

# TWO-EYED DIALOGUE

## Reflections after Fifty Years

*George Gispert-Sauch*

FIFTY YEARS AGO, MY JESUIT SUPERIOR in Mumbai (Bombay) asked me to enrol in the University for a Master's degree in Sanskrit. His intention was that I should prepare myself for a ministry of intercultural dialogue, to be carried out by a team of Jesuits. Dialogue was not yet a popular word, or at least not a theological word. It was in the time of Pius XII, ten years before Vatican II began, and twelve before Paul VI's *Ecclesiam suam*.

### *Early Moves Towards Dialogue*

The Holy Spirit, however, had for a long time been preparing a new era for a Church conditioned to defensive attitudes by the nineteenth century *Syllabus of Errors*, and by the anti-modernist crusade a few decades later. Even at the zenith of the colonial enterprise, the meeting of civilizations and religions had given birth to a new attitude towards other cultures among some Christian individuals and small groups.<sup>1</sup> In India, at the end of the nineteenth century, a Bengali brahmin converted to Catholicism and proclaimed himself 'a Hindu by birth and culture, a Catholic by rebirth and faith'. His name was Brahmabandhab Upadhyay.<sup>2</sup> This was not altogether an original idea: it had been formulated a couple of decades earlier by his own uncle, the Rev. Kali Charan Banerjee, himself a convert to the Anglican Church.

Upadhyay died prematurely as a prisoner, charged with sedition by the British Government in Kolkata (Calcutta). Two years before his death, St Mary's Theological College in Kuresong, ancestor of what is now the Vidyajyoti Faculty in Delhi, started an 'Indian Academy'. Its work would be 'the adaptation of our Philosophy and Theology . . . to

<sup>1</sup> See Paul Hedges, *Preparation and Fulfilment* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), with its particularly significant subtitle, 'A History and Study of Fulfilment Theology in Modern British Thought in the Indian Context'.

<sup>2</sup> See Julius Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay* (Delhi: OUP 1999).

the special needs and conditions of India'. Among the areas of study would be 'the creeds of non-Christians of the Indian Empire, Animists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Moslems, Parsees and Sikhs—from a Catholic point of view'.<sup>3</sup> The Academy functioned for half a century and made a real contribution towards preparing a spirit of openness to the religious traditions of India, even though caveats about prudence and orthodoxy frequently recurred in its history. Again in the 1920s an adventurous group of Belgian Jesuits started a journal of dialogue, *The Light of the East* (1922-1946), which did much to prepare the seminarians and clergy of India for dialogue with other religions.

Consequently, the new orientations of Vatican II did not, in general, cause trauma or surprise in India. They were not even seen as a radical change of direction, but as the official confirmation of what the Indian Church had to an extent been living and advocating for some years. *The Light of the East* was clearly a 'missionary' undertaking—the Light is Christ, it affirmed unambiguously in its opening issue. At the same time, it was respectful and non-polemical. It presented other religions as inspired. In the same issue it affirmed:

From this dispensation (of the supernatural revelation of the Word of God) the East has not been excluded: rather it received it abundantly. The East has lights already: religious, philosophical, moral. We have no intention to put out these lights. Rather we shall use them to guide both ourselves and our readers on the path that leads to the fullness of the Light. We shall try to show that the best thought of the East is but a bud that, fully expanded, blossoms into Christian thought. (p. 2)

This Belgian Jesuit enterprise echoed the kind of fulfilment theology that had been developed by British theologians, notably by the Scottish missionary J.N. Farquhar, in *The Crown of Hinduism*, first published in 1913. It was an unashamedly inclusivist position, to use a modern category. Few theologians would today use the same language. But it was meant to be, and was, open, dialogical, even humble, while firmly holding on to the eschatological convictions of the Christian faith tradition.

<sup>3</sup> From an explanatory leaflet, 1939.

### *Entering the World of Hinduism*

It was as a member of this Indian Church that I entered the classrooms of the Department of Sanskrit at St Xavier's College, Mumbai, six years after my first arrival in India from Spain, and fresh from a three-year course in scholastic philosophy that I had done in South India. All my classmates were Hindus. Most were young women from well established families waiting for their marriages to be arranged, and interested in the study of their national and regional cultures. The teachers also were Hindus, with the exception of the head of Department, a middle-aged Spanish Jesuit trained in Germany, a polymath if ever there was one. He was completely fascinated by his research into the text of the Rigveda and the Mahabharata.

The study course which I followed for four years at St Xavier's and subsequently in the federal University was fascinating. It introduced me to the intricacies of Vedic and classical Sanskrit. I learnt about different sorts of logic, and the profound metaphysical and theological speculation in the Upanishads and various schools of Vedanta. I discovered Indian drama, ornate poetry, erotic manuals, texts of literary criticism, legal and political literature including the now notorious Manu Smriti, and the religious texts of the epics (a prominent place being given to the Bhagavad Gita). I also encountered the liturgical speculations contained in the Brahmanas, as well as the earliest religious hymns found in the Vedas, sung in India long before Abraham migrated from Ur of the Chaldeans.

These studies in ancient Indian literature, art and culture opened up a new world to me. I knew that I was, and would always be, an outsider in this world; I would never be a full participant. Academically I fared reasonably well, but culturally I was different. It would take a life-long effort of dialogue with Indian Jesuit colleagues and with members of the Hindu community to let this world make an impact on me and begin to transform me.

The texts studied in class offered me glimpses of an ancient culture. Much more exciting, however, was the discovery of that same culture lived as a spirituality by my fellow students and professors in the commercial city of Mumbai. I would like here to pay a special tribute to the memory of Professor G. C. Jhala (1907-1972), for many years a faithful teacher in the Jesuit-run university college. In him I saw alive the spirituality of the *sthitaprajna*, the person of steady wisdom, so well outlined at the end of the second chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*: one who renounces all desires that prey upon the mind, contented in

the Self and by the Self; who is above sorrows, pleasure or pain; who is concentrated, with the senses withdrawn; who is above greed, anger, ambition or fear; a person of uprightness and truthfulness.

Professor Jhala modelled this ideal. He was always at the service of the students, of the college and of many worthy institutions and movements in the city. He was faithful year after year to his duties as teacher in an institution where there was virtually no chance of promotion. Quite evidently, the foundation of his integrity and of his serene service was the spiritual outlook of the Vedanta which he taught with conviction and clarity of thought: the awareness that ultimately only Brahman, the Source, or Atman, the Ground of Being, is real. The world does not deserve to be regarded as real, much less to be the object of our ultimate commitment. Whatever loves we have are for the sake of that ultimate Reality, the Atman. Nothing else really counts.<sup>4</sup>

This was my first lesson in true dialogue. I experienced first hand, so to speak, an example of a spiritual life that was nevertheless rooted in religious perceptions quite different from those which had nourished my early Christian and Jesuit life. Indeed, our philosophical training had taught us to criticize such perceptions and set them aside; they were alleged to border on pantheism. But our Master, Jesus, had given us a rule of thumb for discernment—‘you will know them by their fruits’. And this made me stop short with my silent scholastic criticisms. The fruits here were excellent; the roots must therefore be strong and healthy. In the face of the mystery of the Spirit revealing himself in such a person—and Professor Jhala was only one of many whom I encountered—my criticisms found no words.

Later I was led further by what I read, by my fellow Jesuits who were Indian, by my students, even by my superiors. What began as silent admiration became a taste for this tradition. I remember that excellent Sanskritist and professor of comparative literature at the University of Jadavpur, Fr Robert Antoine, who, when Superior of the Calcutta Jesuit province, said to me: ‘Unless we experience within us the great attraction of monism we cannot even understand and enter into dialogue with Hinduism!’

The first lesson could be articulated in terms of the Thomist tradition that had fed my young Jesuit mind: all conceptual knowledge is conditioned by the knower, and hence it does not reach to the heart of

<sup>4</sup> I draw here on a celebrated dialogue in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad between Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi (4:5, 2:4).

the Mystery. Our definitions and theological concepts remain this side of 'saving knowledge'. In the words of the Taittiriya Upanishad I love to quote:

Words and the mind bounce back from It, empty-handed:  
only by experiencing the bliss of Brahman one overcomes all fear.

There were interesting questions here about knowledge and experience. Philosophical psychology had taught me the difference between *knowing* a person and *knowing about* a person. Was the Indian stress on experience and on going beyond words a call to find my security elsewhere than in doctrinal orthodoxy? Was Hinduism calling me to know Brahman, the Absolute, beyond theological formulation?

### ***Jesus Christ or the Upanishads?***

The spirituality of Professor Jhala seemed, however, to leave no space for the role Jesus Christ had in my life. It was centred on the eternal immutable Reality. Was there any place for an ultimately significant historical manifestation? Could I, a Christian, relegate history to the realm of the illusory or even the mythical, and empty it of all metaphysical density? Moreover, the Upanishads and the Indian tradition were also raising serious questions about Christian theology. Where was the real centre of Christianity: the paschal mystery or the Trinity? How did the humanity of Jesus relate to the mystery of the Trinity? What of the dance of the perichoresis within the Trinity? Could that be reconciled with the awareness that the Father is the Source?

Some help in clarifying my ideas on the subject—Cartesianism dies hard!—came from an unexpected quarter. Bishop John Robinson gave the 1978 Teape lectures in Delhi, later published as *Truth is Two-Eyed*.<sup>5</sup> A healthy vision, he said, comes from complementary perceptions. We have two eyes, but each one of us has taken to using one or the other, either the right or the left eye. The picture given us by our preferred eye must then be complemented by what the other eye can give us. The process by which the two visions become one remains hidden in the depth of the preconscious. The healthy complete vision has a wholeness that the one-eyed vision lacks. We can of course choose to

<sup>5</sup> (London: SCM 1979).

look at reality with only one eye. We can use only the Western eye, and stress the personal, the historical, the dualistic, the contingent as the only place in which as creatures we can situate ourselves, the only place from which we can see God. Or we can be Easterners in vision and see everything in a monistic way, *sub specie aeternitatis*, in a quasi-divine vision: from that pinnacle we see ourselves and the world as expressions of God (though we wrongly think ourselves autonomous).

Whoever we are—Hindus, Buddhists, Christians or whatever—Robinson suggests that we should use both eyes. Of course our original culture or faith will lead us to make a choice as to which is our primary eye, but both eyes are needed if we are to have a complete perception. The one-eyed vision is dangerously flat; we lose perspective on distances; we might make misjudgments and have an accident. If we have been educated exclusively in one culture, we are one-eye blind. We need to borrow the other eye from the traditions of other cultures. And here dialogue has a function.

### *Dialogue of Symbols*

Dialogue does more than clarify or enrich our faith perceptions of the world and of the Beyond. It is not merely a matter of understanding. It enters into the world of symbols, reaching depths of the psyche beyond the conceptual world. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have lived for a long time in India are surrounded by a rich symbolic world to which we respond emotionally in ways quite different from how students of religions react to what they read in textbooks.

This became clear to me many years ago when some friends of a fellow Jesuit visited us in Kurseong from the West during the week-long festival of Durga Puja, which occurs in the beautiful month of October. I thought that they might enjoy a walk across the small town to see the pandals getting ready for the celebration of the festival of the Goddess of Bengal. To my surprise, as we entered one of the halls being prepared for the worship, several of the visitors turned back and refused to go inside. Instinctively they were rejecting the symbols of the divine so familiar to the Bengali devotee. The terrible Durga, riding on her tiger, with her beautiful mane of black hair flying in the wind, and her ten arms wielding as many weapons of the gods, and her spear piercing the head of the evil Mahisa—all this is for the Bengali devotee a vision of the divine glory. For me it was a fascinating expression of an ancient popular myth. But for our visitors the symbols were

frightening, something devilish. God only knows what religious formation was behind that reaction. I could not, of course, condemn their attitude, nor even try to convince them that it was all right just to go in and see. Clearly they could not share in the symbol.

Then I remembered that the *trisul*, the three-pointed fork so often found in the adherents of the Sivaite faith, was what in my childhood drawings I had always put in the hand of Satan. I needed to ask myself questions about my subconscious reaction to the *sadhus* of India wielding this fork, and how it appeared on the top of temples. 'Satan' may have inherited it from the Greek Neptune, and it would not be a surprise if it had its origin in the Sivaite world of India. One symbol, many meanings. These shared symbols perhaps point to some kind of shared oneness—not of an intellectual kind, centred on doctrine, but a oneness of the heart, of the emotions. Can we at some level see the symbols with the eyes of the other?



*Durga*

The sharing of symbols is more than the ability to see them as artistic expressions meaningful in their context. Many of us will have admired in some museum or other the reproduction of the magnificent Nataraja, the Great God Siva who dances out the mystery of divine dynamism and love, and causes the creation, destruction and salvation of the world. We may have been ecstatic for at least a few minutes before this

expression of the divine mystery. If we are educated by study, and still more by dialogue, we can also experience what such symbols are for Hindu believers.

But can we go further, and actually share the symbols? Symbols, anthropologists tell us, belong to wholes—they cannot be detached from one culture and artificially attached to another. Theologians call this, disparagingly, syncretism. Anthropologists, too, condemn it as cultural imperialism. Symbols belong to cultures. We need to respect them.

All this is true enough. Equally, however, there are symbols that seem universal; and no culture and no religion can claim ownership of them. Such are the symbols of life—water, food, sex. . . . Moreover, as John Donne said, no man is an island. No community is an island, either. We belong to each other, and therefore we share. Look, for example, at the interesting history of the Indian symbol *om* (or *aum*). It is a phonetic symbol. In India it is all-pervasive. It is the main distinctive symbol of Hinduism, but one finds it also in Buddhism (at least in its Tibetan form), in Jainism and even in Sikhism, whose scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, begins with *Ik omkar*, at times translated ‘God is One!’ *Om* is really a pan-indic symbol. It has many meanings. Or rather it ‘means’ nothing specific. It ‘suggests’ according to its context.

Is it proper for Christians also to use *om* as the symbol of God, or more specifically God’s Word, since *om* symbolises *sabda-brahman*, ‘revelation’? The question is delicate, as its Christian use could be seen as a case of imperial usurpation. Yet it could also be seen as authentic inculturation, of Indian Christians claiming a share in the symbolic world of their culture. While theologians disputed the matter, women religious had the insight and courage to go ahead, and began to chant or sing *om* in their liturgies. Then it started to feature, with or without a cross, in letterheads. Artists like Jyoti Sahi began to incorporate it in their work on Christian themes. *Om* began to appear in some of our churches, on tabernacle doors, and, more appropriately, on the lectern from which the Word is read and preached. Some disturbance and controversy ensued. Some called it an act of vandalism: symbols belong to the community that creates them, and they are subject to the laws of private property. But is this true? Could one not counter that such a way of thinking merely reflected a capitalist culture, as though even the Gods could be objects to be owned privately? Was it the reaction of a Hinduism that had become infected by a Judaeo-Christian



pathology, and hence was making claims about its own property? Many see the extension of the symbol to other communities as a natural and desirable result of dialogue in depth. Like air, bread and water, symbols are shared.

However, symbols are not like coins from one currency that can easily be exchanged for others according to market rates. Symbols come with a retinue; they bring with them a world of moods, perceptions, mystic intuitions, ways of relating to the Divine, all derived from their origins. A sharing of symbols means also a sharing of religious experiences, seeing the Divine with a different eye. Some feel comfortable with this process; for others, it is unnerving, a call to death. It often demands an ascetic renunciation of things that give us security. Faith is purified, with less dependence on its external expressions, and a greater trust in the inner guidance of the Spirit. My colleagues taught me to see the temple, the gurdwara, the mosque, the great *tirthas* (pilgrimage centres), as places for worship and meditation, not tourist attractions. They are places vibrating with centuries of *bhakti*, love, devotion, tapas (penance), faith, trust and prayer. Here we cross frontiers; here we experience liminality; here we share a different spirituality which we do not understand fully. But at this level, understanding matters less. The important thing is communion in silence. The symbol is only a sacrament, a door to another spiritual world.

### *A Guru of Dialogue*

One of the most extraordinary records of this dialogue of religious experience is the spiritual diary of the Benedictine, Swami Abhishiktananda. Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux) came to India in 1948, became a 'Hindu monk', and entered profoundly into the symbolic and spiritual world of Hinduism. His final *samadhi*, his passing into eternity, occurred in 1973. A substantial selection of his journal has been published, firstly in France in 1986, and subsequently in India in 1998;<sup>6</sup> neither version, to my knowledge, has received much attention. However, there are a number of meeting groups that are inspired by this pioneer figure, and there is even an Abhishiktananda

<sup>6</sup> *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart. The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktananda (Dom Henri Le Saux)*, a selection edited with introduction by Raimon Panikkar, translated by David Fleming and James Stuart (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998); French original, *La montée au fond du coeur* (Paris: OEIL, 1986).

Society based in Delhi that feels responsible for keeping alive the testimony of 'Swamiji'.

Swami Abhishiktananda's writings show him as a seeker who lived simultaneously in two worlds. His was not an easy life. Quite apart from the poverty and austerity he had embraced, he was often tortured by the tension between the faith he had inherited from his native Brittany and the spiritual experience he had discovered in India. He exclaimed in his diary, 'The experience of the Upanishads is true! I know it!' I once conversed for a few hours with this *sannyasi*-monk, listened to his own accounts of his life and experiences, and even made my own confession to him. One could not but be touched by the authenticity and integrity of his Christian commitment, and by the sincerity with which he shared in the spiritual world of the Upanishads. His diary reflections often, however, leave one puzzled. He is cynical about many practices and formulations of the Christian faith, and equally critical of the Vedantic claims. Yet underlying his criticisms there is a deep commitment to Jesus Christ and a great love for him. He remained until the end committed to the Eucharist, to the Triune God, and to the Church that had introduced him into this mystery. At the same time, he was also convinced that by embracing the Hindu spiritual world he had 'discovered the Holy Grail'. He had discovered that the God and the Christ we seek outside ourselves is in fact to be experienced within, at the root of our existence, when we truly say, like Jesus, 'I am'.

His disciple Sara Grant recorded a saying of his. It is not a question of finding who or where one is right or wrong, but of accepting both faiths and letting them live simultaneously in one's heart, even when they seem to be contradictory. To embrace different faiths in their tension, without judgement, knowing that they somehow meet in the infinite, in the 'Ineffable Mystery' (Grant's expression, which perhaps best translates the Indian word *Brahman*), is the way of dialogue, is the way of being a Christian today.

To live in two worlds is not comfortable; often it is frightening, a threat to our religious securities. The call to dialogue is, I think, an echo of the call of Jesus to the Galilean fishermen, '*Duc in altum!*—Put out into the deep!' (Luke 5:4). This phrase was indeed inscribed on the crest of my *alma mater* in Mumbai, St Xavier's College. Two things have made it easier for me to answer this call. Firstly, the Christian community in India, with its lively theological animators, has been living this dialogue for centuries, quietly and naturally, and has

supported every venture in this direction. Secondly, Jesus' rule of discernment mentioned above—'you will know them by their fruits'—has enabled me to see the holiness, wisdom and depth in adherents of other faiths. Spiritual dialogue is a matter of trust: trust in the God who calls us to it; trust in the Christian community of India that has lived it; and trust in the Spirit whose creativity is inexhaustible.

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