

# Christian Spirituality\*

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Our concern is to share the riches of Christ with those around us. Our ministry has to be exercised in a secular environment. We have to take note of other factors as well. There is the resurgent Hinduism. The image of the Church is confused. Scholars are recommending dialogue in place of preaching. New missionaries coming with a zeal for evangelism are puzzled. I do not pretend to be an expert. As a pilgrim along the way I have a disconcerting feeling that a good part of my working years is gone with comparatively little to show. I have the feeling that our frustration in the main is due to our spiritual bankruptcy. Are we in any sense worthy of the Gospel? Of course, we can never be. In the Hindu tradition it is only the realized person who ventures to instruct others in spirituality. Would that we could recover the supremacy of the spiritual! The commandment is first to love the Lord with all our being, and as a corollary to love our fellow man out of the fullness of the love of God. Love is rooted in the will. The willed tendency of the heart disciplines the emotions, for will is the master of the heart. Spirituality is impossible apart from self-discipline. A disciplined life manifests itself through the three notable duties of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The disciplining of the senses and acts of silence unto God are undertaken at the same time—all for the love of God.

As ministering priests we are in the limelight. This is inevitable. As men set apart for God we are open to the gaze of others. People are either attracted to or repelled from the Gospel life as they observe us. What we are is more important than what we do. As dedicated persons our lives should be characterized by the habit of the recollection of the presence of God, by simplicity and by availability for others. These things put us beyond the reach of pride and pretension. The man in the street would then be able to say of us what the Shunamite woman said of that pastoral prophet Elisha, 'I perceive that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way.' A life of holiness is the best gift that a Christian can give others; and holiness is safe when it is utterly human.

Patterns of spirituality vary. Hindu spirituality is closely linked to God-realization. Self-realization or God-realization is

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the intuitive awareness that in essence one is divine. The hallmark of a *Guru* is self-realization. The rich spiritual tradition of Hinduism is deeply rooted in mysticism whose axis and goal are quite different from those of Christian spirituality. A Hindu is primarily concerned with the experience of union with the essence of Being itself, and only secondarily with his becoming an instrument in the hand of God for the renewal of society. Generally speaking, the Christian mystics belonged to a fellowship which regarded union with Christ within the context of the Eucharistic mystery with its orientation to the world and society as its primary expression. In his recent book\* Fr. Abhishiktananda pleads for a Christian adventure into the Advaitic mystical experience as a preparation for dialogue.

Then we have the more familiar patterns of Christian spirituality. Some scholars feel that the core of Christian spirituality is not mystical but prophetic and Incarnational. It is argued that, from the beginning of the modern missionary movement in India, it was Christian spirituality as expressed in Christian fellowship and service which transformed Hindu society in a new direction. Modern Protestantism tends to emphasize the inwardness of a Christian's historical vocation.

To a certain extent we are all familiar with the spirituality of the Orthodox Communion grounded in the mystical tradition and with its uplifting worship. More popular is the 'prayer of Jesus' movement. This method of prayer was developed at Mt. Athos and represents the distinctive quality of Eastern spirituality. Briefly speaking, it consists in making the intelligence descend into the heart in order to introduce the name of Jesus there. This is done by means of the repeated invocation synchronized with the rhythm of breathing. Of course, 'heart' here means the centre of personality as in the Bible. The name of Jesus may be used either alone or it can be inserted in a more or less developed phrase. The common form is 'Lord Jesus Son of God have mercy upon me'. The invocation may, if necessary, be suitably reduced as 'Lord Jesus' or 'Jesus'. Perhaps this is something like the *Nama Japa*.

'Pronounce the name with adoring love. Repeat it. Cling to it. Do not think you are invoking the mere name. Think only of Jesus Himself. Say it slowly and softly. If you are not rewarded with any feeling your labour is not unfruitful. This barren prayer may be more pleasing to God than your moments of rapture, because it is free from selfish quest for spiritual delight. We should persevere because the invocation of the name seldom leaves us barren. Often it is accompanied by inner feeling of joy, warmth and delight. There is in this prayer no heaviness, no struggle.'

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\* *The Meeting Point of Hindu-Christian Dialogue in the Cave of the Heart*. C.I.S.R.S., Bangalore.

The mystical tradition of the Church, beginning with the Pseudo-Dionysius, is a rich mine of Christian spirituality. Here we come upon the revered names of Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux and Theresa of Avila. The mystical spirituality of the Catholic Church with its constant emphasis on interiority is a very good corrective to the modern trend towards activism.

What is Christian spirituality? Speaking simply, it is the relation of the Christian to the Holy Spirit of God. When a Christian is known as a spiritual person, it suggests that his whole being is responding to the rule of the resident Spirit. This is simple as it is profound. Spirituality has many facets. It includes a knowledge of God and of the faith because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. Secondly, spirituality expresses itself in practical service to man in his struggle to achieve human dignity. Thirdly, spirituality is rooted in prayer and worship. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to lift up our heart to God and cry 'Abba, Father', witnessing thereby that we are sons of God. Of these different aspects of spirituality worship is primary and definitive. Spirituality represents the recovery in man of a basic relationship to God as creature. To say this means that worship of God is in itself the core of Christian spirituality. Worship has been defined as the direction of the heart, mind and will to God as man's true end. Yet spirituality is not a flight from the responsibilities of life, but is lived out in the complexities of our life in the home, industry, etc. Deep down it is the spirit of worship and adoration.

In modern secular society Christian spirituality is perceived in its rhythm of detachment and involvement. But does this make any sense to the secular man? I do not know. The so-called secular man is in a strange predicament. He is estranged from God to whom he is inextricably related. There is a form of secular spirituality with a feeling after moral values coupled with a search for ultimate meaning. Only the name of God is avoided. We have a duty and message to secular spirituality. Loving service is the key to the heart of secularism.

While we strive to heal the ills of the society it is our duty to uncover the ill which lies at the heart of all ills—the estrangement from God—and thus to witness to the reality of God Himself. We accomplish this primarily by the depth of our communion with God and our humility before Him. Adoration is our response to God's gift. The greatest of God's gifts to man is His Word which was made man in Jesus Christ and came to indwell the Church through the action of the Holy Spirit.

### **Worship**

I was saying that worship is central and definitive for Christian spirituality. In Protestantism worship has very poor showing. In truth, there is a crisis in worship. There seems to be a false dichotomy between prayer and worship on the one hand, and

man in society on the other. Spontaneity in worship is diminishing, and worship has ceased to be a joy in human life. The spirit of worship cannot be fostered by legalism and moralism. In our time we have dethroned the worship of God as being the primary and joyful duty of man in our zeal for the mission of the Church and programmes of evangelism. We should get our priorities right. Meanwhile secularization has cured us of some of the false ideas of worship. We are now learning that true worship affirms the reality of God, of man and of the world. To learn to pray is to make ourselves one with man and with God's world. At one time or other we must have experienced one or more facets of worship. For instance, we must have sensed our having been accepted. God loves me as I am. I belong to God not only by creation but also by His redemption in Christ. At another time the dimension of life as freedom—from guilt and loneliness—must have dawned upon us in worship. God has called me to freedom in Christ. In such moments we are infinitely more of ourselves than we knew ourselves to be. We know ourselves to be sons of God. Something like this is built into us during our worship. True worship takes us out of our depth and beyond known human relationships. To be open to God's presence in worship is to taste His joy which is *ānanda*. Worship needs no justification, just as falling in love does not need any justification.

Von Hügel used to remind us that religion is adoration. You adore only that which you love. We love God for a variety of reasons. To love God from the consideration of His mercy towards us is wholly valid. It is, however, lower than that love which springs from an appreciation of what God is in Himself. Worship is more deep at the thought of the excellence of God's holy nature. This leads to admiration and adoration. 'Regarding with wondering esteem accompanied by pleasure and delight' is adoration. Is this the way we regard God, whether it is in personal or corporate worship? The idea of adoration is there in the Bible though the actual word is not used. The great saints of the Bible were the raptured lovers of God. Adoration is almost a forgotten factor in modern Christianity. The sweet 'madness' that visited such men as Bernard, Richard Rolle, Francis of Assisi and Theresa are, alas, a thing of the past, but crying out for renewal. The mention of these well-known names leads me to say something about another challenging facet of Christian spirituality, namely contemplation.

### Contemplation

A conversation with a Hindu on religion will generally result in his asking, 'Have you had an experience of God? Have you had a vision of Him?' This will soon narrow down to the mystical experience which is familiar to Hinduism and Christianity. Mysticism has had a bad press in Protestantism, though it has a relevance to Christianity today. It is an experience

familiar to the writers of the New Testament. 'If a man love me, he will keep my commandments: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him' (John 14:23). We observe that the actual indwelling of God in man is to be realized in this life. St. Paul is reputed to have had an experience of God that seemed to be out of this world. But this is not a type of self-culture, neither is it a human achievement. The ability to love God in this manner is due to God's initiative and prior love in Jesus Christ. Our response to God's grace takes the form of the 'naked intent' to be drawn into God. God possesses the soul far more than the soul is able to cling to God.

The natural approach to the phenomenon of mysticism is through prayer which progresses through vocal prayer, mental prayer and on to the prayer of silence or the prayer of simplicity. This is more commonly known as contemplation or *dhyāna* in the real sense of the term. Development in prayer is similar to growth in love between a man and a woman. The deeper you are in love the more you are tongue-tied. Here the expression of prayer is basically affective or loving. The normal apparatus of mind cannot interpret this experience.

Contemplation cannot be regarded as an out-of-the-way experience. In fact, every man exists to worship God and thus come to the vision of God. It is right and proper that a Christian should long for a vision of God. God is holy and righteous. A life that is intended to lead up to God should naturally be obedient and unselfish. It is not strange that a Christian should desire God more than anything else. His interior life may be somewhat disjoined. His mind may be too distracted for meditation. He is too self-centred for intercession. In the very acknowledgement of this failure there is an unexpressed longing for God. Perhaps all that he is able to tell God is that he is hungry and thirsty for Him. This longing for God, when released in simplicity, appears to be something in the depth of the personality. Out of this ardent desire for God proceeds an experience in which the person, emptied of the self, and of its own powers finds itself filled by God. This is a form of knowledge of God. Under this aspect of prayer God is experienced as the living reality. It is the felt presence of God, felt by the whole personality. Therefore, contemplation is devotion to the awareness of the presence of God in the soul. Such awareness is beyond concepts and formulas. In this state there is self-forgetful attention, a humble receptiveness, so that the emotion, will and thought are fused and lost in something which embraces them all.

There are one or two things we have to remember. We cannot turn to God unless we first turn into ourselves. God is everywhere, but not everywhere to us. God communicates with us in the depth of our being. There He waits for us and meets us. This meeting with God is joy inexpressible. There is the place of darkness in the experience of God. When God possesses the soul there is first the blinding light. You cannot be near the light of God

without being blinded by it at first. This is also called the darkness of the senses. All the words, thoughtforms and images which we use for God are unequal to the experienced reality of God's presence. Such an experience is a death to our ideas and images concerning God. It is a real dying to self. The eye hath not seen, the ear hath not heard and the heart of man hath not conceived the things that God hath prepared for them that love him (1 Cor. 2:9). Despite the darkness there are flashes of light, the assurance that God is taking possession of a life.

We tend to classify persons and religious orders either as active or contemplative. This is not quite true to life. One who practises contemplation does not necessarily become a recluse or a hermit. Such first-hand experience of God humbles the self, but does not create a desire to tell a story. On the other hand, it makes him long for God and to do what He wills in every situation. The contemplative discovers in his life the unity and serenity of one who is ready to accept whatever comes to him, as from God.

In a true Christian life there is a blend of contemplation and action. There is a rhythm of coming and going, to and from the presence of Christ. There is the withdrawal and ascent to the Mount of Transfiguration and from there the descent to the hard way of the cross. Pope Gregory the Great is one of the best examples of the blend of contemplation with action. He taught that the best kind of life on earth was the life of contemplation. Being Pope, a monastic reformer, a moralist, liturgiologist and statesman, Gregory was a busy person in the world. He has described the rhythm of coming to and going from Christ in this fashion:

'They are sent and they go, when from the secrecy of inward meditation they spread forth into the wide space of active life. But, after the outward works which they perform, they always return to the bosom of contemplation.'

Contemplation as a form of the authentic knowledge of God is of relevance today. In contemporary debate about God the problem of image is a live issue. The key to the knowledge of God is in the depth of self. Contemplation of God with the ground of the soul is open to any man who is ready to be obedient and humble, and who hungers and thirsts for God. It is not reserved merely for advanced souls. Let us learn wisdom from the words of St. Bernard:

'If you then are wise, you will show yourself rather as a reservoir than as a canal. A canal spreads abroad water as it receives it, but a reservoir waits until it is filled before overflowing and thus without loss to itself communicates its superabundant water.'

In the Church of the present day we have too many canals but few reservoirs.