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The Nature and Possibility of Christian Sannyāsa

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Abstract

The article begins by comparing the 'Western' and traditional Indian views of the stages of spiritual development during the life-cycle. The former is characterized as a period of education, work and activity finally ending in retirement and relative inactivity. The latter, drawing upon the ancient Indian tradition as re-evaluated by writers such as Tagore and Thottakara, envisages the life-cycle as comprising four elements: the periods of education, householder, the forest-dweller and, ultimately, the renouncer or *Sannyāsi*. The article will concentrate on this latter stage, in particular, asking the question: is a Christian *Sannyāsa* possible? To answer this question case studies are explored from the contemporary and recent history of Christianity in India. In particular, the article concentrates on three main figures: Henri le Saux ('Abhishiktananda'), Fr Francis Vineeth CMI and Swami Sadanand.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
*A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing (*Ecclesiastes 3: 1 – 5)

Introduction

Writing in 1924 the Bengali Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore - then in his early sixties - made a strong contrast between the Western and Eastern approaches to life. 'In Europe', he wrote, 'we see only two divisions of man's worldly life – the period of training and that of work. It is like prolonging a straight line till wearied, you drop off your brush' (Tagore 1924: 498). For, as he pointed out, 'work is a process and cannot really be the end of anything' and yet 'Europe has omitted to put before man any definite goal in which its work may find its natural termination and gain its rest.' India, on the other hand, 'has not advised us to come to a sudden stop while work is in full swing.' The usual narrative of our lives in the West, as he pointed out, is that we prepare ourselves for work (schools and universities being the places to acquire the necessary skills for a life of work), we work (the most important part of our life) and, then, (if we are lucky) we 'retire', or, as Tagore puts it, 'drop off our brush' to fill the final years watching daytime TV or visiting the grandchildren. Recent reports have highlighted the poor care the elderly receive in the UK and how many are now presently incapable of sustaining meaningful interaction with the society around them. By contrast what Tagore presents us with in the final stages of life is a deliberate and calculated move to renunciation which is enshrined in the Indian tradition.

Unlike Shakespeare in *As You Like It*, or the religious commentator James Fowler in his *Faithful Change*, rather than using a Western seven-fold categorization of the stages of life Tagore preferred to draw upon the ancient Indian classification of the four-fold stages of life, as he said: 'as the day is divided into morning, noon, afternoon and evening so India had divided man's life into four parts' (Tagore 1931:123). According to Vedic tradition, the normal span of human life is given as 100 years. In his essay of 1924 Tagore discussed these stages as follows: *brahmacharya,* the early years of studentship and apprenticeship; *garhasthya,* the middle years of running a household and enjoying married life; *vānaprastha,* retreat from active daily life to 'the forest' and, finally, *sannyāsa* – the total and final renunciation.

In this article, I shall explore India's four- fold classification of the spiritual progress of life and suggest some lessons this approach can teach us about the demands of a spiritual life in the West today, with special regard to the last phase – the so-called *sannyāsa*. In particular, I would like to ask the question: is a Christian formulation of *sannyāsa* possible?

What is *Sannyāsa?*

As suggested at the start of this article, these Indian descriptions of the final stages of life are the ones that differ so markedly from the dominant narrative currently apparent in the West. 'After the infant leaves the womb', writes Tagore, 'it still has to remain close to its mother for a time, remaining attached in spite of its detachment' (Tagore 1931: 125) until, that is, it can accustom itself to its new phase. So it is, suggests Tagore, when we reach the apex of middle-age. At this stage, Tagore writes, the seeker 'still gives to the world from his store of wisdom and accepts its support' but there is a lack of intimacy, vigor, and concern as was the case earlier in the householder phase. This he attributes to 'there being a new sense of distance' (Tagore 1931: 125). We begin to lose interest in what had propelled us through the first half of our life (up to approximately the 50th year – the traditional Jewish scriptural time of the 'Jubilee'). We cease to be so keen to build up material resources but now desire to restore the spiritual parts of our lives. This is the time for renewed interest in retreats, religious books and even the pursuit of studies such as an M.A. or Ph.D. in theology or spirituality.

However, as stated at the onset, there is a problem here, especially for Christians. The Christian spiritual path has always emphasized the importance of service in the world. St Teresa of Avila puts it well at the end of her 'Interior Castle' where she states that after all the ecstasies, meditations and divine moments of consolation we must return to service of our fellow humanity in the world. As she bluntly puts it in her usual pithy way:

> When I see people very diligently observing the sort of prayer that they have and how much they are very wrapped up in it when they have it (for it seems that they will not let the thought move or stir in case they lose a small morsel of the pleasure or devotion that they have had), I realise how little they understand of the road to the attainment of union. They think that the whole business lies in such things.
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> No, sisters, no! The Lord desires works and that if you see a sick woman to whom you can give some help, never be affected by the fear that your devotion will suffer, but take pity on her: if she is in pain you should feel pain too; if necessary, fast so that she may have your food, not so much for her sake as because you know that the Lord desires it. (*The Interior Castle* 5.3.11)

Can the two then be reconciled? The Indian withdrawal from the world and the Christian life of active holiness? One famous practitioner who tried to do this was the French priest, Henri le Saux (later known as 'Abhishiktananda'), who famously travelled to India in the 1940s to

seek a way of life that would integrate Eastern and Western insights of the spiritual life, it is to his experiences of *sannyāsa* that we turn next.

Abhishiktananda's Renunciation

From an early stage, Abhishiktananda also asked the question: 'Does Hindu *sannyāsa* really have an equivalent in Christianity?' (Diary entry, 7.1.1954; Abhishiktananda 1998: 88) and it was in exploring this end that much of the rest of his life in India was dedicated (he never returned to his native France). For him, especially after spending time on the sacred mountain of Arunachāla in Southern India, the heart of *sannyāsa* became a complete stripping, a complete emptying which for him was centered upon silence, solitude, and poverty:

> *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 7.1.54, Abhishiktananda 1998: 88)

We could argue that Abhishiktananda's *sannyāsa* was even more extreme than the Hindu version (certainly more so that Tagore's). The Hindu tradition, as we have seen, involves a ritualized stripping away prescribed for certain castes (and indeed gender) only. What Abhishiktananda was advocating 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 accouterments. In 1954 he wrote in his Diary that '*Sannyāsa*, in its total renunciation and its total liberation, is incompatible with ecclesial Christianity, which does not admit the possibility of itself being transcended' (7.1.54, Abhishiktananda 1998: 88). In 1954 it was the transcendence of Christianity that preoccupied him. Twenty years later in his last written essay, on *sannyāsa*, he prescribes it as the 'renunciation of renunciation' – it would for him ultimately go beyond every religious form, including Hinduism. The Hindu attempt to make *sannyāsa* the fourth stage of life (as described by Thotakkara and Tagore above) was, he felt, 'an attempt of Hindu society to win back, and at least to some extent, to reintegrate with itself those who had renounced everything' (*The Further* Shore, Abhishiktananda 1975: 17). 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 *sannyasi*' who 'becomes indifferent, on that very day he should go forth and roam'(Abhishiktananda 1975: 22).

Despite his desire to live this extreme lifestyle this was to prove

impossible for him. He had difficulty living in isolation at Gyansu, his little hut on the banks of the Ganges, and spent half the year there and the other half teaching and traveling in the Plains. After his own heart attack in July 1973, he realized he would never live in his 'cave' again and died later that year in a nursing home at Indore.

The Possibility of Christian *Sannyāsa*?

If then the traditional practice was too much for a spiritual titan such as Henri le Saux is the practice one that is defensible or indeed legitimate for Christians? As is often the case, Tagore suggests a possible compromise solution. As a young man, writing in 1892 in his early thirties, he made an interesting remark with reference to *sannyāsa*:

> If by nature I were a sanyasi (sic), then I would have spent my life pondering life's transcience, and no day would have gone by without a solemn rite to the glory of God. But I am not, and my mind is preoccupied instead by the beauty that disappears from my life each day; I feel I do not appreciate it properly. (Tagore 1991: 69)

And a year later:

> There are two aspects to India: the householder and the sanyasi. The first refuses to leave his home hearth, the second is utterly homeless. Inside me, both aspects are to be found. (Tagore 1991: 78)

And I think it is in such a 'creative unity' as Tagore expressed it that we can find the 'coincidence of opposites' that I think could best characterize the 'Christian *sannyāsi*'.

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' (Thottakara 2009: 561). 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. Yet, in spite of the differences between the extreme Hindu version of *sannyāsa* (as attempted to be practiced 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 and the embrace of Sister Death. 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 Bangalore, as an example of a modern *sadhu* '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' (Thottakara 2009: 558). At heart what Indian *sannyāsa* and Christian spiritual life have in common is that for both renunciations, 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.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the rich life of Swami Sadanand, a Christian *sannyāsi*, who died earlier this year, Swamiji, as he was popularly known, 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 practicing 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 Swamiji, the nun's murderer and family to Rome in 2014. I had the great good fortune to meet Swamiji shortly before his death earlier this year and, perhaps more than any argument in this short article, his presence and life are a convincing testimony to the possibility of Christian *sannyāsa*. To experience his smile, won despite a lifetime of hardship and suffering, was to experience the loving blessing of the Saviour.

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