, Merton is exploring for the western mind something close to that which in the classical Hindu tradition is sometimes called *Advaita*, meaning, 'not two but one' – 'non-duality'. This idea, this mysterious life-transforming experience of somehow disappearing and being found in the mystery of the Divine, an experience of 'at-one-ment', is surely very close to the very heart and goal of the Christian mystical tradition, – both as we know it in the New Testament, particularly in St John ("abide in me as I in you"), and St Paul ("It is not I who live but Christ who lives in me"), and also as we know it in the lives and writings of the Fathers, and later mystics and saints of the Church both West and East.

Put very simply, what both eastern traditions of spirituality and Thomas Merton as a modern western contemplative are seeking to point to and to draw all seekers of an authentic religious life into, is a kind of direct and immediate experience of the Divine paradox, which is a kind of knowing and a kind of not knowing, a kind of fullness and a kind of radical emptiness which leads to an experience of both vision and liberation that involves and engulfs the heart more than the mind. Mark Tully, who we were fortunate to get to know before we left for India and whom we met up with a few days after our arrival in Delhi, captured it succinctly when he said to me in a discussion about the meeting of the western mind with the eastern religious traditions: "Of course in the West, we want to know about God, in the East, they seek simply to know God."

But where in a few short weeks in India and Sri Lanka to go to discover how in their tradition this quest of knowing, of 'realisation of the Self' – to use a Hindu expression – is entered into? Where to go to glimpse the rungs of the Eastern ladder of Divine Ascent – or Descent if you prefer the image of depth, to Something that is not so much a matter of ideas but rather a matter of experience, an experience of profound liberation – *moksha* is the Hindu word –

which in Merton's life turned him increasingly outwards towards the world and its agonies making him in his time, a prophet and guide for all kinds of social protest movements that were sweeping across America?

Mark Tully was a great help to us, as the only place that I knew in India appropriate for this kind of learning was Fr. Bede Griffith's Ashram at Shantivanam in Tamil Nadu, South India. But Bede Griffiths had died in 1995, and we were gently cautioned by others who knew India about travelling half-way across the world simply to visit a shrine. Slowly through various contacts and a lot of letter writing, three places emerged. An Ashram in north India besides the Ganges at Rishikesh run by a remarkable Catholic Nun called Sr. Vandana. Here in the life of the Ashram and the visits we made to Hindu Ashrams nearby, we were to glimpse something of Hindu spirituality. Secondly, an art Ashram in south India near Bangalore run by an artist, Jyoti Sahi, who led us into some of the richness of the tribal tradition; and thirdly, a Buddhist Meditation Centre high up in the central mountains of Sri Lanka. Here for a few short days we touched on some of the emphases of the southern Theravada Buddhist tradition.

Now if you are temperamentally committed to inclusiveness, Hinduism is a religion you will like! Extraordinarily complex, having evolved over aeons of time, it is like a huge living sponge, infinitely adaptable, flexible, tolerant and absorbent – wanting to say Yes to intimations of the Divine, to the mystery of *Brahman*, wherever they seem to appear. And so a proliferation of gods and goddesses has emerged over the centuries, though at its heart it is essentially, contrary to popular belief, monotheistic – all the pantheon are ultimately to be seen as revelations or aspects of the One Divine Reality. Now there is not time, and I'm certainly not equipped to explore the intricate complexities of Hindu theology, more than to say that I was struck to discover that in classical Hinduism the main emphasis is on a three-fold understanding of the divinity – a *Trimurti* of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer – which focuses the devotions of almost all Hindus. In the main most people are either followers of Shiva or of Vishnu, or one of Vishnu's many incarnations – there have been nine – of which the Buddha was

the ninth, and the very popular Lord Krishna, seen very often playing his flute amidst the entranced gopi's, the eighth.

Something of the inclusiveness of the Hindu spirit met us when, arriving in Rishikesh, we stepped inside the small walled garden at the centre of the Catholic Ashram beside the sacred and revered river Ganges in North India. In and amongst the small well tended flower beds were to be seen a variety of statues – Christ meditating in lotus posture, Krishna playing his golden flute, the Buddha in serene repose. We were met by Sister Vandana, a youthful and sprightly little 73 year old nun, dressed in the orange cloak of an Indian sanyasi which means “one who has renounced the world”. Though a Catholic, and indeed an Indian, she is deeply respectful of the Hindu tradition. In the very small community there we lived as guests for eight days and met some of the traditional emphases and disciplines of the western monastic life ... silence, a degree of fasting, and set times of prayer in the little chapel or *Mandir* which overlooked the swirling waters of the Ganges below; and a strong emphasis on Meditation, but meditation drawing on the Hindu tradition of meditation that is given shape by the six-fold path of Yoga.

Now while I knew that Yoga was far more than the rather debased thing it has become in the West, I had not grasped the systematic way that the tradition of Yoga, focuses and directs different aspects of human life towards union with the Divine. The teaching at the Ashram covered six kinds of Yoga: Bhakti Yoga which means the expression of praise and devotion; Karma Yoga which refers to work and action that points towards unity; Jnana Yoga – the use of the intellect; Hatha Yoga – the use of the body; Japa Yoga –, the focussing of the heart by the use of a sacred word constantly repeated – stilling the mind and centring oneself in what the Hindu's call the ‘the cave of the heart’; and finally Raja Yoga – the King Yoga. This itself has eight steps, focussing on everything from the posture of the body to the training of the mind and the use of the breath and is itself the practice of contemplation, leading to union.. Gathered together under the one word *Yoga* which is a Sanskrit word meaning to join or unite, and from which we get the word ‘Yoke’ – important in the New Testament – I was struck by the comprehensive discipline - or *Sadhana* meaning ‘practice’ - covering so many aspects of life, that it represents. It makes the attempts of western churches

to teach people how to pray seem rather thin. Do we know how to help people to focus the mind, so that the practice of our praying becomes, to use a Hindu expression, ‘one-pointed’? Do we know how to help people to use the body to enter into prayer? Are we learning – in addition to the many words of our liturgical praying in church – how to use just one word, what is sometimes called a mantra, in the practice of meditative prayer?

What you become aware of as you reflect on the whole range of meaning that this word ‘Yoga’ encompasses – the careful and sensitive focussing and training of body mind and spirit that it represents – is that it has grown out of centuries of religious practice ... practice that is deeply familiar with, and sensitive to, the inner landscape of the human spirit, as we seek transcendence; it knows how to harness the deepest energies of that spirit, taking the seeker beyond himself or herself. And yet these supposedly Hindu understandings and emphases do exist of course in different forms in the Christian tradition of contemplative prayer, though taught far too little in the noisy world of our western religion. But think for example of the Orthodox practice of the Jesus prayer, as in some ways comparable to, though not the same as, the recitation of the eastern mantra.

And it was not just through the whole intricate and subtle holistic system of Yoga that we sensed the Hindu genius for encompassing the whole of life. The same kind of holistic understanding is revealed in the Hindu teaching on the stages of life or *ashramas* that ideally the pilgrim needs to go through if he is to fully accomplish the pilgrimage of life and attain union. Let me very briefly summarise them. Stage one is the phase of the student, of education and learning, which lasts up to about the age of twenty. Stage two – the stage of the householder (between twenty and fifty) – is the stage of carrying the burdens of responsibility for career and family. (During this phase it is recognised that the serious spiritual quest for liberation is put on hold). Stage three is the hermit stage – which begins at about fifty when the children have left home and the first grandchild may be born. This is the stage which marks the serious beginning of the search for union with the divine. I was reminded of this the other day when I came across a passage from Jung's writing where he calls religion “a school for the middle aged”.

I find this fascinating for churches in the west tend to be full of people in middle age. I find myself wondering whether the Hindu mind in highlighting the intensity of spiritual need at this stage has a particularly clear understanding of human psychological development, while we tend to get so anxious about the preponderance of the middle-aged and the comparative absence of the young. And stage four is the stage of the *Sadhu* or holy man or woman, when everything is renounced – “take no thought of the future and look in indifference on the present” is the teaching, echoing almost precisely Jesus’ words: “take no thought for the morrow”. Very few go that far, but the whole concept of these ‘stages’ nevertheless offers a simple and illuminating overview.

While there were aspects of Hindu thought which bothered us – and I’ll touch on those very briefly in a moment – we were struck by how it attempted to comprehend the psychic and spiritual needs of human beings, and amidst its colourful and chaotic and sometimes quite amoral theological myths, give space and opportunity for the exploring of those needs.

And so finally and very briefly to Buddhism. After five turbulent weeks in Hindu India, to enter briefly into the world of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka living for a few days in a remote Meditation Centre high in the hills above Kandy, was both a rapid culture shock and meant in religious terms being stripped of colour, symbolism, imagery and the richness of myth, and entering into an austere and almost puritan world of hours of concentration and silent meditation in the long meditation hall, with nothing but the chirping of birds by day and the croaking of frogs by night, for company. Here, surrounded by a rich mixture of young Europeans seeking enlightenment from a tradition not their own, we sweated it out, hour after silent hour.

In Buddhism, desire, attachment, craving . . . is the great enemy; and Mindfulness in the present moment and the eight-fold path of right-behaviour in different aspects of life points the way towards an experience of enlightenment for which one learns to wait and hope in silent meditation, concentrating on the breath. It’s a very hard road, (I was reminded of the paradoxical phrase from the Epistle to the Hebrews that you have “to labour in order to enter into rest”) . . . and in this intense atmosphere of concentrated austerity I became

very grateful for, and missed, the Christian emphasis on grace – Christ coming to meet us with arms outstretched in embrace whatever muddle or mess we’ve made of our lives and throwing a giant party! And this was perhaps our greatest spiritual reservation during our time in the sub-continent, this and our sense that Hinduism particularly does not see history as the arena for God’s salvation, and so would seem to be lacking in the prophetic strand of spirituality that is so definitive of the Judaeo/Christian Way . . . and which makes Christianity a fundamentally this-worldly religion of hope and transformation.

The Christian emphasis on the abundant grace of God, and the reminder that God in the Jewish/Christian Way has entered into history – which is the theatre of his saving activity as he comes to reign – and that the world far from being something evil to be escaped from into prayer (which so often seemed the suggestion), but is rather essentially good and beautiful, and is to be loved, embraced and struggled for in hopeful clear-sighted action proceeding from prayer . . . the lack of these two emphases came to us again and again as two insistent reservations that we could not avoid, even as we struggled to remain open to spiritual riches and spiritual practices that we did not fully understand.

And yet paradoxically I found myself asking in Sri Lanka: is it in the very absence of a clearly announced doctrine of the grace of God leading to the need to spend long hours in disciplined waiting, self-purification, self-emptying and sitting . . . that the glory of Buddhist practice lies? Faith in the undeserved grace of God in Christ as a free gift is the Christian’s treasure and yet do we too easily and rapidly assume it, take it for granted, make it cheap as Bonhoeffer said, and so debase the currency? Can the Buddhists teach us how, in radical emptiness of mind and heart, to wait? The New Testament teaches us that the grace of Christ, though a free gift, inescapably involves a long and costly search demanding our all. Maybe our Buddhist and Hindu brothers and sisters have something to teach us about how we may more thoroughly, and more whole-heartedly, engage in that search.

There is far more that one could say. I would like to finish by saying that I left the sub-continent with one perception deeply underlined. Through touching just the surface of these profound and

ancient religious systems of thought and practice, I came away more convinced than ever that the way of Christ and the presence of Christ is far wider in the world than the narrow confines of a western church which I fear far too superficially and noisily seeks to proclaim and own Him. It is as we learn to listen deeply and respectfully to the traditions and practices of other seekers after God of whatever religion or none, that we shall glimpse Him in his fullness - hidden in the longings of our hearts and revealed to us together as we enter into a shared path of vulnerable and mutual exploration.

