

The Encounter of Religious Experience

I can only give you my experience from a monastic context. I have been a monk for about 40 years and 20 years ago I had the wonderful opportunity of spending a year in India, in Christian, Hindu & Buddhist places. This was an invigorating experience, suddenly extending my horizons; I found myself in a country which was thoroughly spiritual, such a change from living in so-called Christian Europe where spiritual things are not publicly acknowledged. I have also experienced, as perhaps you have, gradually awakening to the reality that all men & women are my brothers and sisters. Bit by bit the limits of my awareness of universality have been extended, from the narrow family and the school of childhood and adolescence, and from the limited universality of the church too. Travel, discovering new languages and cultures, have helped me realize that the German student at university, the Tibetan monk in his monastery, the Indian villager are all in the first place human like me. Moreover, as shadows of growing doubt have risen up within me as years went by, ultimately mingling peacefully with faith, I have drawn much consolation from this awareness.

Another big influence has been taking part in meetings with Buddhist and other monks and nuns, in 1993 at the *Faith in Awakening* meeting in Amaravati Buddhist monastery in Hertfordshire, and in 2004 at *Transforming the Heart* at the Mirfield community, Yorkshire. These have been times of profound spiritual sharing with those following a similar monastic path in other religions. Since 1979 there have also been exchanges with Japanese Zen monks and nuns who have visited monasteries in Europe, receiving Christian monks and nuns in their monasteries in exchange. We discover in these exchanges that our monastic path is something which appears in all religions and that our ways in each have great parallels.

I would like to tell you of three figures who have helped me experience something of the depth of other paths. The first of these is Henri Le Saux, the French monk who arrived in India in 1948 and took the name of Abhishiktananda (the Bliss of Christ). His spiritual journal, published recently under the title *Ascent to the Depths of the Heart*, describes how, after meeting the great saint Ramana Maharishi, he struggled to reconcile the Hindu experience of the unity of all things in God (*Advaita* or non-duality) with the Christian experience of the holy Trinity. What stands out for me is his courage and boldness in facing Truth as he found it, but also his great fidelity to Christ and his humility. Doubting his Christian belonging as he felt driven into the Hindu experience he nevertheless clung to Christ in darkness and anguish to the end of his days. His faithful perseverance towards the Truth has been for me a big encouragement to stay on this interreligious path.

Another spiritual stay has been Raimon Panikkar, Catalan-Indian priest and theologian. His book *Blessed Simplicity* describes the monk in us all - the "monastic archetype" of every human which cries out for some kind of fulfilment, naturally not for most in an institutional way in a monastery. Similarly, the paternal/maternal archetype needs to be lived by all, even if all are not biological parents. His recent work *Christophany* works from the *experience* of Christ rather than attempting a theological reflection on Christ. Again, here is a man whose courage in the pursuit of Truth still enables him to remain faithful to the Christian tradition in all its depth.

Lastly, I have been touched by Christian de Chergé, the trappist monk of Tibhirine, Algeria, murdered with his six brethren in 1997, martyred for love of the Muslims they refused to leave. Christian's faith was, he said, liberated by a Muslim friend who defended him against Muslim aggressors, and was killed for it. Thus Christian learned to see the Word of God in his Muslim friend, and to understand how Eucharist means accepting the other. His friend's giving his life for him was, like Christ's, eucharistic and the Eucharist is the mystery of all humanity not just of Christians.

For Christian de Chergé, dialogue is less an activity than an attitude, an interior path, a spiritual direction, having to do to do not with our differences but with the bonds which unite us spiritually. It takes us out of our security, it leads us to shed our certainties in order to let Christ take over, opening us up to the truth beyond our simple comprehension of it. There is a sense in which I need to lose Christ in order to find him. It is an attitude in which all the undreamt of possibilities can break out in front of me. It is primarily a matter of opening up our heart. If St Therèse could be patron of missions from within her convent, we can enter into the way of dialogue without even meeting a Buddhist or a Muslim or a Sikh. Above all, he said, dialogue requires us to be humble, to guard our personal authenticity, and to have such faith in the other whom we meet that we can be prepared to put ourselves under his or her tutelage of faith without question.

We all need support and encouragement, perhaps nowhere more than in the path of interreligious dialogue. I have been fortunate to meet good Christian friends on the way who have enabled me to stay on the path despite the many discouragements and doubts. May you have such friends of the heart as well to confirm you in your own inner experience.

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