

From belonging to the ground of being: Henri Le Saux's journey to the heart beyond conceptualisations

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Introduction: The Expanding Phenomenon of Dual Belonging

Contemporary theology and religious studies are increasingly becoming more aware of religious dual belonging, where individuals identify with and seek spiritual wisdom from two distinct religious traditions. Empirical data on the prevalence of this phenomenon is still emerging. While it remains limited, key findings from recent studies have demonstrated that dual belonging is a larger reality than assumed. For example, East and South Asian countries are more culturally open to a natural metissage between the traditions,¹ and modern individuals are now shifting from exclusive religious identities to a more fluid and hybrid² practice of religiosity (a practice that should not be considered as equal to the natural reality of metissage in Asia), as Joantine Berghuijs discovered in her 2017 empirical approach to hybrid religiosity in the highly secular Dutch society, where church membership and attendance are dwindling.³ The prevalence of religious dual belonging may

1 Fenggang Yan and Brian L. McPhail, "Measuring Religiosity of East Asians: Multiple Religious Belonging, Believing, and Practicing," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, (February 2023): 222, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/jssr.12827>

2 Here, hybridity refers to the self-conscious blending of traditions, typically associated with Western engagements with Asia, whereas *métissage* denotes the more organic, historically embedded weaving of religious traditions within native Asian contexts.

3 Joantine Berghuijs, "Multiple Religious Belonging in the Netherlands: An Empirical Approach to Hybrid Religiosity," *Open Theology* 3 (January 2017): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1515/pth-2017-0003>

be more particularly true if we concede with Catherine Cornille, professor of comparative theology in Boston, that such religious plurality was – at least on a popular level – the norm in societies, and confessing only one faith was an exception,⁴ beginning with Judaism and becoming a rule of thumb once Christianity gained cultural and theological ascendancy.⁵ Therefore, religious dual belonging is not a late observance recently picked up by academics but a long-occurring way of life thanks to cross-cultural and transnational spiritual searching. The curious nature of dual religious believers is also interesting as it does not come uniformly, and questions arise if such individuals indwell two traditions simultaneously, if they inhabit a hybrid interstitial space, or another category altogether.

Hindu-Christian exchange – encounters across traditions

Given this broader historical and theological landscape, this study turns to the specific case of Hindu-Christian dual belonging, where questions of identity, practice and exclusivity become particularly acute. Since the last 300 years, mutual interaction between Hindus and Christians has created forms of spiritual hybridisation through what Daniel Soars and Nadya Pohran describe as “Euro-American intellectual and cultural frameworks.”⁶ Especially in the nineteenth century, the Christian imagination of India was that of a land ripe for colonisation, coupled with missionary zeal and romanticised spirituality.⁷ Before the Indians and their sages, temples, rituals, and holy mountains, the Western Christian conceived a supposed spiritual paradox of the people, who they dualistically saw as both spiritually darkened and imbued with profound

4 Catherine Cornille, *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 1–2.

5 The Old Testament bears witness to recurring forms of religious syncretism within ancient Israel, most notably Elijah’s divine contest on Mount Carmel, where he accuses the people of Israel of continuously “limping” between the LORD and Ba’al (1 Kgs 18:20–21). There is also archaeological evidence from the Iron Age of inscriptions referring to “YHWH and his Asherah,” suggesting that certain Israelite circles believed that God had a goddess wife. Cf. William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Flk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

6 Daniel Soars, Nadya Pohran, “Introduction,” *Hindu-Christian Dual Belonging*, ed. Daniel Soars and Nadya Pohran (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 2.

7 Cf. Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–67* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), Andrew Porter, *Religions versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “the Mystic East”* (London: Routledge, 1999).

wisdom.⁸ This has often led to unjust condemnation of Hindu philosophy by Christians who could not reconcile the evident spiritual depth of an Eastern spirituality with their own Westernised theological constructs, a tension which Robert Charles Zaehner remarks about in *Christianity and Other Religions*, stating that as a Church “we would do well to see out the truth and the idealism that can be found in even the most remote ideologies rather than to condemn outright what we have not first learnt to understand.”⁹

Indeed, it is in this seeking of the truth within the East that many Christians have found, and continue to see, through the wisdom of Vedānta, a reclamation of the mystical sense of the divine in everyday life, which they perceive to have diminished in the Western world.¹⁰ Likewise, on the other riverbank, Hindu teachers and gurus began to reinterpret elements of Christian doctrine “within Indic styles of beliefs and practices.”¹¹ Two examples are Swāmī Prabhavananda’s *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*¹² and Ian Davie’s *Jesus Purusha: A Vedanta-Based Doctrine of Jesus*.¹³ There is also Swāmī Siddheswarananda’s exploration of intersecting spiritual insights between Carmelite spirituality and Hindu philosophy in his eminent work *Hindu Thought and Carmelite Mysticism*, first delivered as lectures at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1937 “in response to the earnest request of some devotees and admirers of the Ramakrishna

8 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1–3.

9 Robert Charles Zaehner, *Christianity and Other Religions*, vol. 146 of *The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, section XV: *Non-Christian Beliefs* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964), 13.

10 Soars, Pohran, “Introduction,” 2.

11 Ibid.

12 Swāmī Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount According to the Vedanta* (New York: New American Library, Mentor Books, 1972), xi. “This book is based on the lectures I have given on the Sermon on the Mount. [...] To me, the Sermon on the Mount represents the essence of Christ’s gospel; and it is printed here in its entirety, as it is set down, so that Christ’s words may be read in sequence and the unity of his message may be clearly seen. [...] I have tried to approach the teachings of Christ. This is why I have often turned to the words of Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples to help explain the truths of the Sermon on the Mount.”

13 Ian Davie, *Jesus Purusha: A Vedānta-Based Doctrine of Jesus* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press, 1985), 1. “You ask me how it is that I find Hinduism fulfilled in the Person of Jesus. If you will bear with me, and follow me through the maze of my endeavor to explain, to offer a reason for the faith that is in me, I think that you will come to understand why I hold him to be the very heart of Hinduism; for there it was that I found him after all. And because the truth cannot be stated so as to be understood and not believed, I dare to hope that you will likewise be led, by this unfolding of faith, to make your way to the ashram of Jesus Purusha, and join with us in the breaking of the bread.”

Movement in France.”¹⁴ This monk of the Ramakrishna Mission delved into the parallels between Hindu mystics like Shankara and between Hindu mystics like Śaṅkara and Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa and Carmelite mystics, notably St John of the Cross, comparatively analysing the spiritual path of both traditions. He also established the Vedanta Centre near Paris in 1948 to bridge Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, for he saw in the two universal aspects of mystical experience.¹⁵

It is also intriguing to observe that discussions surrounding Hindu-Christian dual belonging are predominantly populated by individuals from Roman Catholic backgrounds who express a particular interest in Advaita Vedānta,¹⁶ a non-dualistic school of Hindu philosophy that posits the ultimate reality (Brahman) and the individual self (*Ātman*) as fundamentally the same (the One Reality), emphasising the unity of all existence.¹⁷ Three prominent figures in the Hindu-Catholic dialogue – Swāmī Abhishiktānanda, Raimon Panikkar, and Bede Griffiths¹⁸ – have significantly contributed to integrating the two traditions, endeavours that have engendered questions regarding the implications of engaging with and embodying two distinct spiritual languages. Swāmī Abhishiktānanda’s mission in India, in particular, marked a pivotal trajectory change in what is primarily understood as dual belonging and its spiritual culmination.

14 “Obituary Note on Swami Shiddheshwarananda.” *The Vedanta Kesari*, May 1957, 154–155. <https://vk.rkmm.org/s/vkm/m/vedanta-kesari-1957/a/11-obituary-note-on-swami-siddheswarananda-may-1955>.

15 Swami Siddheswarananda. *Hindu Thought and Carmelite Mysticism*. Translated from French by William Buchanan. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998;

16 It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore whether Roman Catholics fascinated with the Orient immersed themselves in the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara and his early followers, in the popularized Neo-Vedānta of Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission, or in the spiritual experience of Ramana Maharshi as later interpreted in the light of Śaṅkara.

17 Soars, Pohrana, “Introduction,” 3. Advaita Vedānta (“non-dual Vedānta”) is a major school of Hindu philosophy associated especially with Śaṅkara (8th century). It teaches that ultimate reality is non-dual brahman, identical with ātman (the self), and that multiplicity and differentiation arise from ignorance (avidyā) and superimposition (adhyāsa). Liberation (*mokṣa*) is attained through knowledge (jñāna) that dispels ignorance and reveals the identity of self and brahman. While acknowledging Vedic revelation and ritual tradition, Advaita ultimately privileges transformative knowledge over ritual action as the means to liberation. Cfr. W. J. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), s.v. “Advaita Vedānta,” 15–16.

18 I have written them in this order because Abhishiktānanda lived Advaita Vedānta in its radical consequences, Panikkar philosophised and theologised about it, and Griffiths popularised it.

Henri Le Saux's vocation and transformation in India

Henri Le Saux (1910–73), a French Benedictine monk, had journeyed to India in 1948 with missionary zeal to give a contemplative witness to Christ to the people after living for about nineteen years at the Abbey of Saint-Anne de Kergonan in Brittany. Merely five years of his entering religious life, before even taking his final vows, he felt called “to see and take part in the establishment of contemplative monastic life in the Indian Church; or, if that were not possible (...) then at least to lead a contemplative life in some hermitage in India.”¹⁹ Along with Fr Jules Monchanin, who had also felt called to devote himself to the Church in India,²⁰ Le Saux co-founded the Saccidānanda Ashram (Shantivanam) in Tamil Nadu, aiming to integrate Christian monastic life with Indian *sannyasa* traditions, a renunciate way of life cut off from worldly attachment to pursue spiritual liberation through asceticism and meditation.²¹

Le Saux adopted the name Abhishiktānanda, meaning “Bliss of the Anointed One,” and immersed himself in Hindu spirituality, particularly Advaita Vedānta, engaging deeply with the teachings of sages like Śrī Rāmaṇa Maharṣi. He was also fortunate to have had the esteemed advaitic sage Śrī Jñānānanda Giri as his guru, who had left a deep impression on him when they first met, as he later wrote:

For the first time in my life, I could not resist making the great prostration of our Hindu tradition, and to whom I believe I might give myself the great prostration of our Hindu tradition, and to whom I believe I might give myself over completely (...) I now know what India means by the term ‘guru.’²²

Under his guidance, he delved deeper into the experience of Advaita (non-duality), integrating his advaitic insight with his Christian monastic background and eventually realising he was treading dangerous waters, at least

19 James D. M. Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through His Letters*, rev. ed. (Delhi, India: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1995), 11.

20 Ibid., 13.

21 “*saṃnyāsa* (‘laying aside,’ ‘renunciation’). The way of life of a ‘Brahmanical renunciant’ (*saṃnyāsin*); also the name of the ritual by which a man becomes such a *saṃnyāsin*. More loosely, the renunciation of ‘caste’ identity in order to pursue personal liberation.” Cfr. Johnson, *Dictionary of Hinduism*, s.v. “*saṃnyāsa*,” 284–85.

22 Stuart, *His Life Told through His Letters*, 86–87.

from a Breton conservative Catholic outlook and what his fellow companion Fr Jules Monchanin saw.

Catholic tensions regarding dogma and dual belonging

In truth, considering Christianity is a confessional faith, the Catholic perspective on religious dual belonging is often a distrusting approach reserved for the legitimacy of this way of living and believing. Gavin D’Costa considers the matter of Catholic-Hindu dual belonging from the viewpoint of Catholic dogmatics, arguing that while dual belonging is potentially legitimate within the Catholic faith, it requires careful consideration.²³ His argument summarises that dual belonging may enrich the Catholic faith as long as it does not contradict core Catholic doctrine, especially the necessity of Christ and the Church for salvation (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, “no salvation outside the Church”). He critiques pluralism as a theological position that places all religions on equal footing – an idea the Catholic Church also resists, while still acknowledging the presence of truth and grace in other faiths.²⁴ Instead, he posits asymmetrical dual belonging as an alternative, where the dual believer affirms Catholicism’s necessity for salvation and Hinduism as instrumental in deepening the Catholic faith without being salvific. Such an individual would be known as a “soteriological exclusivist dual believer.”²⁵ Unfortunately, Costa quickly condemns Le Saux in his paper as having denied *de fide* teachings to pluralism and syncretism, showing that even in academic and religious circles, there are hesitations and misunderstandings about the sannyāsi monk.²⁶

This misunderstanding of the man is because Le Saux did not rest at what Costa (or other academics) sees as a safe stage in his engagement with Hindu advaitic philosophy but dared himself to be taken by the Spirit in oft uncharted or misconstrued waters, continually casting aside his thoughts and elucidations

23 Gavin D’Costa, “Considering the case of Catholic-Hindu dual belonging from a magisterial and dogmatic point of view,” *Hindu-Christian Dual Belonging*, ed. Daniel Soars and Nadya Pohran (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge: 2022), 70.

24 For example, see post-Vatican II documents *Nostra Aetate* and *Redemptoris Missio*, which affirm other religions may contain “rays of truth” and can serve as paths of preparation or partial participation in the truth.

25 A person who affirms the necessity of Christ and the Church for salvation (soteriological exclusivism), while simultaneously engaging meaningfully with another religious tradition. This concept is proposed as a way to reconcile dual religious participation without abandoning Catholic doctrinal boundaries.

26 D’Costa, “Considering the case of Catholic-Hindu dual belonging,” 77.

ever to be a more authentic witness to God whom he loved so dearly. As already stated, Le Saux had joined Fr Jules Monchanin in India with missionary zeal, as he wrote in a 1947 letter one year before leaving his monastery in Kergonan: “I dream of giving our blessed Father [St. Benedict] new children who will fashion a Christian India, as their elder brothers fashioned a Christian Europe.”²⁷ Once in India, Le Saux strove to have his ashram as authentic as possible. While enraptured by their spirituality on an intellectual plane, he was unconvinced that Hinduism and Christianity could be reconciled and felt driven to uncover the truth in Hindu philosophy by engaging firsthand with Hindu practitioners on their terms.²⁸ However, once he visited Śrī Rāmaṇa Maharṣi, a sage of the holy mountain of Arunachala,²⁹ his traditional understanding and acceptance of the Christian faith began to shatter. He wrote in *The Souvenirs d’arunâchala*: “It was a call which pierced through everything, tore it in pieces and opened a mighty abyss.”³⁰

From conceptual tension to mystical interiorisation

As the years passed, Le Saux began to feel more violently this sense of inner rending, or *déchirement*. In a diary entry dated August 27, 1955, Le Saux confesses how deeply embedded religious and cultural identities are within the human psyche, and to journey toward Advaita is to make a costly decision that feels like a “rending and burning,” a spiritual crucifixion of all that previously constituted the self.³¹ This mirrors the painful detachment and dark night that the soul undergoes as John of the Cross (whose mystical doctrine exerted a great influence on him) writes in his commentary on *Living Flame of Love*, where before the soul receives the Divine fire of love, “this flame is wounding the soul [...] consuming in it the imperfections of its evils habits [...] The flame is not bright [...] but dark [...] neither is it sweet, but grievous [...]”³² So, responding to

27 Henri Le Saux, letter to Jules Monchanin, 18 August 1947, in James D. M. Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His Life Told Through His Letters*, 18.

28 Ibid., 28.

29 Sri Ramana Maharishi was himself influenced by Christianity in his formation, the extent of which has yet to be studied.

30 Henri Le Saux, *Souvenirs d’Arunâchala: Récit d’un ermite chrétien en terre hindoue* (Paris: Épi/Desclée de Brouwer, 1980), 28.

31 Abhishiktānanda, diary entry, August 27, 1955, in *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948–73)*, ed. Raimon Panikkar, trans. David Fleming and James Stuart (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 117.

32 John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1962), 43, stanza I, para. 16.

the incessant call of the Self (*Ātman*), Le Saux begins to move beyond inherited dualities. In his poetic hymn to Aruṇācala,³³ the living manifestation of Śiva (the Supreme Lord), the “I” beyond the ego, Le Saux evokes Christ as the same flame of Advaita, the Pillar of Fire and love. This mountainous form of the Absolute before Le Saux makes him realise that his Saviour is beyond duality and otherness, yet fully immanent and absolute. He is irresistibly drawn to the mountain’s heart, its *guha*, the inner cave, the symbolic centre of being, in search of the silent voice that speaks only in solitude. There, all illusion (*māya*) disappears before the presence of the Self, and *nāma-rūpa*, the veil of names and forms, is also stripped away, consumed by divine love. Like the moth to the flame, Le Saux becomes consumed by the fire of God. Le Saux also mentions his double renunciation, first as a Benedictine monk and second as Abhishiktānanda, who now abandons even spiritual forms, names, and identities in pursuit of pure being. His prayer is not for spiritual experience but for dispossession, for his self to recognise itself as the I AM that Christ is.³⁴

Nonetheless, as is evident in his diary and personal letters up to his death on December 7, 1973, Le Saux’s enduring faithfulness to his Christian faith was unmistakable. Notably, recently released correspondences between Le Saux and Carmelite nuns attest to Le Saux’s interior life, which was not a hybridised spirituality but profoundly moulded by the Christian contemplative tradition, which Advaitic spirituality enriched rather than compromised.³⁵ Yann Vagneux declares that contrary to suggestive portrayals of the Swāmī as a syncretist or a precursor to New Age spiritualities, he should be understood as profoundly Christian. In India, he did not abandon his tradition but opened himself with radical generosity to Hinduism’s spiritual depth, an encounter which, as we see from his diary, provoked intense inner conflicts and theological tension.³⁶

33 Abhishiktānanda, diary entry, April 6, 1952, 36–38.

34 Le Saux was influenced by the Advaitin *neti, neti* meditative process of eliminating all that can be observed, perceived, or conceptualized as not the Self (body, thoughts, emotions and sensations), with the ultimate goal of revealing the pure, formless, unchanging awareness that is the true essence of “I.” Śrī Rāmaṇa Maharṣi in *Nan Yar?* explains: “After negating all of the above-mentioned as ‘not this,’ ‘not this,’ that Awareness which alone remains – that I am.”: Śrī Rāmaṇa Maharṣi, *Nan Yar? The Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi*, translation by Dr. T. M. P. Mahadevan from the original Tamil, Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, S. India, 1982.

35 Henri Le Saux and Thérèse de Jésus, *Le Swami et la Carmélite*, 2 vols., pref. and notes by Yann Vagneux (Strasbourg: Arfuyen, 2022–23).

36 Yann Vagneux, “Ne faisons pas d’Henri Le Saux un mythe” – Podcast #5 Yann Vagneux, YouTube video, September 12, 2024, posted by Henri Le Saux TV, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATDnSFoYo74>.

Le Saux often had to “put on the mask of a [scholastic/dogmatic] theologian” in Jules Monchanin’s presence and could only articulate his spiritual convictions with greater authenticity and freedom after the latter’s passing.³⁷ In this shift, the significance of his apparent dual belonging emerges. Such a term is employed because, for the dual believer, dwelling in this hybridity is not an end in itself; to remain so ironically risks confining the person within rigid categories and externally imposed forms. Le Saux eventually came to recognise that the Advaita path, non-dual awareness and more than a philosophical worldview, was the way to be consonant with the core of Christ’s teachings, which transcend binary frameworks to liberate the soul that yearns to call for a radical and authentic love of God. In the Gospel narratives, Jesus frequently resists either/or dilemmas, such as whether one should pay taxes or not, observe or break Sabbath restrictions, to forgive or condemn sinners,³⁸ opting instead to reply with a more profound and integrative sense of the truth.³⁹ Rather than rigid legalism, he speaks of compassion, relationality, and the inner disposition of the heart, making his followers understand that the soul-seeking person must let go of oppositions to affirm a more unitive understanding of reality. This movement finds its fullest expression in the mystery of the Incarnation, which does not merely model non-duality, but reveals it as the ontological ground of divine and human communion. As the Son who declares, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), Christ enfleshes this unity by becoming one with us.⁴⁰ As Master, he calls us to abide in Him, and to be one through Him, and with Him, and in Him,⁴¹ just as He is one with the Father (cf. John 17:21). In the Incarnation, the Word bridges the divide between spirit and matter and

37 Raimon Panikkar, *Swami Abhishiktananda: An Interview with Raimon Panikkar*, interview by Christian Hackbarth-Johnson, YouTube video, November 19, 2011, posted by Kusala’s Urban Dharma, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOMcDuHh31g> Le Saux’s writing was also submitted to Henri de Lubac by Monchanin and although not strictly heterodox, de Lubac suggested caution and discouraged the publication of a book (“Guhantara”) by Le Saux. De Lubac himself was interested in ‘dialogue’ of Christianity with Buddhism, mainly.

38 Matt. 22:15–22; Mark 3:1–6; John 8:1–11.

39 A perfect example is the narrative of the woman caught in adultery in John 8: 1–11.

40 John 14:20; 15:1–11;

41 The Concluding Doxology in the Catholic Liturgy of the Mass. Cfr. *The Sunday Missal: Sunday Masses for the Entire Three-Year Cycle*, ed. Rev. Dr. Robin Gibbons (London: Collins, 2011), “The Order of the Mass,” 84.

inaugurates a vision of the New Jerusalem, where, in the words of an ancient homily for Holy Saturday, heaven and earth are reconciled.⁴²

The late Raimon Panikkar, a Catholic priest, philosopher, and leading figure in interreligious dialogue, argued similarly about the intimate connection between being and thought, in which the latter transcends the former. He was a contemporary and close friend of Henri Le Saux and sought to articulate a vision of religious experience beyond conceptual theology. Before his death, Panikkar confessed his spiritual struggles about a God whose name he felt he had abused because of the limits of language, writing:

You are not an *Aliud* but rather an *Alter* – the other part of myself. But I do not know how to express this... I have not mentioned you by your name, Jesus Christ. I love, you who are neither myself nor another. I would like to say goodbye to all those whom I have loved passionately – because love is a passion.⁴³

Panikkar's confession contrasts *Aliud*, an Other and wholly external God, with *Alter*, the intimate Other, divine and inseparable from the self, mysteriously within and beyond at once. God is not the distant object of theology but the relational mystery at the core of being, which resonates with Le Saux's realisation of encountering God in the interior silence of the heart. It is the proper orientation of the soul longing for God not to reach outward toward an abstract deity but to descend into the very ground of being, as St Augustine of Hippo recognised, that God is He who is "deeper than my inmost understanding,"⁴⁴ and with the Psalmist who sings, "You formed my inmost being (...) my very self you know."⁴⁵ Still, in this apophatic tradition of God who is beyond thought or name, the name of Jesus retains its gravity, and the person of Christ remained for Le Saux as his deepest reference point.

42 Kummissjoni Liturgjika għall-Provinċja Ekkleżjastika Maltija, *Liturgija tas-Siġġat skond ir-Rit Ruman*, vol. 2 (Malta: Kummissjoni Liturgjika għall-Provinċja Ekkleżjastika Maltija, 1993), "Qari minn Omelija antika fuq is-Sibt Qaddis ta' l-Għid il-Kbir," 434–437.

43 Raimon Panikkar, *The Water of the Drop*, ed. Milena Carrara Pavan (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2018), 288–89.

44 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), 62 (3.6.11).

45 Psalm 139:13–15.

It is imperative also to recognise that Le Saux's spiritual journey was not a "third way"⁴⁶ of spiritual being but a radical interiorisation of truth beyond doctrinal and cultural borders.⁴⁷ In contemplation, he was across thresholds, between symbol and silence, form and formlessness. His profound insights in his interreligious journey stand in continuity with a long lineage of mystics, Christian or otherwise, who, by grace, came to dwell in the Divine. Pseudo-Dionysius's apophatic theology insists that God is beyond all names, images, and concepts. He may be praised more profoundly by denying what he is not, for even the most exalted names fall short of the divine mystery.⁴⁸ Likewise, Meister Eckhart's "ground of the soul" (*Grunt*), a dwelling of simplicity and stillness, deeper than the mind's or will's faculties, where the soul and God are one.⁴⁹ Fr. Angelus Silesius, the seventeenth-century poet and mystic who converted from Protestantism to Catholicism and, from being a Franciscan, embraced a deeper solitude, echoes similar themes in *The Cherubinic Wanderer*, writing of himself as the peak in God, which he must himself ascend "If ever I be shown the dearest countenance" (2:83). In another poem he expresses,

No future and no past! What is about to be
Forever was in God perceived essentially. (2:182)

These verses and others unfold the mystery of God through silence, surrender, and paradox to flee into the open desert of Being, where the Divine and the Self

46 An expression coined and popularised by Steven Levy, drawing inspiration from Richard Rohr. Cfr. Steven Levy, "The Third Way," CACE: The Centre for the Advancement of Christian Education, accessed 22 April 2025, <https://cace.org/the-third-way/>.

47 To move beyond does not imply the abandonment of what presides, but rather a progression toward the goal to which these elements point. It is essential to recognise the distinction between objective faith and the subjective appropriation and interpretation of that faith through human categories and conceptual frameworks.

48 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920), 59. "It is greater than all Reason and all knowledge, and hath Its firm abode altogether beyond Mind and Being, and cannot be reached by any perception, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding..."

49 Meister Eckhart, "Sermon 2," in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed. Maurice O'C. Walsh, rev. with a foreword by Bernard McGinn (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 40. "[...] for the soul's image appertains especially to this eternal birth, which happens truly and especially in the soul, being begotten of the Father in the soul's ground and innermost recesses, into which no image ever shone or (soul-)power peeped." This is also at the back of Nicholas of Cusa's *docta ignorantia* and the medieval text *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

are inseparable.⁵⁰ Without the language of Advaita that Le Saux knew, all these mystics affirmed a reality that transcends concept boundaries and religious identities. In light of this, we do well to see Le Saux's spiritual journey as a rediscovery, an awakening to the perennial truth that experiencing God is not confined to any one doctrine or tradition, as well as a grace not for the privileged few, but to all who dare to fully surrender to the depths of Being.⁵¹

The Sacred Heart and the Inner Cross

Immersing himself even deeper into the Advaita mystery, Le Saux yearned for a state he described using Advaita thought and categories as “waking sleep,” a condition of complete identification with Christ's inner divine reality. “The interior of Christ,” he writes, “is my interior together with the interior of God, of the divine Father.”⁵² This mystical union is sought by radical interiority, compelled by the action of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete whom Christ promises will lead His disciples into all truth.⁵³ This same Spirit draws the soul not merely into discipleship but friendship, as Jesus declares: “I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”⁵⁴ The Gospel of St John underscores that intimacy with God is the fruit of divine self-disclosure/revelation; those whom God loves are drawn into His confidence. For Le Saux, this divine intimacy is not confined to ecclesial boundaries but flows wherever the heart is open to the Real. He writes in his diary:

I must have absolute faith in this mystery of the beyond into which I throw myself. Whether I call it Christ, Shiva, Paramātmān does not matter. Total acceptance that someone is there to receive me, to take

⁵⁰ Maria Shradý, “Foreword,” in *Angelus Silesius: The Cherubic Wanderer*, trans. and foreword Maria Shradý, intro. and notes Josef Schmidt (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), x.

⁵¹ This insight about the experience of God as not confined to any single doctrine or tradition was rediscovered during the Renaissance in the form of the *prisca theologica* and *philosophia perennis*, championed by figures such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. It later resurfaced in the twentieth century through thinkers like the French metaphysician René Guénon (+1951), who also translated parts of the Vedānta. A contemporary of Swāmī Abhishiktānanda (Henri Le Saux), it remains to be seen whether the two were aware of each other's work.

⁵² Abhishiktānanda, diary entry, July 28, 1955, 106.

⁵³ John 14:26

⁵⁴ John 15:15.

complete charge of me, or rather that in the end I will find myself set free from all my present limitations.⁵⁵

In this complete abandonment, Le Saux enters a space beyond dogma, ritual, and even theological imagery, intensifying his tension. Immersed as he is in Advaita, he admits an inner conflict: meditating on the image of Christ as the Beloved falls short of comfort since he is “already too Hindu and too advaitic to do that.” He continues writing: “Even the symbol of the Cross no longer speaks to me. So I concentrate on the Heart of Christ, *hrid*, in the Hindu understanding of the mystery of the Sacred Heart.” (July 27, 1955)⁵⁶

Here, Le Saux is not rejecting the Cross outright. Other later and favourable references to the Cross are found in his diary, such as an entry dated Good Friday, March 31, 1972, where he reflects that the mystery of the Cross conveys a depth that Hindu archetypes such as the Purusha or the sadguru cannot express: “The Purusha is not sacrificed for the world’s salvation. He does not suffer – Jesus suffers.” In Le Saux’s estimation, Christianity confronts suffering and sin as real and redemptive, not as *māya* or illusion, but as real and redemptive, wounds through which the Divine enters, uniquely, through Christ. In this light, the Cross becomes a symbol of suffering and sacred revelation. As the Good Friday liturgy recalls through the words of St John Chrysostom, in the side wound of the Crucified Christ, the temple veil is torn open, revealing to us God’s dwelling place.⁵⁷ Human suffering is the path to communion, not a reality to transcend, since the pure of heart serves in suffering. The Cross is not an emblem of triumphalism to them but of kenotic love, the divine self-emptying made visible.⁵⁸

How, then, can these perspectives be reconciled? The reconciliation lies not in compromise but in a transformation of spiritual consciousness. For Le Saux, the most profound truths of the Cross are not discarded but interiorised. In the stillness of contemplative union – what the Upanishads call the *guha*, the cave of the heart, one of the most ancient images associated with the heart

55 Abhishiktānanda, diary entry, July 27, 1955, 106–107.

56 Ibid.

57 This catechesis is given as the Second reading in Office of Readings of Good Friday. Cfr. *Liturgijas-Sighat*, vol. 2, “Qari mill-katekezi ta’ l-isqof San Ġwann Krizostmu,” 415–416. “A soldier opened his side, and the wall of the Holy Temple was revealed to us; and I have found a precious treasure and rejoice that I have acquired a wealth beyond compare.”

58 Abhishiktānanda, diary entry, December 11, 1971, 333.

in the Indian tradition – form and symbol dissolve. The Cross becomes not a historical event but a timeless mystery inscribed in the Sacred Heart, or *hrid*, where the Divine Self (*Ātman*) dwells in silence. So, what remains is not a narrative of devotion but a mystical ontology: the Cross's essential meaning, calling the faithful to passionately love and transcend sin, is reconstituted as interior reality. Within the *guha*, Christ, who loves and suffers, is eternally present as pure Being, *Brahman*, and the Cross and Self are one. In this light, Le Saux echoes Pseudo-Dionysius, for whom divine love is an ecstatic and unfying power that carries the soul beyond itself.⁵⁹

Thus, through the Cross, Le Saux descends into the Heart, the still point where passion and love join into pure being. His Beloved is no longer outside but revealed as the Self within, the I AM. Le Saux affirms the mystery of the Cross but realises that symbols such as the Beloved of the Crucified rest on a dualistic foundation, a distinction between God and the sinner, between subject and object. The swāmī no longer seeks relationships alone but for identity. In the Sacred Heart, when freed from sentimental devotionism, Le Saux discovers the centre of consciousness, the locus of revelation and transformation. In the silence of the *hrid*, the Cross is transfigured, and the Divine Self shines forth beyond all form.

Death and the Holy Grail as the final union

Eventually, Le Saux's prayer for an ultimate surrender was answered. In his final days, it seemed that Le Saux was aware of his impending death, physical and spiritual. On July 9, 1973, just days before his heart attack, he composed a kind of testament with instructions about "the disposal of his books, files and correspondence, not forgetting 'souvenirs'."⁶⁰ He then made one final journey to Rishikesh and then to Kaudiyala, a remote hamlet along the Ganges, spending three days with his disciple Marc Chaduc (Swāmī Ajātānanda) in a small, deserted Śiva temple without food in a state of 'holy inebriation.'⁶¹ On

59 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names* IV.13, trans. C. E. Rolt (London: SPCK, 1920), 105: "The Divine Yearning brings ecstasy, not allowing them that are touched thereby to belong unto themselves but only to the objects of their affection."

60 Abhishiktānanda, "TRUE COPIES OF INSTRUCTIONS LEFT BY SWAMI ABHISHIKTANANDA DULY SIGNED ON 9.7.73." 9 July, 1973, in Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through His Letters*, 305.

61 In Catholicism, it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit as well as the effect of the Blood of Christ we partake in the Eucharist.

July 14, 1973, Le Saux and Chaduc parted with words that both instinctively recognised as “those of the ‘great departure’ [the soul’s final release or transition into ultimate union with the Divine] and a final farewell.” That very afternoon, Le Saux collapsed in the Rishikesh bazaar from a severe heart attack, the outward sign of his inner consummation.⁶²

Le Saux was providentially recognised by a friend whose taxi had been held up at the bazaar, and for the next two weeks, he was lodged and nursed in the Tourist Bungalow. While there, he quickly penned a poem to be delivered to his disciple, describing his heart attack as Śiva’s column of fire passing over him, an unmistakable symbol of divine penetration and awakening. Using eschatological imagery, he writes:

You were looking for me either among the dead or among the living,
in some *loka* [situation, world] or other, forgetting that simple, I
was, I am. The awakening has nothing to do with any situation. The
awakening, *prabodha*, (just) is.⁶³

Le Saux directly echoes the language of Christ’s resurrection when the angels tell the women at the tomb, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”⁶⁴ Therefore, in his moment of mystical resurrection, Le Saux no longer locates the Self in temporal or situational categories of life or death but testifies to a state of pure presence: “I was, I am.”⁶⁵ The eternal presence of Being is beyond birth and decay.

The two weeks following his heart attack were, in Le Saux’s words, filled with bliss. Despite the decline in his physical strength and mental clarity, he saw them as an invitation to deeper surrender. In his state, his ego was stripped away. He found himself lost in “total simplicity,” no longer tethered to thought or identity grounded in what Meister Eckhart might call the *Grund*, the “ground of the soul,” something not to be attained but the very depth of what one already is in God. As Le Saux put it, he had been “cloué par Shiva,” nailed by Śiva, an image of inner crucifixion and transformation. This may be

62 Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through His Letters*, 305.

63 Abhishiktānanda, letter to Marc Chaduc, 21 July 1973, in Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told Through His Letters*, 307.

64 Luke 24:5

65 Abhishiktānanda, letter to Marc Chaduc, 21 July 1973, in Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told Through His Letters*, 307.

connected to St John of the Cross's commentary on *Living Flame of Love*, where he writes that divine union often comes through a "supernatural assault of love" so intense it may overwhelm the soul's earthly capacity to endure it.⁶⁶ He also writes of the experience of God:

The soul feels itself to be at last wholly enkindled in Divine union [...] the soul is in such a lofty way possessed of Him, and is adorned with such a marvellous wealth of gifts and virtues, it is very near bliss, from which it is divided only by a slender web.⁶⁷

St John continues writing that the soul is struck by love to death, stripped of all agencies and taken up entirely by the Spirit,⁶⁸ an image of passive and receptive transformation in clear correspondence with Le Saux's experience of being consumed by divine fire. The swāmi's consciousness is now irrevocably altered, as he now abided in that dimensionless space where form, time, and striving fall away. What remained was the silent I AM, the Self in union with the Real.

It is fitting, then, that Le Saux came to describe his heart attack as the culmination of his spiritual quest. In letters written during his recovery, he wrote of having found the long-sought "Holy Grail," referring to his experience as a moment of ultimate awakening. This "extra lease of life," as he called it, was not for personal fulfilment but permission by God's grace to share his discovery with others. For Le Saux, the encounter with the Self (Ātman), not fully realised as the "I AM," marked the completion of a journey requiring the total surrender of ego, form, and theological constructs. In his diary, he expressed:

66 John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 55, stanza I, para. 28. In a letter to Mère Françoise-Thérèse written a month after his heart attack, Abhishiktānanda writes: "We must accept what your Carmelite saints say (Elijah was very much present to us during that week that was spiritually so powerful), that there are inner experiences which the body/heart cannot bear." ("Il faut croire ce que disent vos saints du Carmel (Elie nous fut très présent dans cette semaine spirituelle si forte) qu'il y a des expériences intérieures que le corps ne peut supporter.") Cfr. Abhishiktānanda, letter to Mère Françoise-Thérèse, 16 August 1973, in Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told Through His Letters*, 309.

67 John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 32, stanza I, para. 1.

68 John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 32–37, stanza I, para. 1–8: "that delicate flame of love that burns within it [...] whenever it assails it" (32, stanza I, para. 1); "the soul cannot perform these acts, but it is the Holy Spirit that moves it [...] impelled and moved to them by God" (34, stanza I, para. 4); "its only business the reception of God" (38, stanza I, para. 9); "wounds the soul [...] so deeply and profoundly does it wound it" (36, stanza I, para. 7).

After some days there came to me, as if it were the marvellous solution to an equation: I have found the Grail. And that is what I keep saying and writing to anyone who can grasp the figure of speech. The quest for the Grail is basically nothing else than the quest for the Self. A single quest, that is the meaning of all the myths and symbols. It is yourself that you are seeking through everything. And in this quest you run about everywhere, whereas the Grail is here, close at hand, you only have to open your eyes. And that is finding the Grail in its ultimate truth, Galahad's direct sight of the inside of the vessel and no longer just being fed by the Grail which mysteriously passes through the hall, nor even drinking from the Grail[...]⁶⁹

We can see here that Le Saux is drawing on Arthurian legends, particularly the figure of Sir Galahad. The Holy Grail, a potent image in the French Catholic and mystical imagination,⁷⁰ is the chalice that received the Blood of Christ, first at the Last Supper and again at the Crucifixion in the hands of Joseph of Arimathea. It is a mystical symbol of union: the Passion, the Eucharist and the full realisation of divine presence all in one. As such, it is the symbolic equivalent of the Christic mystery and the mystic's goal in their inner pilgrimage. Therefore, Le Saux sees in the figure of the virgin knight Sir Galahad the spiritual life as a quest marked by interior purity, suffering and surrender, for it is only the purest of knights who may behold the Grail, not for glory, but as a testament of readiness to receive the divine mystery.⁷¹ Galahad's virginal heart mirrors the mystic's disposition to harbour a heart emptied of self, capable of union. Likewise, Le Saux's "marvellous adventure"⁷² was his soul's transformation into one who can see, receive, and become what it beholds. The Holy Grail is the summit of Christian and Advaita perfection, where the mystic no longer seeks consolation or experience but rests in the silent recognition of the Christ has always been present, the Bridegroom in the heart (*hrid*), awaited in longing and now revealed in stillness. The "cellar" is the soul's innermost depth, the "last and most intimate degree of love," where God communicates Himself and "the understanding drinks wisdom," a participation that is received rather than

69 Abhishiktānanda, diary entry, September 11, 1973, 386.

70 Cfr. René Guénon, *Le Roi du Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).

71 Theo Howard, "The Sacred Heart, the Most Precious Blood, and Mystical Chivalry," *OnePeterFive*, July 1, 2024, <https://onepeterfive.com/the-sacred-heart-the-most-precious-blood-and-mystical-chivalry/>

72 Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktānanda: His Life Told through His Letters*, p. 307.

acquired through discourse.⁷³ God is the “crystalline fountain” within the soul, from which “flow the waters of all spiritual blessings,” a hidden source that springs up into everlasting life.⁷⁴ God may communicate Himself abundantly and frequently in the soul’s inmost centre until, through the transformation of love, “each lives in the other, and the one is the other, and both are one.”⁷⁵ echoing Le Saux’s final realisation of non-duality where the ego is no longer the one who seeks, but the Self who is.

Conclusion: Toward the Centre of Being

As such, Le Saux’s final realisation is not innovation but recognition, a return to the centre shared by all true mystics, the soul’s consummation in Being. His heart attack was the culmination of a life lovingly poured out in pursuit of the Real. St John of the Cross wrote about this state of soul: “In slaying, thou hast changed death into life.”⁷⁶ A soul united with God does not see death as a rupture but a luminous passage into the very being of God, the final purification and gentle transfiguration by love into the divine.

Henri Le Saux’s life also raises important questions about religious dual belonging, which can often become a fixed identity of inhabiting two traditions simultaneously or oscillating between the two in a hybrid state, rather than realising that one more step is yet to be taken, that of transcending categories altogether. What began as a bridging of Christianity and Advaita Vedānta became a radical interior movement towards non-duality for Le Saux, where forms fall away, and the Self is recognised as divine. His was not a rejection of religious identity but a transcendence of it since to remain “in between” would have been for Le Saux to stay divided on a superficial level. True mystical union with God demanded nothing less than the dissolution of separation itself.

The swāmī wrote of having found the Holy Grail. As the virgin knight Galahad, who, after beholding the Grail, saw Christ rise from the vessel to administer the Sacrament before dying in ecstasy, Le Saux, too, received his viaticum from the Beloved within. Death became the sacrament of union, the final veil torn

73 St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. E. Allison Peers, vol. 2 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Bookshop, 1946), 101, stanza XVII, para. 2; 103, stanza XVII, para. 4.

74 Ibid., 65, stanza XI, para. 2.

75 Ibid., 68, stanza XI, para. 6.

76 John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 30, stanza II.

away.⁷⁷ This was not rupture but revelation, not the end of his seeking, the still point of the seeker, where he and the sought are one. Therefore, to speak of Le Saux merely in terms of dual belonging is to speak from the outside, a space that Le Saux had continuously left repeatedly in his life. He moved beyond boundaries, not merely interreligious but trans-religious, surpassing doctrinal categorisations or rationalisations in pursuit of a deeper transfiguration of spiritual consciousness. Christ and Śiva, *hrid* and Cross, *Brahman* and I AM are all fulfilled in the silence of the cave, where the soul drinks from the Grail and becomes what it beholds. In this, Le Saux does not stand apart from tradition but reveals its innermost flame:

“One simply IS. And this fundamental experience is at the same time that of the unique and single EXISTENCE.

From this summit, or this centre, of BEING, of ABSOLUTENESS, life is renewed in its essence. What until then one called “oneself,” what until then one called “the others,” what until then one called “God.””⁷⁸

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⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Abhishiktānanda, diary entry, July 24, 1952, 52. Emphases written by Le Saux.

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