

The Transformation of Dom Le Saux— Swami Abhishiktananda

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It has been suggested¹ that there are four possible explanations for, or ways of understanding, what “happened” to Dom Le Saux on his way to becoming Swami Abhishiktananda, namely that he

- a) gradually went ‘off the deep end’; or
- b) became a Hindu; or
- c) found the non-dual place beyond all religions; or
- d) covered his enduring Christianity with a layer of Upanisadic language.

This article will explore each of these four possibilities, with the intent of understanding, as clearly as possible, what really did “happen” to Abhishiktananda. The texts which will be used to facilitate this quest are Abhishiktananda’s essay on the Upanisads from *The Further Shore*,² and James Stuart’s collection of Abhishiktananda’s letters.³

A. “Off the Deep End”?

Dom Le Saux, a French Benedictine, went to India with the intention of witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ by living as a Christian monk among Hindu sadhus.⁴ However, a few years after his arrival in India, he ceased seeing himself as a Christian missionary,⁵ and, some might argue, “became more Hindu than the Hindus.” Could it be that Dom Le Saux suffered some sort of mental or emotional breakdown in India, which led him to forget or deny who he really was, and to start pretending to be something or someone quite different from whom/what he had previously been? I doubt it. I see no

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evidence in the texts which would suggest that Dom Le Saux-Swami Abhishiktananda became mentally imbalanced or went mad; nor was it the case that he was stupid. Something obviously happened to him (or perhaps better, happened *in him*) after his arrival in India, but it was not a psychological breakdown. We can therefore, eliminate from consideration explanation "A." If what happened to Abhishiktananda was not a mental breakdown, then it must have been some sort of spiritual transformation. But exactly what kind of spiritual transformation was it? Each of the three remaining possible explanations suggests a different answer to that question.

B. A Convert to Hinduism?

If this explanation is correct, then Dom Le Saux' transformation into Swami Abhishiktananda resulted from his abandoning of his Christian faith, and conversion to Hinduism. However, on the basis of the textual evidence, this explanation, like the previous one, must be rejected. Despite his new name, Abhishiktananda was *not* a Hindu convert. Shortly, after his arrival in India (1948), he wrote: "it was only the passing visitors to the ashram who took the white *sannyasi* for a genuine convert to Hinduism."⁶ A few years later, he referred to himself as "a poor Christian monk in the midst of Hindu monks."⁷ Around that same time (1952), he further characterized himself as "truly the Christian successor of the sadhus, who for centuries have followed each other in the crevices of this sacred mountain."⁸ Twenty years later, and shortly before his death, Abhishiktananda could still write: "Take good note that we should not change our 'tradition.' It is under the sign of Jesus Christ that we have awoken to Brahman [God], even if it needed the Veda to make us fully aware of Him."⁹ This is a very significant statement, as it demonstrates that, even after Abhishiktananda had been in India for many years, he neither considered himself to have changed his "tradition" (i.e., to have converted from Christianity to Hinduism), nor did he advise others to do so. Clearly, the spiritual transformation which Abhishiktananda underwent was not a conversion to Hinduism. We can therefore, eliminate

explanation “B,” and proceed to consider the remaining two explanations.

C. Discovery of the Non-Dual Place Beyond All Religions?

There is significant evidence which could lead to the conclusion that Abhishiktananda’s transformation resulted from his finding the non-dual “place” which transcends the plurality of particular religions—that place where true mystics of all religious traditions, and Ultimate Reality, are said to be one. For example, Stuart notes that already by 1952, Abhishiktananda

began to regard his own life as a *sannyasi*, no longer chiefly as a means of being able to give an effective Christian witness to Hindus, but as an end in itself, a total consecration to God with no ulterior motive, whatever.¹⁰

The fact that Abhishiktananda came to view the path he was following as an end in itself, involving no ulterior motive, may indicate that he believed he had discovered something of supreme value in his experience of the Upanisads, something that transcended the Christian faith.

Later in his life, Abhishiktananda wrote: “Meditation on the Upanisads makes me ever more keenly aware of the transformation through which the Church, and indeed all religions, must pass. The age of religions ... has passed.”¹¹ This is a striking statement indeed. The age of religions, *Christianity included* (since it, too, is in need of transformation), has passed. In this instance, Abhishiktananda does seem to be claiming for himself the non-dual experience which transcends all particular religions, an experience which for him was made possible only by his meditation on the Upanisads. By relegating particular religions to an age that has passed, Abhishiktananda even appears to claim a certain normativity for non-dual spirituality, for the present and future ages of humanity.

Along these same lines, Abhishiktananda further states (in a discussion of the relevance of the Upanisads):

The Upanisadic experience has nothing to do with any religion, whatever It is of a different order altogether.

It is the ultimate awakening of the human spirit, with which religions are now being confronted.... The wider dissemination of this experience is even preparing the way, it seems, for humanity to enter a new era, one towards which the world is blindly groping its way.... (M)en's relationships with each other, and the relation of each man with 'God' will be lived out of an interior experience at once of pure Presence and of Communion.¹²

Although Abhishiktananda's romantic notion of humanity's "blindly groping its way toward a new era" may be a bit overdone, his claim is clear enough: the experience to which the Upanisads point is not tied to any particular religion, not even Hinduism. That experience has little (or nothing) in common with "religion", as religion is generally understood. It is rather, the direct experience of the oneness of all people, and of each person's oneness with Ultimate Reality. In a word, the experience to which the Upanisads point is radically non-dual, and it transcends all particular religions.

All in all, explanation "C" seems to account well for what "happened" to Abhishiktananda. But this explanation appears, at the same time, to contradict what was said in the previous section—that Abhishiktananda did not convert to Hinduism, *but continued, in some sense, to consider himself a Christian*. How could he continue to think of himself as a Christian, if he had found the non-dual place beyond *all* religions, Christianity included? This question will have to be revisited in due course. Prior to that, however, and before determining whether explanation "C" *best* explains what happened to Abhishiktananda, the final potential explanation (which entertains the possibility that he remained a Christian) needs to be considered.

D. Enduring Christianity Covered with a Layer of Upanisadic Language?

The fourth and final explanation to be considered here is the possibility that Abhishiktananda continued to be a Christian to his life's end, but that his Christianity was profoundly informed, or deeply influenced, by his upanisadic

experience. One fact which supports this explanation is that he continued to reflect on that deepest of all Christian mysteries—the doctrine of the Trinity—and the direction his reflection took was indeed, influenced by his meditation on the Upanisads. For instance, he wrote: “The mystery of Christ and of the Father is *beyond words*, more even than that of the *atman*, the *prana*, the Spirit Live this Trinity humbly in the mystery of the simplest human relationships.”¹³ This notion of living the Trinity in human relationships is further clarified by Abhishiktananda’s theory of “correspondences.” He understands the entire universe to be

made up of correspondences, not only in general between the cosmos and man, but also between the physical and mental elements and functions of man, and the elements and functions of the cosmos. Even more, this world in which man lives had an extraordinarily profound correspondence with the other world—... the super-terrestrial world of light....¹⁴

Abhishiktananda came to view the Trinity in terms of the correspondences he perceived in his own relation with Christ (who is himself a “mystery of pure relation”), his own relation with the Father and the Spirit through Christ, and his own relations with other people and all creatures in Christ.¹⁵ Thus, by means of a theory of correspondences which Abhishiktananda developed from his meditation on the Upanisads, he arrived at a new way of understanding (or experiencing) the mystery of the Trinity. This suggests that, although he had unquestionably adopted an upanisadic framework, he, nonetheless, continued to consider himself a Christian.

There is also evidence that Abhishiktananda saw himself as a reformer working from within Christianity, rather than as a critic standing outside. Stuart notes that Abhishiktananda thought that the church needed to challenge Christians “to penetrate beyond the merely intellectual and moral level of their faith, and to recover the sadly neglected mystical dimension of their tradition.”¹⁶ It has been India’s special gift to model this inward emphasis. Abhishiktananda seems convinced that such a mystical dimension *is* a genuine part of the Christian heritage, but that it has regrettably been allowed

to atrophy: "Christianity, from being an experience has become successively and at the same time ritualism, institution, formulas, ethics, social action."¹⁷ He warns that unless Christianity shifts its teaching focus from what is outside to what is inside, "it will continue to fall short."¹⁸ The point is that, in regard to Christianity's neglected mystical element, Abhishiktananda seems more like an internal reformer bent on changing the status quo, than an external critic who sees the situation as already hopeless (which in turn indicates that he continued to think of himself as a Christian).

In one regard, it may be that Abhishiktananda took his upanisadic experience to an unacceptable extreme—unacceptable, that is, from the standpoint of traditional Christian orthodoxy. A central emphasis of the Upanisads is the non-dual notion of the identification of one's own deepest self (Atman) with the Universal/Cosmic Self (Brahman). Abhishiktananda's experience of this upanisadic notion led him to claim that "the deep confession of faith is no longer the external 'Christ is Lord,' but '*so'ham asmi*' [I am he]."¹⁹ Now, it is one thing to talk about *union* with Christ ("Christ abides in me and I in him"), which finds support both in the pages of the New Testament and in the experience of Christian mystics throughout the ages. It is, I think, quite another thing to claim *identity* with Christ ("I am Christ"), as Abhishiktananda here does. Such a claim comes perilously close to—if indeed, it does not constitute—a kind of blasphemy or idolatry. An important question (the further consideration of which unfortunately lies outside the scope of this essay) is just how far a Christian can take the notion of non-dualism, and still remain a Christian. As has been shown, it does seem that Abhishiktananda, in some sense, continued to consider himself a Christian. But would other Christians acknowledge someone who says "I am Christ", to be a Christian? Most Christians, I dare say, would have grave difficulty with such an admission. Abhishiktananda had no such difficulty; rather, he appears to consider this non-dual claim as just one more instance of covering his enduring Christianity with a layer of upanisadic language (or more generously stated: of complementing his enduring Christianity with a deep upanisadic experience).

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it appears that the evidence for what “happened” to Swami Abhishiktananda is conflicting. Explanations “C” and “D” have both been found to be well supported in the two texts which were the basis for this study; however, “C” and “D” turn out to be contradictory (if indeed, not mutually exclusive) explanations. For how can it be true that, at the same time, a person both discovers the non-dual place beyond all religions, and remains committed to a particular religion? That a person can move beyond Christianity while remaining a Christian seems, as a proposition, unintelligible. Perhaps, this points to a paradox, or mystery, which, for Abhishiktananda, was resolved in the experience of living it out. Or perhaps (and I suspect this is more likely), the contradiction never was completely resolved in Abhishiktananda’s experience of “upanisadic Christianity.” If this latter contention is true, then he probably had days when he was very aware that he was a Christian trying to integrate the upanisadic experience into his Christianity, and other days when he felt convinced that he had transcended, through realization of the non-dual Ultimate Reality, all notions of belonging to the particular religion known as “Christianity.”

Judging thus, from the texts which formed the basis for this examination, I would have to conclude that Abhishiktananda himself never became one hundred percent clear as to what exactly had “happened” to him; therefore we, too, have to be content with an exploration of possibilities such as has been attempted in this article.

Work cited

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2. Delhi: ISPCK, 1975.

3. *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told Through His Letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989).
4. *Ibid.*, 32.
5. *Ibid.*, 63.
6. *Ibid.*, 35.
7. *Ibid.*, 63.
8. *Ibid.*, 62. The mountain to which he refers, is Arunachala.
9. *Ibid.*, 306.
10. *Ibid.*, 64.
11. *Ibid.*, 307.
12. *Further Shore*, 99.
13. In Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda*, 303. Emphasis is in the original.
14. *Further Shore*, 76. The original contains a footnote reference which has here been omitted.
15. *Ibid.*, 77.
16. *Swami Abhishiktananda*, 64-5.
17. *Ibid.*, 304.
18. *Ibid.*, 301.
19. *Ibid.*, 305.