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SANKARA'S BHAKTI AND SWAMI ABHISHIKTANANDA'S "ADULT FAITH"

I

Swami Abhishiktananda was not a regular Hindu *swami* but rather a French Christian monk who adopted that name upon entering the mode of the life of a *sannyasin*, his original name being Henri La Saux, O.S.B. The Swami had a strong Advaitic experience upon meeting Ramana Maharsi and he spent the rest of his life integrating it with his experience of being a Christian. In this process he developed a concept of faith which shows an astonishing similarity to the definition of Bhakti attributed to Śaṅkara. As Swami Abhishiktananda did not belong to the Hindu religious tradition or even, in the usual sense, to the orders of *sannyāsa* founded by Śaṅkara, his confirmation of Śaṅkara's definition must be taken seriously into account.¹

II

On account of the primacy accorded to *jñāna* by Śaṅkara, he is often depicted as downplaying *bhakti*.² This, however, is not the assessment of the Hindu tradition itself. As Professor S. Radhakrishnan had pointed out, while Śaṅkara "is an absolute non-dualist in his metaphysics, he has great faith in *bhakti* or devotion to a personal God."³ He then goes on to cite the following examples. The first example is a prayer to Viśvanātha of Kāśī:

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1. For details of his Life etc., see Robert A. Stephen's *Religious Experience as a Meeting-Point in Interreligious Dialogue: an Evaluation of the Venture of Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux O.S.B.)* (unpublished Master's thesis: University of Sydney, 1984).
 2. See A.L. Basham, Hinduism, in R.C. Zaehner, ed., *The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959) p. 238.
 3. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sūtra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971) p. 37.

yātrā mayā sarva-gatā hatā te, dhyanena cetaḥ-paratā hata te,
stutyānayā vak-paratā hatā te, kṣantavyam etat trayam eva
sambho.

Forgive me, O Śiva, my three great sins. I came on a pilgrimage to Kāśī forgetting that you are omnipresent; in thinking about you, I forget that you are beyond thought; in praying to you I forget that you are beyond words.⁴

The next is of a prayer to Viṣṇu:

satyapi bhedāpagame nātha tavāham na māmakīnas tvam
sāmudro hi taraṅgaḥ kvacana samudro na tāraṅgaḥ

O Lord, even after realising that there is no real difference between the individual soul and Brahman I beg to state that I am yours and not that you are mine. The wave belongs to the ocean and not the ocean to the wave.⁵

This is followed by examples of prayer to Sarasvatī and the Buddha respectively.

kaṭākṣe dayādrām kare jñāna-mudrām kalābhir vinidrām kalāpaiḥ
śubhadrām

purastrim vinidrām purastuṅgabhadrām bhaje śāradāmbām ajaśram
mad-ambām.

I constantly worship my mother, the *śāradāmbā*, the goddess of learning who is soft with compassion in her looks, who has the *jñāna-mudrā* in her hand, who is bright with all the arts, who is blessed with long flowing hair, who is ever watchful, in front of whom flows the Tuṅga-bhadra.

dharā-baddha padmasānasthāmghriyaṣṭiḥ
niyamyānilam nyasta nāsāgra-drṣṭiḥ
ya āste kale yoginām cakravartī
sa buddhaḥ prabuddho'stu mac cittavartī.⁶

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.* p. 38.

Similarly T.M.P. Mahadevan also refers to the Bhakti rhapsodies of Śaṅkara. He states that "Śaṅkara, while defining this type of higher *bhakti*, compares it to the attraction of iron-filings to the load-stone, the constancy of a chaste wife to the lord of her heart, the dependence of a creeper on a tree, and the flowing of the river towards the sea."⁷

In this context he also recalls the story of Kaṇṇappar. "The story of Kaṇṇappar best illustrates the highest type of *bhakti*. In the mountainous region of Kālahastī was a rough stone image of Śiva. Every morning a pious and learned Brahmin came to it and offered worship according to rule. One day a young huntsman happened to pass that way. The sight of the image roused the feelings of religious devotion in his heart. He brought water in his mouth and poured it on the image, decorated it with wild flowers and offered swine's flesh ill-baked in fire. Next morning when the priest turned up, he saw the dirty things and thought that a vile man had desecrated the holy place. Śiva wanted to teach the Brahmin a lesson and show him that the hunter's unclean worship was more acceptable to Him than the *pūjā* performed according to the scriptural law. One night the Deity appeared in a vision to the priest and directed him to watch the next day from a hiding place the expression of the barbarian's love. The Brahmin did as he was told. He concealed himself near the idol and waited. The hunter came to worship. He saw to his horror blood dripping from an eye of the image. He remembered the medical formula that eye heals eye, and at once removed one of his own eyes and placed it on the idol's eye. The blood stopped. But soon the other eye of the idol began to bleed. The young chieftain placed one of his feet a little below the affected eye in order that it may serve as a mark and prepared to sacrifice the other eye also. But before he could cut it out, Śiva manifested Himself to him and accepted him as one of His chosen devotees. The hunter was healed, and was known henceforth as Kaṇṇappar, 'the beloved of the eye.' Śaṅkara, in one of his poetical works, describes this saint as the best among Bhaktas. 'The contact with the worn-out shoe gave immense pleasure to Śiva's body; the water brought in the mouth became his ceremonial bath; the swine's flesh which had been tasted before it was offered became his delicious food. What will not *bhakti* do? Lo, the barbarian became the best among the bhaktas!'"⁸

7. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetana Ltd., 1971) p. 90.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

It should also be noted that despite questions about the relationship between Advaita and the Bhagavad Gītā,⁹ the verse Śaṅkara singles out as containing the essence of the Gītā is a theistic one (XI. 55):

matkarmakṛṇ matparamo
madbhaktaḥ satgavarjitaḥ
nirvairaḥ sarvabhūteṣu
yaḥsa mām eti pāṇḍava

Doing My work, intent on Me,
Devoted to Me, free from attachment,
Free from enmity to all beings,
who is so, goes to Me, son of Pāṇḍu.¹⁰

It could be argued that although Abhishiktananda was a follower of Śaṅkara's Advaita, he was really led to it by Ramaṇa Maharsi so do we find many examples of *bhakti* in the life and thought of Ramaṇa Maharsi. This fact is easily documented.

III

Now what was Śaṅkara's concept of *bhakti*? In the *Vivekacūḍamaṇi* we read:

Among the instruments of emancipation the supreme is devotion. Meditation upon the true form of the real Self is said to be devotion.

Some say devotion is meditation on the nature of one's atman. He who possesses all these qualifications is one who is fit to know the true nature of atman.¹¹

It sounds odd to even the Advaitic ear that Bhakti or devotion should be defined in terms of the investigation of the self. Yet Abhishiktananda, in describing his experience comes very close to such

9. Eliot Deutsch and J.A.B. van Buitenen, *A Source Book of Advaita Vedānta* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1971) p. 213.

10. Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gita I* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; Harvard University Press, 1944) p. 118, 119.

11. Mohini M. Chatterji, *Viveka-Cudamani or Crest-Jewel of Wisdom* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1973) p. 17, 18.

a definition of devotion if he does not quite reiterate it. In a key passage Robert A. Stephens sums up the evidence:

Those who live at the level of the depth of the reality behind the signs, Abhishiktananda describes as having an "adult faith."

And faith is adult only when man has reached in himself that central place of himself, independent, responsible and free.

And adult faith is based on a real experience of God both in His presence in the depth of the soul and His presence in the core of all things.

He goes on to say that he is not speaking

"of a 'felt' experience, of a so-called sentiment of the divine presence (but rather) what some call an 'ontic' experience, something which springs from the centre of the being and transforms all activities of man, even if he is not directly aware of it."

It is this point which has to be kept in mind when he writes about religious experience.¹²

IV

It is best to conclude in Swami Abhishiktananda's own words:

The most important thing is to free oneself from everything and to bring oneself to one's own innermost centre. For that India is not essential, thank God. However I believe that according to the order of Providence, and bearing in mind the necessary sequence of time and of the growth through Time of the Body of Christ towards its fullness, India by means of its agelong preparation gives to Christians in general a reminder – at once gentle and violent – that the Lord is not to be found in the place where man *imagines* or thinks that he is. It is only when once a man has fully left himself behind that he discovers God, and it is in Him – on the other side of this preliminary loss – that he rediscovers himself in the very depth of God.¹³

12. Robert A. Stephens, *op. cit.*, pp. 58–59.

13. Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 60.