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THE SEARCH OF WESTERN YOUTH FOR EXPERIENCE OF THE DIVINE THROUGH INDIAN CULTURE

For many young people in the West today the Christian religion seems to be a closed book. Church-going or active belonging to a community is the exception rather than the rule for most of them. This alienation from traditional patterns of religion, should not however be interpreted as indicating an attitude of indifference to spirituality. It is more that their experience of meaning, which ultimately could also be called the divine does not coincide with what they find in their local church.

In the space of one essay it would be impossible to describe in detail all the different ways in which these young people search for meaning outside the local church. To give some indication of the diversity, we could mention the Peace Movement, the Taize Community, Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy and so on. The interest in Indian spirituality is thus seen as one way among many ways. For the people who chose this path, the religious problem is "not so much a crisis of faith in the pure sense, as a crisis of the mediations of faith."¹ The regular church-going practices seem unable to penetrate the barrier created by the consumer society. In fact the church itself often becomes infected by it. The priest in a sincere effort to be "with it" starts trying to package his sermon/liturgy almost like yet another advertisement, only this time selling God. This type of society bombards the psyche with every type of distraction and satisfaction, and makes it extremely difficult for the presence of God to be felt.

In addition to this, there is a tendency which perhaps has its roots back in the nineteenth century, of moral self-righteousness among committed Christians. This "I holier than thou" attitude makes it very difficult for the seeker, who may feel very unholy, to make an approach. It is against this background of the difficulties experienced in relating to the Western Church, that the ways in which Indian culture evokes an experience of the divine will be explored.

1. Michael Paul Gallagher S. J. "An Anatomy of Religious Indifference". The month December, 1980, p. 402.

Perhaps one of the most important features of traditional Hindu culture is that religious experience is often evoked through *symbols*. These symbols can also be experienced as art. For the seekers we are discussing here, who are unable to relate to the Western Church, the rich symbol system of the Hindu temple offers an insight into the language of the soul. The stone sculptures, unlike the modern sermon, are not affected by the activities of modern society. They speak about very basic human experiences and convey a dimension of holiness. Here it might help to take some concrete examples.

In every Shiva temple the sculpture of a bull is found facing towards the *garbha griha*, that is, holy of holies. Inside this sacred space is sculptured the Linga-Yoni. This latter represents the primeval male and female energies. It could be compared to the Chinese Yin-Yang symbol, which unites the opposites represented as male and female. The bull is the vehicle or *vahana* of the god. The animal dimension of the bull is usually movingly portrayed, especially in the older temples. The stance of the bull and its positioning are deeply symbolic. In spite of his massive strength, the Nandi bull is always shown lying down obediently. He is positioned looking towards the *garbha griha*. These primeval symbols point towards a very simple but important truth, that human life in all its dimensions that is, body and soul, is sacred. It also conveys that this sense of sanctity requires the transformation of the animal passions.

The strength of this symbolism lies in the fact that it is non-verbal and it is static. The sermonizing form of religious communication tends to require activity on the part of the preacher but the audience remains passive, one could even say "captive". In order to experience these sculptural symbols described, it is necessary to make the effort to visit the temple and to walk around. One is therefore naturally extricated from the onslaught of fashion and movement which constitutes so much of the modern environment. However this type of experience can only "work" if at least some background knowledge of the symbol system has been gained already.

In this symbol system, it is important to notice that the animal, symbolized as Nandi, is first of all presented and then transformed into an attitude of devotion. In one sense the animal part of our nature is what we fear. This fear sometimes leads to a total suppression of it, especially in the Western religious context. Possibly this has been a contributing factor to the swing in the opposite direction, which has led to the so-called "permissive society".

One of the important aspects of Hindu culture is the ability to see the problem, make it conscious and then to coax it into a new attitude. This is evident if we contrast the figure of St George and that of Lord Vishnu. The former is often depicted in the act of piercing the dragon with his lance in order to finish it off. The latter is shown reclining on the cosmic serpent. This poisonous reptile becomes his protector and friend instead of an enemy ready to inflict death on him. Lord Vishnu's deep meditation and relaxed attitude seems to have transformed the serpent by non-violent means.

Another aspect of Indian religious culture which helps to fill a spiritual lacuna for the young Westerner, is the *emotional* dimension of the spirituality. A good example of this is found in the great epic of Valmiki, the *Ramayana*. One of the salient features of the *Ramayana* is that the whole gamut of human emotion is conveyed. These are intermixed with very lofty ideals and, religious truths. It is also significant that Sita, the heroine, plays as important a role as the hero Rama. The Western tradition has tended towards a predominance of emphasis on the masculine experience. This has meant that emotion and feeling have been marginalized. Through the *Ramayana* it is possible to restore a more equal balance between male and female, thought and feeling and so on. Hence it is possible for the emotions to find a positive identification. The divine dimension of human love experience is conveyed.

The figure of Sita is especially important for women. The changing status of women is one reason why many of them despair of finding any fulfilment in the church or within the Christian tradition. Although Hindu society has not, until very recently, encouraged the social emancipation of women, at the symbolic level, the feminine element plays a very important role. One of the liberating aspects of encountering another culture into which one has not been born is that a scripture, which has influenced society in all sorts of ways, can be experienced afresh, without preconceptions. Thus, if one's life experience is one of freedom and creativity for women, then it is possible to discover this in the figure of Sita in the *Ramayana* text. But if one had been told from childhood that it was a scripture used to keep women in subordination, it would be very difficult to interpret it otherwise.

This insight, produced by the *interaction of different cultures* is one of the most enlightening aspects for a person who feels "stuck" in his/her own culture. It reveals the reality that what we are able to see in scripture is limited by what we are. When we are living in our own culture, the ways in which we have been taught to understand scripture, are so deeply embedded

in our psyche, that the only response in order to change this, is a total rejection. But through cross-cultural encounter it is possible to go straight to the source, unmediated by cultural traditions. Thus scripture can be seen as a creative entity which each person has a right to understand and experience in his/her own way. Religion is not a set of unquestionable rules and "historical" truths.

This attitude of creative reinterpretation of the text is also a striking feature of much modern Indian Christian theology. This is especially the case for those people who are involved with the process of inculturation. Here it is seen that the same Christian truth can be experienced and presented in many different ways. In a manner that is both profound and forceful, Indian Christians ask themselves, what is our experience and what is our culture? It is from this basis that they approach Christian Scripture. The results in interpretation are remarkably different from standard Western interpretations.

Here it is worth mentioning the *specific problems of women* in search of the divine in the Western context. There, in spite of the growing number of women theologians, and in the Protestant tradition, practising ministers, the dominant approach to the Christian truth is a rationalistic and literary one. Often, being more intuitive and feeling oriented, women are unable to function creatively in this set up. By contrast, the more indigenous Indian theology tends to be far more intuitive and open to all the colourfulness of the emotive side of human nature. Indian theology gives a good example of how it is necessary first to understand one's own experience and problems and then go to the text. Otherwise the dominant Western male interpretation is so pervasive that it influences the experience itself, and makes reinterpretation almost impossible. Thus the Indian style is an especially helpful approach for women theologians.²

Another very creative aspect of Indian Christian culture lies in the *ashram movement*. Shantivanam, where Father Bede Griffiths lives, is one of the best known. There are many other important *ashrams* of this kind all over India. Here the importance for person who is alienated from religious experience, is the accessibility of the contemplative life and the beauty of the worship and meditation. The *ashram* life if it is based on a

2. For a detailed development of this point see my article - "Mary, a symbol for Artists and Priests" Pub. Vidyajyoti. Feb. 1986. pp. 87-99

small community as for example at Saccidananda Ashram in Coorg presents beautiful atmosphere to a visitor, who soon becomes a participator with a living symbol of community life. One of the confusing aspects of Western life is the break up of any type of community life based on some non-materialistic goal. The *ashram*, especially if it is located in a rural area, gives an insight into how human spirituality can be linked to the rhythms of nature.

The *ashram* usually has a sense of openness to all visitors, regardless of sex, caste or creed. Unlike strict cloistered contemplative orders, the lay person staying at the *ashram* is able to experience the natural rhythm of contemplative life. The very climate of India helps to make the *ashram* life-style austere, simple, and accessible. By contrast the traditional Western convent or monastery seem remote and private, and the life-style is sometimes quite elaborate. The lay person tends to feel like an intruder.

Indian spirituality offers a "new" approach to the divine, through symbols and ways which are very old. The strength and direct simplicity of the Hindu symbols can awaken the dormant needs of the soul. The importance given to emotion in scriptures such as the *Ramayana*, open up new ways of balancing feeling and intellect. The cross-cultural dimension frees the seeker from preconceived ideas about religion. Indian Christian theology helps to re-inforce this attitude of bold and creative reinterpretation. The *ashrams* offer an experience of contemplative life which is accessible to lay people. Thus, through all these means, Western Youth are enabled to rediscover the religious dimension of their lives through the help of Indian spirituality.