

Reg: Serial No 86 of 1974.



SACCIDANANDA ASHRAM

Shantivanam,
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Tamil Nadu-639 107

Date 18:2:90

Dear Father Charles,

Thank you for your letter, and for sending me a copy of the document on Christian prayer and meditation. As a response to the challenge presented by Hindu and Buddhist spirituality today, I find it extremely disappointing. There is no hint of the tremendous depth of this spirituality or of its profound wisdom - Eastern meditation is treated as though it were a matter of superficial techniques, of "bits and pieces" which a Christian can use if he wishes, but of whose dangers and abuses he must be made aware. What is still more disappointing is that the conception of Christian prayer which it presents is most inadequate, ignoring as it does what is deepest and most significant in the Gospel and in Catholic tradition.

The document insists on the "distance" which must always exist between man and God as creature and creator, and warns against any attempt to "try and overcome the distance", as though God in Christ had not already overcome that distance and united us with him in the closest bonds. St Paul says: "You who were far off he has brought near - not kept distant. in the blood of Christ"; Jesus himself totally denies any such distance. "I am the Vine", he says, "you are the branches". How can the branches be 'distant' from the Vine? Later the document insists that we must "never in any way seek to place ourselves on the same level as the object of our contemplation". Of course, we don't seek to place ourselves on the same level. It is God who has already placed us there. Jesus says: "I have not called you servants but friends". And to show what such friendship means, he prays for his disciples: "That they may be one, as thou, Father in us and I in thee, that they may be one in us".



Date: 12-12-74

The union between Jesus and the Father in the mystery of the Trinity is the closest which it is possible to conceive, or rather it is beyond all conception. Yet it is for this very union that Jesus prays for his disciples. One of the great teachers of Christian meditation G. Dox. Fr John Main, has said that Christian meditation is a 'participation in the consciousness of Christ'. Or rather it is to "share in that stream of love which flows between Jesus and the Father and is the Holy Spirit". It is to this depth of contemplative wisdom that Christian meditation should lead us and it is towards this depth of unitive prayer that many Christians have found that the Hindu and Buddhist and Sufi mystics can lead us. This reminds us that centuries ago the Church was challenged by a similar movement of mystical prayer in the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus & Porphyry. But the Church in the 4th century did not meet this challenge by a cautious retreat into the past. It boldly accepted the challenge & incorporated into Christian doctrine the profound insights of the Neo-Platonists. Jaci Davidson in his *Platonism et Theologia Mystica* has shown how St Gregory of Nyssa steeped himself in the philosophy of Plotinus and by subtle changes adapted it to orthodox Christian doctrine.

Another crisis in Christian mysticism was encountered in the sixth century with Dionysius the Areopagite, now generally believed to have been a Syrian monk of that period who had absorbed the teachings of Porphyry, a later Neo-Platonist. He boldly went beyond the dualistic, conceptual model of prayer to which the Roman document clings and declared that in contemplative prayer we must go beyond all words and concepts and enter

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into the "divine darkness", so that we come to "know by unknowing". Anyone familiar with Hindu and Buddhist mysticism will know that it is to this 'supra-conceptual' knowledge, this experience of a transcendent mystery, transcending word and thought, that they also ^{can lead} ~~are led~~. This is not to say that Hindu, Buddhist and Christian ^{mystics} all have the same experience. But it is to recognize an analogy between ^{the experiences} ~~them~~ and to look upon ^{the Hindu and Buddhist} ~~their~~ experience as something of supreme ^{significance} ~~importance~~, not to be lightly dismissed by a Christian as of no importance.

There is a crisis in the church today. Many Christians are looking to the church for guidance in contemplative prayer and are failing to find it. They then turn to Hindu and Buddhist masters for guidance and often through them come to understand something of the depth of Christian mysticism. But for such people this document offers no assistance whatever. It is rather calculated to put them off and make them confirmed in their belief that the Christian Church ^{has} ~~has~~ nothing to offer those who are seeking God in the dark, often on a lonely path and desperately in need of the guidance which the church ^{so often} ~~fails~~ to give.

I hope that I have not put the case too strongly, but I feel that a protest has to be made. You can make any use you like of it if you decide to publish it, please show it first to Fr. Thomas Keating or anyone else you respect for correction.

Yours ever sincerely in Christ

A Bede