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EXILE AND WANDERING

Spiritual Practice and Foundation for Interreligious Dialogue

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AFTER EIGHTEEN YEARS of silence in the Benedictine Monastery of Kergonan, Henri Le Saux went to India, leaving forever the life of a traditional European monk. This was the beginning of his wandering. After some time in the ashram of Shantivanam,¹ he felt called to more solitude and renunciation and wandered northward to the Himalayas and the banks of the Ganges. His internal wandering brought him closer to Hinduism, where he discovered the depths of *advaita*. His experience of non-duality was so intense that he entered into an extremely painful identity crisis. Once he took the name of Abhishiktananda, he began to walk unknown paths that took him away from his certainties and the images of God with which he felt at home; he followed such unknown paths while recognizing God in the heart of otherness, as he himself testified: "O my Beloved, why are You hidden under the features of Shiva and Arunāchala, of Ramana

the Rishi and of Sadaśiva the Wandering Naked One, to give me Your grace?²

What roles do the themes of exile and wandering play in the religious identity and the mystical experience of Abhishiktananda? How are they relevant in his life of faith? Answering these questions can help us understand how a spirituality of dialogue invites Christians today to deal with exile and wandering in their relationship to the divine. This effort is all the more precious and needed since these themes are relevant to an increasing number of present-day men and women.

Modern means of communication and transportation have dramatically changed our world. Consequently, displacement has become easy and is even encouraged. Emigration, nomadism, and semi-nomadism are current realities. For an increasing number of people, travelling has become necessary for seeking a job, advancing a career, finding happiness and peace. Going on a journey is sometimes motivated by an inner dissatisfaction and the hope of putting a definitive end to it. Leaving our familiar environment or landmarks, at least momentarily, can create a space wherein we die to ourselves in order to be in touch with and awakened to deeper dimensions of our being. Thus, wandering is not only a physical act; it also concerns our convictions and beliefs.

In his historical overview of Christian spirituality, Philip Shel-drake highlights the twentieth-century movement from a faith based on pre-established or dogmatic discourse to a faith based on experience and the appropriation of this experience by the believer in a specific and unique way.³ The spiritual journey now takes precedence over the clarity of the truths to be attained and proclaimed. In a global world, the clash of differing worldviews contributes to the crumbling of ideologies and traditional landmarks. Exile and wandering are encouraged, as well as a certain degree of disorientation and confu-

sion! Religious pluralism challenges our certainties and forces us to rediscover the meaning of the quest and the journey.

In this context, interreligious dialogue is often recognized as the most appropriate answer to the current challenge of religious pluralism. To be meaningful, however, this answer should take into account the themes of wandering and exile. Hence, the following questions arise: How are these themes integrated into the interreligious dynamic? What challenges do they pose to the church? What hope do they represent for a new global consciousness? In order to deal with these questions I divide this paper into two parts: I. Exile and wandering in the life and message of Abhishiktananda; II. Exile/wandering as a common ground for interreligious dialogue.

I. EXILE AND WANDERING IN THE LIFE AND MESSAGE OF ABHISHIKTANANDA

It should be noted at the outset that the themes of exile and wandering are particularly important in the experience of Abhishiktananda.⁴ They are at the root of a double impulse that makes him both a pioneer of dialogue with Hinduism and one of the major Christian mystics of the twentieth century.⁵

I. Exile and Duality

Exile, a form of banishment, describes the situation of one who is evicted or obliged to live outside the place, usually the fatherland, where he or she lives habitually, or where he or she feels at home. In addition, exile includes an implicit desire to return to the place one calls home. Those who experience exile often see their new situation as temporary and hope someday to live again in their native country.

With this definition in mind, this question arises: Can we talk

about exile in the case of Abhishikhananda? Yes and no. In the strict sense, no, because nothing obliged him to leave France or his monastery. From an external perspective, his preparation to depart for India was of his own free will. Moreover, once on the Indian subcontinent, he never nourished the thought of returning to his fatherland.

However, from an existential perspective, the reference to exile is relevant, for Abhishikhananda felt pushed from within to live outside his familiar environment. His interior uprootedness during his time in India obeyed a double impulse: first, he felt the urging of a missionary call to participate in laying the foundations of a Christian monasticism in India; second, his uprootedness demonstrated such a thirst for God that he questioned the capacity of his own monastic life to quench it. Early in his monastic life at the abbey of Kergonan he had developed a passion for an apophatic approach to God according to the Hindu tradition.

In brief, Abhishikhananda's spiritual and missionary vocations obliged him, so to say, to leave the place that was familiar to him. Consequently, he spent several years anticipating his possible departure, preparing himself by reading about Hinduism and studying Sanskrit. Once in India, his entire life with its trials and tribulations, its hardships and errors, reveals his hope of returning not to his fatherland, but to the source, to this place beyond all places, to his ultimate home, to his true Self. Abhishikhananda left his home in Brittany and travelled to distant shores. In doing so, he eventually returned home, but this time "home" no longer referred to a particular region, but to the *guhā* of his own heart, which is beyond all duality, the space that is the most familiar and truest home. "My duality in relation to the world," he wrote, "... cannot be final.... As long as I feel two, it is exile."⁶

For Abhishikhananda, the home of departure is not the home of return. Does the itinerary of the French Benedictine refer therefore

more to the idea of the exodus as understood in the biblical sense? His migration from France to India can actually be seen as a liberation, a gateway to awakening: from a God enclosed in creeds, to a God freed from all bounds; from a mystery that we continue to name to a mystery that we should simply *be*. Abhishikhananda liberated himself from a way of being church that he came to realize was an obstacle between human beings and Christ. We have an indication of this when he spoke of how difficult it was for him to imagine his Hindu friends entering the institutional framework of Christianity, in spite of their admiration for Christ.⁷ The more he lived in both worlds, the less he envisioned a solution to the problem. More than anything else, this situation called Abhishikhananda to enter into the deepest internal experience through the contemplative way of silence.⁸

As in the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, the departure of Abhishikhananda was oriented straightforwardly towards the Promised Land, the land that he trod with joy and serenity towards the end of his life and that he called the Grail. This land was the central concern of his whole life, namely, "the Mystery of the Absolute from the perspective of *advaita* (non-duality) as explained in certain *Upanishads*, which he sees as the equivalent of the intuition of Moses in Exodus and of Jesus: *I am*."⁹ Furthermore, as was the case in the exodus of the Israelites, the freedom granted in response to the divine call also led him to wander for many years.

2. From Hospitality to Wandering

Wandering is the most dominant feature of Abhishikhananda's life, and this theme resounds in several ways. Let us say right at the start that for Abhishikhananda wandering is not at all a choice. If he did, in fact, choose to follow the inner call mentioned above, he surely did not intend or imagine that he would be wandering for such a

prolonged period of time. He also certainly did not choose to suffer the extreme consequences that, at times, were almost unbearable for him. Regardless of his intentions, he was led to a state of homelessness, compelled to start the journey again and again, interiorly as well as externally. Nevertheless, he fully accepted this path, trusting that there was no other way.

Wandering was probably the biggest wager of his life, leading him to unknown avenues and new discoveries. Could Abhishiktananda's acceptance of wandering be the reason that he, rather than Jules Monchanin, has provoked such a growing interest among today's theologians and specialists of interreligious dialogue? Prior to his death, the priest from Lyons, a great intellectual, had said of his companion, whose journey he hardly comprehended: "Abhishiktananda went further than I; I have, for my part, been much too Greek."¹⁰ It is fair to say that Abhishiktananda was moved—more than his elder—by a profound desire to embrace the mystery of God in his whole being. This desire manifested itself in his limitless disposition to listen and receive otherness in the depths of himself—in this case, the Hindu and the essence of the Hindu tradition—and also to be received by the other in the same manner. The former disposition does not go without the latter; he would have not known how to receive without having first been received.¹¹ This is why Abhishiktananda continually encourages Westerners travelling to India to live with Hindus and not solely with the people of their own ethnic group. Otherwise, why make the journey?¹² He is regarded as one who went the furthest in the practice of what Pierre de Béhune, following Louis Massignon, calls "sacred hospitality."¹³ His way to cope with wandering was deeply rooted in hospitality. He understood himself from this irresistible call to be received into the heart of Hinduism, which he links to the experience of non-duality (*advaita*) and describes as the jewel of India.

However, the *ātman*—to which this experience of non-duality awakens us—cannot be attained through exegesis or by the intellect, as the Katha Upanishad reminds us.¹⁴ It demands a complete commitment on our part. As an interreligious path, hospitality belongs to the realm of experience and faith and includes risks, as the life of Abhishiktananda amply demonstrates! Moreover, the one who can attain the experience of non-duality, continues the Upanishad, is elected by the *ātman*.¹⁵ There can be no doubt that Abhishiktananda felt compelled to walk the narrow path that led to an experience beyond all experience. This compulsion, he said, rises

in the heart of those whom the Self has chosen (Katha Upanishad), this implacable experience of the Presence who, for centuries and millennia, attracted so many of India's children into the most cosmic vocation imaginable: wandering along roads, from village to village, paying no attention whatsoever to the things of this earth, hardly uttering a word except at times in order to recall to those whom they meet the secret of the profoundest depth and, at noon, begging a handful of rice from the houses they happened to be passing by—or hidden in the forest solitudes or in the mountain caves, their gaze fixed on inwardness, witnesses of Being!¹⁶

Let us recall that for Abhishiktananda, wandering was both spiritual and interreligious; it was imposed on him from within and the result of the welcome he gave *advaita*, which he believed was at the very heart of the Hindu tradition.

3. *Between Question and Stripping Away*

Wandering took two major, interlocking forms in Abhishiktananda's life; we can distinguish but hardly separate them.

Firstly, wandering took the form of a question or doubt. Abhishik-

tananda went so far in the advaitic experience that he attained a point of no-return, crossing the limit beyond which rest was no longer possible. Hence, he experienced a vivid internal tension that prevented him from fully feeling at home in one or the other tradition: "From now on I have tasted too much of *advaita* to be able to recover the 'Gregorian' peace of a Christian monk. Long ago I tasted too much of that 'Gregorian' peace not to be anguished in the midst of my *advaita*."¹⁷ His "religious double belonging" projected him into a kind of no man's land where he had nowhere to lay his head. Moreover, he was overwhelmed by a sensation of anguish, for he was not sure that he was on the right path. The tension sometimes became unbearable: "Kyrie eleison (Lord, have mercy), save me, under whatever name you are pleased to draw near to me," he cried, "O You who gnaw at me from the depth of the heart, You beyond every name!"¹⁸ At times, his suffering was so intense that he would have considered it a grace to be taken from this life. The stakes were huge, for they involved nothing less than his salvation: "Supposing in *advaita* I was only finding myself and not God?"¹⁹

Secondly, wandering involved an on-going stripping away. Continually to discard one's false identities implies a new departure, an exit out of one's self, out of the routines and certainties in which one is tempted to take refuge. Abhishikatananda liked to say there is no place for oneself—that is, one's own will and desires—and for God at the same time. To be called to strip oneself of oneself is an invitation to an endless journey into the abyss of the Self. Abhishikatananda testified to this when he wrote:

And it seems to me that at the bottom of my soul I heard the call to the kind of total stripping away that kept the young Ramana immobile in the caves of Arunāchala, or that, two centuries earlier, had propelled

Sadasiiva Brahman to wander endlessly along the shores of the Kaveri, as naked and mute as he was in the womb of his mother, the call to the complete stripping away that is the call to complete liberation, because one is only free when one has nothing, absolutely nothing that he can call his own.²⁰

But solitude offers no escape from anguish:

The weight of solitude is heavy. The weight of oneself is even heavier—the vision and terror of one's stagnant mediocrity! And the peace one invokes is so often transformed into anguish. . . . At the last stages of his long itinerary, there arises in him (the contemplative one), the harrowing call of Saint John of the Cross descending to the deepest center of the soul: "Tear through the veil of this sweet encounter." (*The Living Flame of Love*, I, 6)²¹

Wandering as stripping away and wandering as question are linked to each other and condition one another. Wandering as stripping away leads to wandering as doubt, as can be seen in Abhishikatananda's description of what happened to him one Sunday morning as he was preparing to celebrate Mass. He discovered that his portable altar stone was broken. Now the rubrics of the Roman rite forbade one to celebrate without an altar stone. He saw the broken altar stone as a sign, but he was unsure how to interpret it: "Was it an invitation, he wondered, to renounce once and for all externals of the Church? Or was it a warning that he was treading a dangerous path?"²²

Wandering as question, on the other hand, called Abhishikatananda to wandering as stripping away. His anguish and his ques-

toning, which were both rooted in his effort to reconcile his advaitic experience and his relationship to Christ, led him to a deeper awareness of the divine mystery that, from the bottom of the heart, was calling him to more renunciation. The irony is that it was this complete stripping away that ultimately, at the end of his life, removed all doubt, as well as any worry about whether or not he was on the right path. Wandering, then, gradually gave birth to inner stability and serenity, a paradox that we shall come back to. First, however, I want to consider the doors through which Abhishiktananda entered this path of wandering and stripping away:

4. Access to the *Heart of Hinduism*

Abhishiktananda entered the path of wandering and stripping away by penetrating the heart of Hinduism. He entered this heart through means of persons, places, events, sacred books, and by the life of a renunciant (*sannyāsi*).

There were at least four individuals who made it easier for Abhishiktananda to access the jewel of India, by virtue of the fact that they themselves were carriers of this jewel. First, there was Ramana Maharshi, who abandoned everything when, as a youth, he experienced a spiritual awakening. He was the first Hindu to have a major impact on Abhishiktananda. Abhishiktananda was predisposed to accept this impact—so much so that he expected to be transformed on the occasion of his first contact with the sage of Arunāchala. It was only at their next meeting that Abhishiktananda understood the necessity of total openness and thus discovered the power of Ramana Maharshi's presence—so much so, that he wished from that time forward to become a "Christian Ramana."²³

Among the Hindus, we should also mention Harilāl, Ramanā's disciple, who introduced himself to Abhishiktananda in a somewhat enigmatic fashion, referring to a kind of spiritual call or mission to jus-

tify his presence.²⁴ He invited Abhishiktananda to even greater stripping away and renunciation, to go beyond both Hindu and Christian myths in order to allow himself to go forward in the divine presence:

You lack only one thing... Free yourself from the last bonds that hinder you. You are ready.

Enough of your prayers, your rituals, your ruminations on this and

that. Realize that *you are Tat tvam asi*. You are that.

You say that you are a Christian. At your stage of life, this makes no sense.²⁵

However, it was in and through the form of Swami Gnānānanda that Abhishiktananda was invited to enter further into the heart of Hinduism. In spite of the fact that Gnānānanda's teaching was similar to Ramana's, Abhishiktananda's relationship with the two of them was quite different. He recognized Gnānānanda as his guru and it was with him that he discovered what it really meant to be a disciple in the Indian way. For the first time—and he himself was surprised by this—he did not feel any reluctance to prostrate himself before another person known for his spiritual qualities. He experienced the true intimacy and total trust that is the basis of the guru–disciple relationship. He felt connected, soul to soul (*communion dāms*), with the Swami: "When he speaks to you," says Abhishiktananda, "it is as if what he says was coming out of your own heart."²⁶

Abhishiktananda very soon felt the desire to live near the sage, and went so far as to say that Christ was present through him.²⁷ He was willing to answer all the demands the master made of him.²⁸ Gnānānanda actually encouraged him to enter more deeply into the abyss of the heart, in the silence of the Spirit, and in order to do so, he asked him to devote himself exclusively to *dhyāna*, which consists in an interior dwelling in the divine Presence (*se recueillir au plus profond*

de soi).²⁹ As Harilāl did earlier, Gṇānānanda invited Abhishikṭtananda to more radical simplicity, keeping only what was essential. As soon as the call from one's own depth is heard, one must plunge into the abyss without worrying anymore about rites, prayers, or any ascetical efforts.³⁰ If Harilāl's invitation gave Abhishikṭtananda a new awareness (*prise de conscience*) of the necessity of letting go, Gṇānānanda's led Abhishikṭtananda to put this awareness into practice. He invited Abhishikṭtananda to make a long retreat in silence, and therefore led him to more wandering and more renunciation. The guru encouraged him to go into exile from all familiar environments and make the absence of every location his true home,³¹ promising him the end of his existential contradictions and anguish.³²

It was finally through another European, a Frenchman like himself, that Abhishikṭtananda discovered another aspect of the advaitic experience, that is, spiritual fatherhood. According to Hindu tradition, the experience of non-duality is often passed on from master to disciple, and that is what came to pass in Abhishikṭtananda's relationship with Marc Chaduc (Ajātananda). Their meeting drove them both to more wandering. Marc's wandering began after Abhishikṭtananda gave him the initiation of *sannyāsa*, by which he freed him from his disciple condition. That initiation was, for Marc, the beginning of a journey from which he has never returned. Abhishikṭtananda's wandering, on the other hand, was interior and was intensified by Marc's arrival in his life, which had the effect of confusing some of his certainties and deepening his conviction of the truth of the Upanishads. In Marc, Abhishikṭtananda found a "truly total disciple,"³³ and with him he knew what it meant to be a guru the same way that he knew what it meant to be a disciple in his relationship to Gṇānānanda.

In November 1971, as Marc and Abhishikṭtananda were walking besides the Ganges on the way to Phulchatti, there occurred the

"irruption of the mystery of Being between—at the heart of—us two. . . ."³⁴ From that time on, they lived the guru-disciple relationship in its deepest sense, and the disciple became, unknowingly, the teacher of the master. Abhishikṭtananda realized he did not really know what the poverty of *sannyāsa* meant until his guru-disciple relationship to Marc bore fruit.³⁵ He now understood—not without suffering—that the renunciant has no location (*loka*) wherein he can rest or cling, not even the location that takes the form of human relationship.³⁶ His relation to Marc led him to enter more deeply into the experience of being an alien, a stranger,³⁷ and to more stripping away, even to the point of affecting his physical health.³⁸ The moment of Marc's initiation became for Abhishikṭtananda the space where all boundaries burst from within. In her introduction to *Initiation à la spiritualité des Upanishads*, Odette Baumer-Despeygne reports:

Some days later Abhishikṭtananda will write to the new "Swami" a long Poem in which there is a verse: "It was too beautiful this morning of June 30th . . . Your *diksha* made me shudder to the very bottom of my being; tearing me from myself, losing me in the infinite spaces where I know nothing more, where I try to find myself in vain! "OM!"³⁹

Among the places that had this effect on him was the mountain Arunāchala, a powerful symbol of the God Śiva.⁴⁰ Abhishikṭtananda felt mysteriously attracted to the sacred mountain. He made several retreats there, living as a hermit in some of its caves. By then, the desire to emerge into silence and solitude was growing. The following remarks of Jacques Dupuis are illuminating:

The holy mountain calls him unceasingly; there where the Absolute is discovered at the bottom of the heart. His true place of dwell-

ing is there: here (in Shantivanam) he feels confined. Neither an outside adaptation of forms of life and liturgy, not even theological discourse or dialogue at the level of concepts, will allow the true encounter of Christianity and Hinduism. It is necessary to go forward, combining in oneself the two experiences, in order that from their clash a more profound light may shine forth. Such is the task of the Hindu-Christian monk. There can be little doubt that the Hindu experience imposes radical demands on the Christian monk. These demands go in two directions, but they are inseparable. In the first place, as a prerequisite of any genuine spiritual realization, there must be absolute and complete renunciation, the kind of genuine asceticism that in Christianity has not been equaled since the days of the desert fathers. The Hindu monk is essentially a wanderer. Then—and above all—there is the demand for the complete emptiness of self that alone allows for the true awakening to the Absolute. It is to this emptiness and to this awakening that the Hindu wisdom draws him.⁴¹

These words help understand the decision of Abhishiktananda to leave the ashram of Shantivanam, which failed in its mission to attract the hoped-for vocations from the people of India.⁴² So, after the death of Monchanin in 1957, Abhishiktananda lived mostly as a hermit, but he also went on long pilgrimages to the Himalayas, where he finally decided to settle in 1968, after making arrangements with Father Bede Griffiths to take over the direction of Shantivanam.

In addition to persons and places, events also predisposed him—not without a certain brutality—to more stripping away. To beg is not an easy thing to do for a Westerner like Abhishiktananda. But providence, he said, helped him, coming in the form of a thief who robbed him of his savings, thereby encouraging him to ask for charity and thus strip himself even more.⁴³ Was it not this same providence that,

towards the end of his life, predisposed him to suffer a cardiac crisis, by making him forget his bag on the bus, thus causing him to run after it? It was this heart attack, after all, which proved to be the way to his final awakening.⁴⁴

Sacred texts, mainly the Upanishads, where the mysteries of *atman* are exposed, were also the means by which Abhishiktananda was received into the heart of Hinduism. According to Marc Chaduc:

In the life of Swami Abhishiktananda, the Upanishads had a central place. His spiritual path essentially consisted in the complete appropriation of the advaitic experience of the Upanishadic rishis, without however losing hold of his own rootedness in the Christian tradition. He made the Upanishads his own, and whenever he happened to comment on them, it was always with a reverent enthusiasm and in order to bring out the radiance of their marvellous intuition.⁴⁵

His spiritual itinerary was so linked to these texts that, following his awakening, Abhishiktananda, without any false humility, wrote: "The experience of the Upanishads is true, *I know it!*"⁴⁶ However, such a discovery has a price. It leads to stripping away and dying to oneself. In reference to his retreat with Marc in Phulchatti, Abhishiktananda wrote: "It is fantastic, this Light (*gyoti*), which empties, annihilates, fulfills you; and how true the Upanishads are! But to discover them is a mortal blow, because you only discover them in yourself, on the other side of death!"⁴⁷

At last, and maybe principally, Abhishiktananda was warmly received by India through his adoption of the way of the *sannyāsa*, the way of renunciation. It is on this point that I would like to dwell briefly:

5. *The Way of the Saṃnyāsa: End or Means?*

The way of the renunciant has meaning only when centered on the experience that is beyond experience, that of non-duality (*advaita*). Hence, the life of solitude and wandering can be approached in two manners, as a “preparation for” and a “consequence of” this experience. Abhishiktananda spoke of this distinction when he wrote:

This is that original saṃnyāsa without the name, which was described in Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad: “Once a man has come to know Him (the great unborn ātman), he becomes a *muni*. Desiring him alone as their *loka*, the wandering monks begin to roam. The men of old knew it well, and then they had no wish for offspring. ‘What should we do with offspring, since we possess the ātman as this *loka*?’ Rising above the desire for sons, the desire for riches, the desire for lokas, they wander forth and live by begging” (4.4.22).

The other kind of saṃnyāsa (*vividhā-saṃnyāsa*) is taken by a man in order to get *jñāna* (wisdom) and *mokṣa* (liberation)... *Saṃnyāsa*, when genuinely lived with all its implications, is certainly a man’s most direct route for becoming a *jñāni* and finding liberation. Even then it is clear that no one would ever take saṃnyāsa unless he had already glimpsed the light in his own depths and heard the call within.⁴⁸

The distinction between the “*saṃnyāsa* as a means” and the “*saṃnyāsa* as an end” in itself is obvious, even if, in practice, the two do not appear all that different. The actual basis of the distinction is the master’s appreciation of the spiritual progress of his disciple:

Saṃnyāsa can only be given . . . when the guru feels confident that the disciple has really *seen*, is *evamvidān*, and possesses the physical, mental and spiritual strength to remain faithful under any circumstances to the fundamental demands of the ascetic life. Normally he

should have given proof of his quality, not only in his life in the guru’s company (*antevāsin*) but also in solitude and wandering (*parivṛāya*); and even more, in the case of a westerner, in the persevering practice of the ascetic life in the midst of a world which rejects such ascosimism. It is also understood that his *dikṣā* will involve for him the actual departure for a period of wandering and *bhikṣatāya* (living on alms), which should last as long as possible.⁴⁹

In what way is the life of the wandering monk the means of becoming aware of the divine within one’s self (*ātman*)? Everything starts from the principle, mentioned above, that there cannot be a place for me and for God at the same time. To bring me closer to God means to dispossess me of myself. Thus, wandering is a preparatory path, conducive to going beyond oneself, to opening the space inside, so that the clarity of the *ātman* shines without obstruction or blockage.

What happened before the initiation of Marc Chaduc can be understood in this sense of preparation. A little before the *dikṣā*, which requires that the one initiated immediately begin a life of wandering and begging, Abhishiktananda and Marc left for some days of wandering. It was a way for the future Swami to acquire a preliminary experience of this way of life.⁵⁰ We should remember that wandering as an element of *saṃnyāsa* can only be understood as an answer to a deep call from within. For the *saṃnyāsi*, wandering deepens an experience already had and lived; it now becomes the required and most direct way to liberation.⁵¹ When wandering takes the form of pilgrimage, it becomes the framework wherein an experience of God can be deepened. In this case, wandering expresses neither bewilderment nor confusion. Rather, it is an expression of a quest where each step invites one to more interiority, to greater letting go, and in so doing brings one closer to the goal. It is from this perspective that we can understand the pilgrimages of Abhishiktananda to the source of the Ganges.

Wandering as preparation stresses effort and search. *Samnyāsa* as an “end in itself” does away with the question of purpose or of an experience to be deepened. The quest stops! An overpowering light alone remains. Abhishiktananda gives an account of this understanding of *samnyāsa* in the following terms:

According to the Law of Manu and subsequent tradition, *samnyāsi* should only be taken late in life, when a man has fulfilled his duty to the devas by prayers and ritual offerings and to the ancestors by begetting children, and when he has a grown-up son who is himself a parent and capable of taking his place in fulfilling the duties of man’s estate. However, it may happen that the light of self-realization begins to shine so brightly in a man’s heart that it can no longer be resisted; then, no matter what his age, his calling or his responsibilities in society may be, he has no alternative but to leave his home and become a solitary wanderer, far from the cities of men (Jābala Up., 4.1). As Shankara explains in his commentary on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Up., 1.4, that knowledge puts an end to all activity; no *karma* is compatible with it.³³

Samnyāsa here marks not the entrance to the path, but in some way its accomplishment: “The very day on which he finds himself to be free from all inner attachment, that is the day on which he should go forth and roam” (*Nārada-parivṛāja* Up., 3.77).³⁴

If we can speak of “accomplishment” here, it does not consist in achieving anything in particular, reaching a status or joining a caste or an elite. Nothing of the kind! On the contrary, it adds nothing. All that remains is vulnerability or divesting. There is actually neither path nor accomplishment. Renunciation must be total! Thus, it might be more correct to speak of non-accomplishment. *Samnyāsa* is not another style of life, nor is it a preparation for anything. It brings nothing. All

it does is recognize publicly and for oneself what is already there.³⁴ It is a state beyond all states and a way beyond all ways of life. According to Swami Gṛānānanda, here *dhyāna* alone counts.³⁵ As Abhishiktananda put it, *samnyāsa* in its highest state is seeing the Grail in all places and in all things; it is recognizing that awakening is neither affected by life nor death. If from outside we give the impression of perpetual wandering, from inside *samnyāsa* is about a life of eternity both in the now and beyond time.

Consequently, *samnyāsa* is the absence of quest, the end of exile, the end of searching for a home. According to Jacques Berton, the spiritual director of Madame Guyon, a seventeenth-century French mystic, it is even the complete absence of home (*chez soi*). The following words of Jacques Berton could well be a commentary on the life and message of Abhishiktananda:

In the state of simplicity, there is no more home. The soul has no more interior, because it is no longer withdrawn, collected, gathered and concentrated within itself; rather, it exists and is to be found outside, in great bareness and poverty of spirit.³⁶

Or, as Marie-Madeleine Davy said about Abhishiktananda:

The phenomenal world withdrew and took with it the traces of earthly exile. But in the face of this nothingness, there is a Presence: that of the Absolute. As soon as they were pulled out of the world of manifestation, the roots began to draw their sap from the celestial realm.³⁷

Once again renunciation must be total! Thus, the *samnyāsi* detaches himself from everything—his property, family, country, his name, and even, as was the case of Marc Chaduc, from the central reference

of the church, which is the Eucharist. James Stuart reports that the *dikṣā* of Marc ended with the celebration of the Eucharist, and afterwards the cup and the stone that served as the altar were thrown in the Ganges to signify that true *sannyāsa* marks the end of all signs.⁵⁸

II. EXILE/WANDERING AS A COMMON GROUND FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Having thus examined some elements that show the central place of exile and especially wandering in the life of Abhishikānanda, we can now briefly look at the way these themes can benefit interreligious dialogue. By way of introduction, we can say that wandering and dialogue are closely related: exile/wandering facilitates dialogue, and dialogue invites exile/wandering. Their interaction, then, takes the form of a spiral movement and plays a crucial role in the present-day emergence of a global consciousness.

1. *Exile/Wandering Facilitates Dialogue*

The itinerary of Abhishikānanda shows how much exile/wandering facilitates dialogue. What it requires, first of all, is listening to the other with the will to understand the other from within. The more the wanderer allows himself to leave behind familiar landmarks in order to be received in the heart of the other, the more he realizes the distance that separates him from his host, and the less he is inclined to impose his vision of the world and the religious structure that he had wanted to share with them. Thus, Abhishikānanda was more inclined to enter a deep dialogue with Hindus without any concern about the effectiveness and expansion of Christianity in India.

The expression "to go out in dialogue" ("*sortir en dialogue*") of Pierre de Béhune,⁵⁹ who prefers it to "entering into dialogue,"

expresses the conviction that there can be no true meeting without distancing oneself from one's own certitudes, without making an effort to open one's mind to other ways of thinking, without being willing to acknowledge that one's own convictions might not be the only expression of what is true.⁶⁰ Wandering facilitates dialogue in the sense that it evicts us from our situation of self-sufficiency and places us in a position where we have no choice but to acknowledge that we are in need of the other. Was not this the kind of life Abhishikānanda experienced—with a certain amount of difficulty, it is true—when the life of an itinerant monk made it necessary for him to go begging?

Wandering reveals our dependency on others and thus pushes us to more humility. For that reason, it becomes the privileged space for a dialogue where Christians and other believers alike are all pilgrims, called to mutual understanding on their journey into the divine mystery that both unites and differentiates them. On this journey, no one pretends to have a monopoly on the truth. Here the spiritual depth of a relationship to the other is revealed. Here we can find an alternative to a fundamentalist approach that is growing in various environments today and that refuses exile and wandering, preferring conquest and entrenchment. The itinerary of Abhishikānanda offers precious and beneficial lessons for the world today.

In dialogue with Hindus, exile/wandering offers a way for Christians to be understood by their partners. Dialogue is based on the right to self-understanding. All partners in dialogue have the right to be understood as they understand themselves. However, to be understood by the other as I understand myself requires that I speak a language the other can understand. Hence the importance of learning the other's language before I begin to speak—learning not only the mother tongue, but also the culture, faith, and beliefs of the other. Thus, Abhishikānanda strove to know the world of his Hindu partners and to enter into it as best he could.

This is the logic of "sacred hospitality," which for this Benedictine monk consisted in becoming a *sannyāsi*, a renunciant itinerant monk. For him, *sannyāsi* was India's royal way towards the experience of non-duality. By embodying this Indian way of renunciation, Abhishiktananda allowed Hindus to recognize themselves in his own way of life and consequently to be open to his Christian faith. He was convinced that it was in the experience of *advaita*, an experience requiring total self-divesting, and through true and deep dialogue that the Christ and Trinitarian love could be revealed in this new time and place.⁶¹

2. *Dialogue Invites Exile/Wandering*

Looked at from another perspective, it is also true to say that dialogue invites wandering. If in dialogue with Hinduism Abhishiktananda had every reason to believe that India was waiting for the church to enter her heart, then it was also true that the church was called to give more consideration to the acosmic being, to rediscover the relevance of the anchorite, whose vocation is to a life of silence and solitude. For Abhishiktananda there are parallels between the way of the Indian renunciant and the Gospel:

The wandering *sannyāsi* of India is truly very close to the evangelical wanderer. If we take seriously "the directive that Jesus gave to his Apostles" when he sent them to preach the Kingdom—"nothing less than "sell everything you have; be like the birds of the sky and keep nothing for the following day; leave field, home, and family; take nothing for the road, not even a pouch, or bread, or silver, or two tunics, and eat whatever is served you."⁶²

Abhishiktananda recognized that in the Western world, where even religious institutions were being corroded by secularism and

activism, the way of the *sannyāsi* was badly understood, if it was understood at all. A veritable revolution would have to take place if the value of wandering and renunciation was to be appreciated as a spiritual path:

The spirit of secular activism corrodes everything. So in the West monks and clergy seek to establish their status in society and ask for a social recognition which is purely secular in character. In the flood of secularism which is sweeping away all the adventurous sacredness with which their calling was overlaid (cp. *adhyāsa*) in previous ages they lose the sense of their real identity. Thus they forget that their primary function is to be the witnesses in the midst of society to what is truly sacred—that which is beyond all forms and definitions. They merely replace the forms of a false sacredness with secular forms which are no less alienating, instead of plunging directly into the infinite—though this is what is imperatively demanded at this turning-point of history.⁶³

But no changes would arise, Abhishiktananda warned, if the church imposed her positions *a priori* and prevented providence from acting freely. His own life and example was an invitation to the church to become more of a wanderer, not in order to disavow her faith, but to show more vulnerability and humility. Abhishiktananda believed that by so doing, the church had everything to gain. Her encounter with India was not accidental; it was the place where the church was being called to find her fullness. In these circumstances, Christian monasticism—given its obvious and specific call to contemplation—must play a central role.⁶⁴

This does not, of course, mean that acosmicism is the spiritual ideal toward which every Christian must strive. Abhishiktananda was well aware that this particular way was suitable for only a very few.

Nonetheless, all Christians today need to be aware of the relevance of this way. The crucial role of the acosmic way consists of allowing an opening or a breach to remain in the church's structure in order to prevent any kind of absolutism. Those who feel called to a life of wandering and renunciation do not become part of a particular caste or order; rather they embody the state *par excellence*, where God mocks any form or any pretention to speak in his name.

The future of the church lies precisely in her incompleteness, in the empty space where Christians reconnect with the outpouring of the Spirit of the first times and therefore refuse to absolutize any forms, images, formulas, or ideas whatever they may be: "Why do we always confuse the true supernatural with our current 'idea' of the supernatural, with what we construct?"⁶⁵ Already in early Christianity, Gregory of Nyssa said that concepts create idols of God, only astonishment seizes something.⁶⁶ Wandering creates a space that makes astonishment possible once again; it revives the sense of the mystery of God. By doing so, it demolishes alienating certainties and with them tendencies to ritualism, activism, and absolutism. Wandering offers Christians the freedom and space to rediscover the deeper meaning for their own life of the rites, sacraments, doctrines, and ethic of the church.

"The world is dying from lack of depth, of roots,"⁶⁷ Abhishiktananda lamented. Christians are called to rediscover the dimension of depth, to rediscover the Grail, the symbol of this experience beyond all experience, and to do this while being open to religious otherness. Once again, everything depends on the church's capacity to answer the call to exile and wandering. In a pluralist world, inner or intrareligious dialogue invites Christians to vulnerability and stripping away to go out of themselves, to get rid of false identities, to go, as I have suggested elsewhere, into the "desert of the otherness":

Exile and Wandering

As is the case with the desert, relational space is space we travel through; we do not stay there. The desert is not a place to set up a permanent encampment, because there is no place to lay one's head. The desert is a place of passage, of wandering, or even of exile where love is accompanied by the anguish rooted in our ultimate incompleteness, which, however, reveals our true nature.⁶⁸

In spite of the suffering and discomfort they bring, exile and wandering can offer the space for creative encounters that will benefit a pluralistic humanity in search of new coherence. Abhishiktananda's life and message invite the church to consider such avenues. Today, interreligious dialogue is vital and necessary, not only because it contributes to the emergence of a global consciousness, but also because, by doing so, it extracts from the ordeal induced by exile and wandering the spiritual density conducive to a heart-to-heart exchange, coupled with the disposition to rediscover the core of our respective religious traditions.

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