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Page 170

BOOKS

MY GURU AND HIS DISCIPLE by Christopher Isherwood. Eyre Methuen, £8.50

What can turn an atheist intellectual into a resident devotee at a vedanta temple? What can turn him away again? Explanations are here proffered by the atheist himself, in cool and lucid Isherwood prose.

The guru of the title is Swami Prabhavananda, head of the Hollywood Centre of the Ramakrishna Order. Isherwood's atheism leads him to the Swami. To deny God brings one nearer to him. In the Swami's words: "Anyone who says he has devotion or thinks he has devotion doesn't have it." Credulity is the greatest obstacle to spiritual progress. Isherwood discovers within himself a strong devotional inclination coupled with emptiness. He is steeped in that dull brutish inertia the Hindus call *tamas*. Yet there is nostalgia, an almost-memory of something once known, long-since forgotten.

Who can fill the gap but God? At first Isherwood recoils:

"To me all this Oriental stuff was distasteful in the extreme. However my distaste was quite different from the distaste I felt for the Christians. The Christians I saw as sour life-haters and sex-forbidders, hypocritically denying their rabid secret lusts. The Hindus I saw as stridently emotional mysterymongers whose mumbo jumbo was ridiculous rather than sinister. "

The Swami's personality and teaching dispel the ridicule. God is a sound as well expressed by "a Nature to be known" or even "this thing." It is another word for the reality within, the Atman. On hearing that a rodent exterminator is to join the Temple, a devotee smartly ripostes: "from ratman to Atman." But the Atman is no joke. An initiated disciple will not be set free from his guru until he realizes the Atman within himself, and is united with it.

The obstacles to this release are tough. Addictions and their opposite, aversions. Pretensions. Possessions. The Swami teaches that austerity and discomfort are not the answer. A man of true renunciation concerns himself neither with poverty nor with riches. Mere outward austerity is a degenerate form of ritualism. The, spiritual soul makes no demonstration of its renunciation or its communion with God.

Behind and fortifying the obstacles lurks the ego or self-will. The spiritual person does not try to impress you with his personality, the way most people do. His ego-space takes up little room. The Swami was like that. With candour, Isherwood makes it plain that at no time did his own ego cease to obtrude. It sabotaged his attempts at spirituality by insinuating doubt. It strove to maintain the messy impulse-driven way of life to which it was accustomed. It would rather wallow in lazy black misery than be interfered with by the Swami. But the aim of religion is not to make you happy in a worldly sense. "The death of the ego 'was never supposed to be pleasant, and this misery may really mean that we are getting ahead with it."

The misery was principally over sex. The devotee must be celibate, and Isherwood places sexual experience high in his list of essentials. Here we confront a contradiction in the spiritual life. All the great religions agree that chastity is essential to spirituality. Yet in doing this they discard a human attribute. How can a legitimate philosophy of man reject a part of man? The Hindu doctrine of *kundalini* does not reject sex altogether. It puts it in its place, and it is literally a low place. The *kundalini* is a reserve of energy situated at the base of the spine. The energy can rise to any of seven levels, depending on the person's degree of spirituality. If it reaches the highest there is *samadhi*, the ultimate experience of union with what is eternal within oneself. Chastity is a necessity, to conserve the psychic power essential for spiritual progress. Sex is not evil or sinful, but something to be overcome along the road to personal development. If one wishes to win the race one must keep in training.

Within the Swami, Isherwood is aware of strong sexuality. It is controlled, rather than repressed or concealed. The Bengali is small in stature, somehow babylike. He arouses protective feelings and has an animal lack of self-consciousness about bodily functions. He freely smiles and giggles, showing two rabbit-like front teeth. He chain-smokes cigarettes, drinks alcohol and eats meat (though not beef). He shows the devotees how to be a follower, not how to be a leader. Every one of them loves him. Indeed to them he is the very embodiment of love, though not the kind that makes demands. With him there is lack of demand, lack of strain, entire reassurance. He does not think of sexual activity as "impure" (though Isherwood does). For the Swami, purity is telling the truth. He believes in the universality of religion, and is against creeds, sects and fanatics. This raises a question for the humanist. If spirituality is part of man the humanist cannot reject it. A humanist should oppose *wrong* religion not *all* religion.

The discipline of the order was less rigorous in Hollywood than at its base in India. Meditation was central. At first it is a struggle to fix the mind on all-pervading Existence. Later,

Page 171

.....contemplation is effortless. We are unaware of the passage of time, and the need for images stops. We pass beyond the stage of logical analysis. We cease to infer. We know.

To aid contemplation, the guru gives the initiate a *mantram*. This consists of one or more names in Sanskrit. Constant repetition of the mantram (perhaps with the aid of a rosary) is called making *japam*. A devotee makes between five thousand and ten thousand repetitions on an average day. Meditation can take place anywhere. Isherwood's favourite spot for it was the shrine room of the Temple. The smell of incense helped. It induced a special mood by association - just as the smell of antiseptics induces the passive mood of the hospital patient. The shrine contained holy relics, about which Isherwood remarks:

"The Hindus, like the Catholics, believe that such relics generate spiritual power which can be communicated to worshippers who expose themselves to it. But this is only half of the process. What the worshippers receive, they must return to the shrine through acts of worship; thereby they 'recharge' the shrine, and thus themselves, continually."

Isherwood never quite became a believer. He could not bring himself to abandon the self which sometimes needed to be sex-absorbed, drunken or angry. He missed his friends, and above all he needed to pursue his genius as a creative writer wherever it might lead him. The price of holiness was too high. He remained a demi-devotee with a foot in both worlds.

This beautifully-written book squarely confronts what each of us must face. Men and women are fleshly spiritual. Being both, can we live both? If not, which shall we prefer?

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