

All Saints Day 2015. Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin.

Wisdom 3.1-9, John 11.32-44. The Unknown Saints and India.

“The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God ... no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace . . . their hope is full of immortality.” Such comforting words – often heard at funerals - from the broad Wisdom tradition of the Jewish people written a good 100 years before Christ.

And on All Saints day we celebrate especially the unknown saints, the righteous ones, those God-centered, God-seeking people through whom as a child once put it, “God’s light shines through”. Many of us will have our own personal saints for whom we give thanks – family members, teachers or mentors from our early days, even writers who have challenged us and changed our lives.

But today I’d like to look further afield, to the unexpected saints, righteous and inspiring men and women from faraway places and other cultures, even from other religious traditions. Especially, since the Dean will be going there next year on a months-long spiritual journey, to India, one of the places where since the latter part of the last century the Church has been most open to other faiths, reaping rewards both in depth of spirituality and in drawing souls to Christ.

I was first drawn into there by the early books of Dom Bede Griffiths, a Welsh Benedictine monk, formerly Anglican, who went to India “to discover the other half of his soul” as he put it. He felt the need to balance the rational conceptual way of thinking in which he had been trained with the more intuitive, heart-centered spirituality he hoped to find in India. And find it he did – in company with three others who had arrived there a little earlier, in flight from the dogmas and maybe the arrogance of the Western Church. They were two French priests, Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, who later took the name Abishiktananda – “Bliss of the Anointed One” - and a Belgian Cistercian named Francis Mahieu. All of them saints, for me.

Between them these four men founded two famous Christian ashrams where ministry to Christians, Hindus and those of other faiths

continues to this day. The most famous is the ashram of the Holy Trinity, Saccidanda, also known as Shantivanam, meaning The Wood of Peace. Near a village in the middle of south India, on the banks of a sacred river that is too often dry, it is an assembly of huts and simple cells where the resident community welcomes spiritual seekers of all backgrounds to a simple routine of prayer, meditation, personal contact and vegetarian meals. In the worship here, while the main Eucharistic rite is familiar, everything else – the music, the style of preaching, the vestments, the inclusion of readings from other world faiths, the sitting on the floor – is something new. This is what the liturgy scholars call “inculturation” – Christian faith presented in a radically un-European style as appropriate to the local culture – and it is hugely refreshing.

The formularies of classic Christian theology based on Greek philosophy and Roman law are largely set aside. For instance the Holy Trinity is revered in chant as Saccidananda – that is Sat (Absolute Being) - Cit (Logos or communication) and Ananda (Bliss – the love binding all together) – a formulation that dates from an Indian convert to Christianity early in the 20th century

At this ashram one may expect to meet any one from a nun to a latter-day hippie, a university professor to a tradesman from the village nearby, a secular priest from Bombay to a wanderer from the Antipodes. Every one is welcome; every one respects the rule of quiet and the expectation to join in worship, preferably after an hour of solitary meditation by the river. Any one can seek advice or not as they choose; and most people join in the open air tea breaks, designed to facilitate friendly social contact. All this I know because I was there, in Fr Bede’s time, some 30 years ago. I hope it remains much the same today, though inevitably it must be somewhat different.

The other major ashram – more remote, at the top of the Kerala mountains far to the south west, is Kurisumala, which in my time was led by Fr Francis Mahieu from Belgium. With the worship here in the local language, Kurisumala was remote in more ways than one, and attracted fewer far flung visitors and more locals; yet like Shantivanam it brought together people of very different backgrounds to worship in the style of the local culture and the Syriac liturgical tradition. The

highlight was perhaps to hear Fr Francis chant the Lord's prayer in Syriac – the closest we can get to the Aramaic of Jesus' day.

But what was the point of these ashrams? you might ask.

I think it was, and remains, to take the dialogue between Christianity and other faiths, in particular Hinduism, to a much deeper level than could be achieved in universities and conferences. It was to open Christianity to the spiritual depths and gifts of Hinduism and Buddhism in a way that would enrich Christian faith and foster mutual respect between those of the different religious traditions. Conversions might happen, but more important, the spiritual life of all participants would be enriched and enlivened. As one of the four pioneers pointed out, it was necessary to come together before the divine mystery not in discursive or debating style but in silence and prayer – “in the cave of the heart”.

Back in the 19th century, most Christian missionaries in India seem actually to have handicapped their mission through their lack of respect for the spirituality of the people born and living there. Few of them would have been aware of the beauty and depth of the long tradition of worship, teaching and hymnody of the Vedas going back to 2,000 BC when the Aryans first entered Northern India; even less of the subtle spirituality of the Upanishads, composed by poets and mystics at the time the Hebrew prophets were writing, and of their acceptance of one Supreme Being made known partially in various guises. It was these compositions which taught India about the Spirit of God alive in human minds and lives – sharing their “intuition of ultimate reality” as Bede Griffiths put it, an intuition equally to be found within Christianity yet too often forgotten or ignored.

The Bhagavad Gita of the 2nd century BC was also unknown to too many of the early missionaries. Crucially it shares the experience of God as personal, as both the “lover of souls” freely available to the human heart, and supremely transcendent and “dwelling in inaccessible light”. (This was the book that Mahatma Gandhi kept on his bedside table, along with The Sermon on the Mount.)

By the time the missionaries came to realize that they were not dealing with primitive pagans “bowing down to wood and stone” but with people of mature spirituality, and were led to initiate a two-way

conversation, it really was almost too late. The suspicion for many years, rightly so, was that any listening on the missionaries' part was merely to enable them to "know the enemy", the better to demolish Indian insights with the hammer of the Gospel as they understood it. Fortunately there were a number of thoughtful missionaries who were more far-sighted, and a number of Hindu dialogue partners who, while unwilling to renounce their own spirituality, were glad to accept all they felt Christ had to offer them.

The most influential book of this period, "The Crown of Hinduism", cited the teaching of Irenaeus that the sacred scriptures of all religions, along with those of Judaism, should be seen as "preparation for the Gospel", pointing to Christ, and argued that Christianity was thus the natural "fulfilment" of Hinduism. The suggestion was well received and in due course led to a number of books by respected theologians suggesting, in short, that a good Hindu might be considered an "anonymous Christian", or that the risen Christ was present with the Holy Spirit, though unnamed, within the spirituality of other faiths.

So, bearing in mind that "the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God", it might just be possible to get to heaven without being baptized or formally accepting Christ.

But European missionaries were still distrusted and understandably so. (How would we like to be told that we were "anonymous Hari Krishnas", I wonder?) And a statement from Indian lay Christians was issued to the effect that Western theology, together with western missionaries, should stay in the West: "We accept nothing as obligatory save Christ". And this statement strongly influenced government policy, as did the pungent sentence: "Christ would be enough for India, if only he were left alone with India"

As a result a new strategy of "Christian presence" was adopted by missionary societies: no open preaching or teaching, merely Christian service and lifestyle. Some wonderful work was done in schools and hospitals, much of which continues today. And gradually this self-restraint gave way to a new more truly respectful style of dialogue, first in the Protestant churches as they felt their way to merging in the Church of South India and then the Church of North India, and then

blossoming richly in the Catholic Church after Vatican II recognized and affirmed the prayerful approach to God in the great world religions.

What is encouraging is that this can now be experienced not only in the Christian ashrams, but in seminaries, monasteries and theological colleges around the sub-continent – for example at the Jesuits' De Nobili College in Pune and the Union Theological College in Bangalore. Indeed not only dialogue but serious study of Hindu philosophy, theology and anthropology is routinely taught to seminarians.

How this is working out today in the spiritual life of the Church and the other religions in India is something I'm hoping the Dean will come close to discovering in his time there. Bede Griffiths went to India "to discover the other half of his soul". Many Europeans have done the same and been deeply changed by the experience, as European categories attached to the Gospel long ago are stripped away, leaving a Christian revelation pared down to essentials and then re-experienced and deepened in meditation and in conversation with other God-given sacred traditions.

God does not leave his people without a witness. Can we believe that God has chosen to bestow divine grace and revelation only on those within the visible Church? Such an assumption must belong more to notions of empire and conquest than to the service of the Living God. Is it not among the unclean grave-cloths from which the Lazarus of the Church must be freed?

Even without going East ourselves, let us begin to "unbind the wrappings", the all too human limitations and constrictions of our own tradition, and accept the fullness of God's blessing. So may we enter a new closeness to God, recognizing his presence in the very depths of our being – our creator, our redeemer and our life. Amen.

Canon Ginnie Kennerley

1 November, 2015