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# Peace to Nivedita

A. F. THOMPSON\*

Margaret Elizabeth Noble, Sister Nivedita after her ordination by Swami Vivekananda in March, 1898, is a great figure in the political history of modern India. She has also a not inconsiderable niche among the saints of modern religion in Bengal. She was Christian by background; it may be that she remained a Christian in conviction and influence as well. If so, her career poses for Christians in poignant and very human terms a question never satisfactorily resolved by the Church and one that is likely to recur more and more profoundly in modern times: what is the relation between Christian and 'non-Christian' faith? Is it possible to be Christian in secularity or in forms of religious devotion which are not all at Christian?

There is no evidence in Nivedita's writings that she had any relationship whatsoever with the Christian Church in India. Indeed, it would have been surprising if she had, since she sometimes referred to Christianity as a western religion and often expressed her detestation of the importation into India of foreign habits and beliefs; 'Christianity to the European in his own place', she said, 'Islam to the Arab. . . But Vedanta to all the peoples and all the faiths'.<sup>1</sup> In response to statements of this sort it would not be strange if Nivedita were remembered—if at all—as an opponent. The editor of her *Complete Works* confirms that she did arouse opposition from the Christians of her time. He cites a critical review of her book *The Web of Indian Life*, which appeared in the *Church Times* of August 19, 1904, and reports on adverse reactions to her lectures and writings from 'missionaries' and other Christian opinion in Britain and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

But should Nivedita be disowned or unremembered by the Christian Church in India? Should she not rather be claimed as its own? The case indeed is difficult for any narrow view of religious loyalties, for Nivedita's enthusiasms were as broad as India and her loyalty

\* Dr. Thompson is on the staff of the Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Waterloo, Canada; and is a former editor of this Journal.

<sup>1</sup> Pavrajika Atmaprana (Ed.), *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta, Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 1967), II, p. 504. Cf. her cry in a letter to a friend, quoted in L. Reymond *The Dedicated*, (New York, John Day & Co., 1963), p. 238; 'I shall have nothing to do with Christian or government agencies so long as they are foreign. That which is India, I touch the feet of, however stupid and futile.'

<sup>2</sup> In his preface to the third volume. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* are in four volumes. Subsequent reference to them will be by volume and page only.

was given to little less, after her *guru* Vivekananda. She was not merely an advocate of *advaita* philosophy, she was a practising Hindu. She learned meditation, she immersed herself in Indian history, culture and religious tradition, she carried on a lively defence of and propaganda for Hinduism, she offered *puja* and wrote devout meditations to Kali as the Divine Mother. Her entry into Hindu worship and devotion would be particularly hard for most Christians to understand. At her ordination as *Naishtik Brahmacharini* in 1899 she offered *puja* for the first time under the guidance of Swami Vivekananda: 'he taught me to make puja', she wrote. 'He gave me my long-desired lesson in performing the worship of Shiva. We did it together'.<sup>3</sup> Later she presided at *Sarasvati puja* in her school. Her defence and interpretation of the worship of Kali is well known.<sup>4</sup> Somewhat less so, perhaps, is her habit of invoking the blessing of the Divine Mother ('In the love of that Great Mother, I commend myself to you'<sup>5</sup>, 'May the blessing of the great Mother be upon you'<sup>6</sup>). Certainly Nivedita was Hindu, and she proclaims herself such. In 1901 she wrote to a friend, 'I belong to Hinduism more than I ever did. But I see the political need so clearly too'.<sup>7</sup> In 1902 she addressed a gathering of Indian women on the subject, 'How and Why I adopted the Hindu Religion'.<sup>8</sup> In 1910 she wrote to a friend, 'I had to worship the Mother to get the energy to carry out Swami's will. But there comes a moment in eternity when that will is done. . . I retire now, and love and worship only Shiva for ever and evermore'.<sup>9</sup>

Not only is Nivedita a professed convert to Hinduism, she is also in many of her writings a critic of one aspect or another of the Christian religion. In describing her adherence to Hinduism she presents it at least once as the upshot of growing 'doubts as to the truth of the Christian doctrines'.<sup>10</sup> But this is a note she strikes often in one way or another, feeling that the central event to which Christian faith is oriented, the Incarnation, has been exposed as a local mythology in the comparison of religions and of religious histories which modern communication has brought to pass. Not only has the Christian myth failed to hold the minds of modern men, it has also lacked ex-

<sup>3</sup> A letter to a friend quoted in Reymond, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> Especially in her book, *Kali the Mother*, included in the *Complete Works*, I, pp. 461-504.

<sup>5</sup> II, p. 477.

<sup>6</sup> I, p. 389.

<sup>7</sup> Reymond, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>8</sup> II, pp. 470-472.

<sup>9</sup> Reymond, *op. cit.*, p. 359. The meaning of this statement is somewhat in doubt. It is offered by Nivedita's biographer as an interpretation of her psychic and spiritual progress on her last pilgrimage. An examination of Nivedita's own account of this pilgrimage (*Kedar Nath and Badri Narayan: a Pilgrim's Diary*, I, pp. 395-449) reveals an objective, even academic, occasionally devotional interest, which does not appear to comport with the view that this was the occasion of a dramatic reversion to an inner life.

<sup>10</sup> II, p. 470.

planation and interpretation, a philosophical justification such as is provided for religious faith, in her view, by *Vedanta*.<sup>11</sup> It has thus failed to come to terms with the new world view arising out of the predominance of scientific technique.<sup>12</sup> Worse, Christianity has failed to provide an ethical impulse which might have coped with the potentially destructive forces of modern times: 'Christianity. . .has been further discredited by the discovery that its adherents possess no ethics sufficiently controlling to influence their international relations, and finally by that worship of pleasure which an age of exploitation necessarily engenders'.<sup>13</sup> As damning, from Nivedita's point of view, as this indictment of Christian ethics, is the fact, as she sees it, that Christianity seems no longer able to develop a spirituality which in itself is deep and convincing<sup>14</sup>—although she recurs to the lives of saints of the medieval church as examples of just this. Finally, Nivedita includes in her writings, more or less by the way, sharp reminders of injustices of the past which arose out of the alliance of Christianity with a political order and an ideology, for example her assertion that "In Christendom, knowledge has been so much feared that men have again and again suffered torture and death for no other crime".<sup>15</sup>

In view of all this, is it possible for the Christian Church in India to acknowledge Nivedita as in some sense her own? There remains—surprisingly perhaps—a *prima facie* justification for doing so. For Nivedita's adherence to Hinduism and her criticism of Christianity are not the whole of the story. Nivedita maintained that she remained a Christian. "Have you given up your religion, Christianity?" she was asked in the United States in 1899. "No", she replied, "I have stated many times that I am one of the *Three Christian* members of the Order of Ramakrishna, now resident in India".<sup>16</sup>

This rejoinder might be dismissed as an *ad hoc* and unreliable expression of Nivedita's mind and heart were it not for the many ways in which Nivedita's Christian background and experience continues to find expression in her lectures and writings after her arrival in India. One kind of evidence of this influence is Nivedita's habit of using Christian scripture, or occasionally a Christian hymn, to point some lesson or express a truth of the spiritual life: "*The whole shall be leavened*",<sup>17</sup> "The Lord bless—going out—coming in—even for evermore".<sup>18</sup> Caught by the beauty of the evening worship of the Ganges

<sup>11</sup> II, p. 399. "We (in Europe) had no such tool, such as we now hold, by which to cut away the doctrinal shell from the kernel of Reality in our faith."

<sup>12</sup> II, p. 407.

<sup>13</sup> II, p. 238.

<sup>14</sup> II, p. 402. "In Protestant countries we have long lost the tradition of career which shall express to the uttermost the striving after selflessness."

<sup>15</sup> II, p. 234.

<sup>16</sup> IV, p. 378, italics in the original.

<sup>17</sup> II, p. 493. Italics are in the original.

<sup>18</sup> II, p. 395.

at Hardwar Nivedita exclaims "O ye mountains and hills, bless ye the Lord! Praise him and magnify him for ever!"<sup>19</sup> Deeply felt, it seems in quite another mood, is her mingling of Old Testament passages with selections from Hindu scriptures in her "Office for the Dead".<sup>20</sup>

Another way in which Nivedita's Christian background appears most markedly is in at least one extended and very positive reference to the tradition of Catholic Christianity in Europe (set, however, in the context of a comment on the degeneration of European culture and spiritual life):

The poor and lowly have taken her (Rome) by storm. Henceforth is she to be in Europe not the voice of domination, but of renunciation; not the teacher of aggression, but of self-sacrifice; . . . far more deeply and truly the friend of the people than of kings. Henceforth, those who are in a special sense her children will live sequestered from the world, pursuing after poverty instead of riches, after self-mortification instead of self-indulgence; men and women apart. . . Her customs will become rituals, her journeys will be pilgrimages. The simplest ordinances of her life. . . will now be sacraments. The expression of her forgiveness will be absolution. . . Her very rulers will claim no personal right to their high places but will declare themselves simple executors of the divine will<sup>21</sup>.

This evocation can be seen as decisive for a definition of Nivedita's Christian experience when one places alongside it the undoubtedly Christian views Nivedita expresses from time to time in some of the essays collected under the title *Religion and Dharma*<sup>22</sup>—essays in which she considers the future of Hinduism! Here one might say that Nivedita develops elements of an 'ecclesiology' of Hinduism, a doctrine of religious solidarity and of religious organization and action in which the influence of Christian belief and experience would appear even if there were not—as there are—references to them.

Of course a key consideration for Nivedita, in writing about the future of Hinduism, is that Hinduism possesses in *Vedanta* a philosophy of unity which is in itself compatible with scientific thought and is also a powerful factor in allowing and assisting the tradition in various ways to adapt itself to modernity. More than philosophy is necessary, however, for the positive transformation of the tradition. Organization is needed. Nivedita pleads eloquently in her essay "Hinduism and Organization" for the development of voluntary associations for civic action and for a sense of the value of corporate life and activity: "There must be association of aim and co-operation of

<sup>19</sup> I, p. 400.

<sup>20</sup> II, pp. 257-61.

<sup>21</sup> II, p. 232.

<sup>22</sup> Edited by S. K. Ratcliffe and published in 1915. Included in the *Complete Works*, III, pp. 387-497.

effort, if there is to be success, and there must be a strong bond of love among those few ardent souls who form the central core'.<sup>23</sup> Nivedita believed that specifically religious institutions such as temples should lead in this kind of action, particularly in the area of education. More broadly she hoped that the entire body of traditional Hinduism could be galvanized and made effective, all elements within it feeling 'the duty of solidarity'.<sup>24</sup> In all of this Nivedita may no doubt be seen as following up one of the responses of her *guru*, Vivekananda, to the problems of modern India as he saw them: he spoke forcefully of the need for organization and action to transform Indian society.<sup>25</sup> But Nivedita takes up and gives expression to this aim and interest in such a way that anyone from a catholic Christian background can not fail to see the evident influence of the doctrine of the Body of Christ,<sup>26</sup> that solidarity of believers which involves, for them, participation in the divine action for the transformation of the world. From a Christian point of view it would be necessary to weigh seriously, as indicating this influence—and lively hope—Nivedita's frequent reference to a central religious tradition in India as 'the Mother-Church of Hinduism'.<sup>27</sup> She, of course, had no hesitation in admitting such an influence in an age of 'the Interchange of Ideals' when 'the thought of the East is about to effect the conquest of the West. And the ideals of the West, in turn, are to play their part in the evolution of the East'.<sup>28</sup>

In line with this ecclesiology of Hinduism, Nivedita hoped for 'a larger democratic element' in Hindu religion, particularly in Hindu worship, which would issue in a recognition of 'the value of liturgical prayer'.<sup>29</sup> Not only a Christian but more specifically, an Anglican bias seems to be visible, in this connection, in her commendation of the *Book of Common Prayer*:

<sup>23</sup> III, p. 402.

<sup>24</sup> III, p. 406.

<sup>25</sup> Some isolated statements of the Swami Vivekananda sound positively 'Maoist': 'Do not say organization is material . . . to make a great future India the whole secret lies in organization, accumulation of power, coordination of wills'. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, thirteenth edition, July, 1970) III, p. 299.

<sup>26</sup> *Romans* 12:4, 5, *I Cor.* 12:27, *Ephesians* 4:15, 16. It is [noteworthy that this formula serves as a basic definition of 'the Church' through most of Christian history, among reformers as well as in catholic circles. Nivedita shows a fine appreciation of a 'church ethics', i.e. of moral activity as developed within such a matrix, in lines about the beneficial influence of 'sects'. The 'sect' is 'a confraternity . . . a home . . . school . . . an arena. Each member's life is plunged into the open, with the moral enthusiasm of all about him to be his guide and stay'. III, pp. 408-9.

<sup>27</sup> I, pp. 113, 117, 161, 180. II, p. 281. III, p. 398, etc.

<sup>28</sup> III, p. 413, cf. her essay "The Greater Ritual", pp. 394-5.

<sup>29</sup> III, p. 413.

The old Latin Church, while much more historical, and much closer to Asiatic ritual, does not seem to compare, in the simple grandeur of its services, with the modern Church of Anglican Protestantism. . . The great stroke of genius, in which the European mind reaches its most distinctive manifestation appears to have been the invention of Common Prayer.<sup>30</sup>

Anglican ritual is, apparently, not only the most beautiful of western forms of worship; its Common Prayer is the expression of that solidarity without which religion can expect to have little influence upon life!

The use of Christian scripture, the influence of some central Christian views concerning the being and function of the church: these by themselves would not demonstrate that Nivedita was and remained a Christian. What was Nivedita's understanding of and relation to that 'person' (or 'event') to whom (or which) Christian faith is oriented?<sup>31</sup> When she writes about Jesus, Nivedita tends in many of her pronouncements to a liberal Protestant kind of view—congenial of course to that theory which understands all religions as so many human affirmations about the incomprehensible divine unity. Thus Jesus was a *sannyasin*, 'the Asiatic man'.<sup>32</sup> He establishes a kind of focus on divine reality which has had incomparable effect in human and religious history:

Jesus swept down in His Might on the old Jewish entrenchments of justice—righteousness—and carried the banner off bodily to that outpost of love and mercy which struggling souls had reached, indeed, before Him, but which none had yet been strong enough to make the very heart and focus of vitality.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand Nivedita is capable of expressing a more 'catholic' point of view. In a comment on Millet's painting 'The Angelus' she declares that the *Ave Maria* prayer<sup>34</sup> 'represents to the Christian what might be called the memorial of the Incarnation; it brings him closer than anything else to that mysterious union between the human and the divine, which according to his belief, sums up the mystery

<sup>30</sup> III, p. 411.

<sup>31</sup> It is easy to put the question more simply. But Christians have had notorious difficulties in defining what is absolutely central for Christian faith. The solution to the problem devised by the World Council of Churches is well known and would not have presented Nivedita, I believe, with insuperable difficulties.

<sup>32</sup> II, p. 492.

<sup>33</sup> I, p. 462. This reference to Judaism may be taken as another indication of Nivedita's Christian consciousness: it does less than justice to Judaism!

<sup>34</sup> 'Hail Mary, full of grace. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death'.

of Jesus'.<sup>35</sup> While obviously chary of expressing her own commitment thus, she can be found declaring elsewhere that 'Profound depths stir within us in presence of the intensely Christian conception of God—a child in His mother's arms'.<sup>36</sup> In this context she indicates that Jesus *as expressing the divine nature* must be seen also as feminine. So he appears, says Nivedita, when he summons 'all...that labour and are heavy laden'; so he appeared when he wept over the city and would have gathered its people together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings'.<sup>37</sup> The context of both of these statements is an essay in Nivedita's book *Kali the Mother*—which might seem to many Christians an odd place from which to mine a confession, inevitably incidental to the theme, of the 'divinity' of Jesus the Christ. But it must be admitted that there is in Nivedita's work on Kali a note which is profoundly compatible with a Christian view of things. The mythology and iconography of the Mother, as Nivedita points out, tell of love triumphant in suffering: 'Have not the great intuitions of our life all come to us in moments when the cup was bitterest? Has it not always been with sobs of desolation that we have seen the Absolute triumphant in love?'<sup>38</sup>

The belief that Jesus accomplished a divine revolution in human affairs usually arises, for Christians, in connection with belief in the Resurrection. Nivedita cannot be found expounding this doctrine in her writings, but she reports an extraordinary incident at Khandagiri at Christmas in 1902. She and other disciples of Vivekananda sat round a campfire on Christmas Eve, intending to observe the Christian festival, as she says, 'after the old-time fashion of the Order of Ramakrishna'.<sup>39</sup> In order to do so, one of the number began to read the story of the Nativity from St. Luke's Gospel. Absorbed in the story the reader went on through the Gospel to its culmination in its account of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It read differently now, for Nivedita, because it chimed in with her own experience of loss and renewed presence through the recent death of Vivekananda<sup>40</sup>. It read 'like the gasping, stammering witness of one who had striven to record the impalpable and intangible'. Nivedita's tentative conclusion might be offensive to some Christians in that her own experience of loss interprets the Gospel rather than the Gospel her experience. But is that sequence of apprehension unusual among Christians?

We who followed the Christian story of the Resurrection, could not but feel that behind it, and through it glistened a thread of fact; that we were tracing out the actual footsteps left by a human soul somewhere, somewhen, as it trod the glimmering

<sup>35</sup> IV, p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> I, p. 464.

<sup>37</sup> I, p. 464.

<sup>38</sup> I, p. 473.

<sup>39</sup> I, p. 265.

<sup>40</sup> July 4, 1902.



pathway of this fugitive experience. So we believed, so we felt, because, in all its elusiveness, a like revelation, at a like time, had been given to us.<sup>41</sup>

These expressions of Nivedita's Christian background, experience and conviction may seem to be positive in non-essentials (her view of medieval Catholicism) and much too guarded and tentative in essentials (her statements about the person and mission of Jesus). In fact Nivedita's 'Christian mind' is not even this clear: some statements in *The Web of Indian Life* reflect some elementary theological perplexities, difficulties in her apprehension of Christian faith which are understandable enough from some points of view but which reveal an inadequate exposure to classical Christian thought. These statements amount to something like a caricature of 'the Western religious vision':

Are not the symbols somewhat crude? Heaven and hell, reward and punishment! . . . Is the whole universe . . . only one vast kindergarten? . . . How are we to believe in salvation expressed as an *event*? in unchangeable happiness conferred on us from without?<sup>42</sup>

Of course if these rhetorical questions are intended to represent popular distortions of Christian faith, the expected answers would command assent among most instructed Christians. Reward and punishment have figured excessively in popular religion in the West; believers have been encouraged to think of themselves as 'babes' or 'sheep' forever (one might almost say) immature; the Cross has been represented as a transaction entirely apart from the believer, apart from the imputation to the believer of the results. Even more, 'grace' has been reified and trundled about as the invisible prerogative of an all-too human institution. But if these are serious questions intended to suggest the conclusions of the deepest thought of Christian tradition they are, of course, misleading. It is sufficient to say that the Incarnation, as understood by the Fathers of the Church, is indeed seen as an actual historical event, but as an event in which the age-long process of God's dealing with humanity is focused, clarified and so revealed. And that the thought of 'reward and punishment', in almost all of Christian theological writing, is subordinate to a biblical view of selves growing in maturity and love.<sup>43</sup>

Did the view of an ultimate reality which is loving and gracious itself present Nivedita with insuperable difficulties? Not so, if an answer is sought for in her writings about Kali as the Divine Mother. But, as noted above, Nivedita went on to represent her spiritual progress and convictions by a more austere mythology, that of Shiva.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> I, p. 267.

<sup>42</sup> II, p. 153.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Ephesians* 3: 14-19.

<sup>44</sup> *Supra* p. 3.

This mythology, Nivedita says, represents 'the highest conception of God as approached by the spiritual intuition of man. He is the divine accessible *within* and purified of externals'.<sup>45</sup> He is also the divine understood as gracious, for many Hindus, but it is at least possible to wonder whether this side of Saivite mythology meant very much for Nivedita. She retells *puranic* stories of Shiva, but in doing so, lays emphasis on his role as the withdrawn *yogin*.<sup>46</sup> Her comment about the role of the idea of 'grace' in western religious life is acerbic and perhaps uncomprehending: 'The Christian doctrine of grace introduces something confused and miraculous into the European ideal of life'.<sup>47</sup> Again, she may have reason for such a comment, where the idea of grace has been reified and misused. But should Nivedita of all persons not see that 'grace' has stood for liberation in love, the gift of knowledge of oneself in the love of another? It seems possible that *advaitist* notions of the 'impersonality' of the Absolute closed off to some extent, for Nivedita, the Christian—and Hindu—view of a finally loving, helpful and communicative divine reality. Should this be true, it would not make Nivedita totally different from a fairly broad spectrum of modern Christians and modern interpreters of Christian tradition. In *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* by Paul Van Buren,<sup>48</sup> for example, the idea of divine self-disclosure and 'help' virtually disappears.

Theological affirmations of difficulties do not necessarily or adequately express the substance of Christian life—or of other life lived in faith. The attempt to understand Nivedita's experience as Christian cannot ignore two more important (and relatively non-doctrinal) measures. The first is that Nivedita received communion with her dying mother in the winter of 1907-8 in England. The rite apparently was Anglican. Nivedita 'had talked at length with the clergyman' and 'she bowed her head as he gave her a special blessing in Jesus' name'.<sup>49</sup> An equally simple indication discloses itself through many of her writings: it is just that Nivedita loved. It seems clear from her biography that her love, at a critical stage in her life, was above all for her *guru* Vivekananda; perhaps it was an all-too-human love.<sup>50</sup> But it became, through her immersion in Indian life, a wide 'impersonal' love for India which is a palpable presence in much of her writing on Indian history and traditions, in her ministrations to Indian people, and in passionate desire that India should be free. If hope and love make a Christian, assuredly Nivedita was one.

But do not her criticisms of Christianity set her outside the tradition—to say nothing of theological perplexities or of her dedication

<sup>45</sup> I, p. 93.

<sup>46</sup> e.g. in I, 470-1, and II, p. 164.

<sup>47</sup> II, p. 162.

<sup>48</sup> New York, The Macmillan Company, 1966.

<sup>49</sup> Reymond, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

<sup>50</sup> However, 'Love for Swamiji does not prevent one's loving others, and loving them does not seem untrue to him'. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

within Hindu forms? Did she not assume a stance of separateness as when she wrote, 'We can afford to laugh at our religious friends, in the fashions that sweep across their religious horizon. God really exists, the Christians are inclined to believe, because Sir Oliver Lodge says so'.<sup>51</sup> This separate stance hurts if, from a Christian point of view, one values the life and ardour of Nivedita. Yet there was much in the history of the time that tended to require it of her. The blending of Christian religion with the ideology of empire had gone far in certain Christian circles<sup>52</sup> and Nivedita had a sense of the stubbornness and persistence of the imperialist taint.<sup>53</sup> One point at which this identification became visible was in the person of the Viceroy responsible for the partition of Bengal, 'the man Curzon' as Nivedita called him. Nivedita's Irish background as well as her love for India demanded that she view such 'Christianity' from outside.

Criticism as such is not the problem. Criticism of Christian religion far more trenchant than Nivedita's has been voiced within the tradition both in the past and also in more recent times: it is tempting to speculate on Nivedita's role, could she have had one, in some coteries of 'progressive' Catholicism in the days since Vatican II! Criticism similar to Nivedita's has been a means of new life in a tradition of protest that goes back to the prophets. And has it not been held to be an essential principle of Protestantism that it brings all forms of religious life under critical scrutiny in the name of divine truth?

Some of Nivedita's criticism of the 'intellectual failure' of Christianity are directed to the failure of Christian thinkers to understand the modern world and to interpret Christian teaching in relation to it. She was aware of the situation of belief, Hindu and Christian, in a world in which a more or less 'scientific' education combined with a technical orientation brings all traditional wisdoms under questioning—where they are not simply neglected or set aside. Her awareness of the process of secularization finds expression at several points in her writing.<sup>54</sup> The theory Nivedita found by which religious faith could be interpreted, if not justified, was, as has been noted, *vedanta*, Vivekananda's doctrine of the *one reality* beyond, though addressed in, the forms of devotion. He brought to the West, says Nivedita, no new kind of religion but rather 'the Hindu message of the imminent God'.<sup>55</sup> One wonders whether Nivedita's career as a believer would

<sup>51</sup> III, p. 397.

<sup>52</sup> A delightfully good-humoured view of an experience of the identification of Christian faith with the ideology of empire is given in the chapter "Bishops and Bayonets" of Verrier Elwin's autobiography, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (London, O.U.P., 1964), pp. 86-99.

<sup>53</sup> 'How silly I think it now to do anything in England for India... What utter waste of time! Do you think ravening wolves can be made gentle as babes?' Raymond, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

<sup>54</sup> e.g. II, pp. 238ff and IV, p. 302.

<sup>55</sup> I, p. 25.

have been substantially different if Paul Tillich, a Christian theologian rather than a Hindu *swami*, had given her *his* message of the imminent God, his abstract and summary presentation of truth as 'Being Itself' or 'the ground of Being' as a means to interpret religious faith and the relation between religions.<sup>56</sup>

Nivedita wrote also of a failure of Christian spirituality and ethics. There seems little point in trying to blunt this criticism, much as one might offer in rebuttal the example of a few who have seemed to be 'lights of the world' in recent generations. One might rather wonder at Nivedita's perspicuity. The two world wars had not taken place before her death in 1911, but she wrote that 'Europe was covered with a series of armed camps miscalled nationalities'.<sup>57</sup> The present—rather ineffectual—concern among the churches over development, waste and pollution was not to find significant expression for half a century after her time. She was 'ahead of her time', very much aware of the ethical and spiritual problems posed for traditional religious life and thought by the economic and social developments constitutive of modernity.<sup>58</sup>

But if Nivedita is to be seen as Christian in some significant sense, if her career is to be seen in some positive relation to its Christian roots, what is to be made of the crowning difficulty, her adherence to Hinduism and her entry into Hindu devotions? Is it possible to justify this as a 'dual loyalty' or is Nivedita to be seen by Christian eyes as schizophrenic or apostate?

One way to deal with this problem—which might indeed seem to some Christians to be a valid way—is through the theory of religious experience developed by Swami Vivekananda on the basis of suggestions from his *guru* Sri Ramakrishna. According to this view, mentioned briefly above, all religions are essentially true in so far as they are directed toward the apprehension of the one ultimate spiritual reality, and yet are all alike human, local, conditioned and therefore relative and limited apprehensions of divine truth.<sup>59</sup> *Vedanta*, then,

<sup>56</sup> 'Being Itself' as a concept intended to indicate divine reality in a non-symbolic fashion is found in the *Systematic Theology* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1951), I, in a discussion on pp. 235-238. 'Ultimate concern' is Tillich's way of describing human orientation toward this 'ground' in *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1963).

<sup>57</sup> IV, p. 221.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Paul Tillich's comment on the churches' perception of the dangers of technology and its secularizing influences: 'The first time Christian leaders officially observed the threat of this situation was at the conference of the International Missionary Council in Jerusalem in 1928, but it was decades before this awareness influenced the Christian churches' view of themselves in relation to the world religions and to the international secular consciousness of mankind.' *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*, p. 13.

<sup>59</sup> This view of religions is expounded by Swami Vivekananda at many points in his lectures and writings. See, e.g. "What is Religion?", *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, I, pp. 333-343.

offers a superior and reconciling vision of spiritual reality; it is, Nivedita says, 'the Science of Religion, the Christian faith being only one of many faiths to which its canons of criticism apply, and which fall within the scope of its theory'.<sup>60</sup> In line with this view of the religions, apparently, Nivedita develops at two points at least in her writings the view that religions may be understood as so many 'languages' in which humanity addresses God. Thus her own entry into Kali worship was entry into one address that India makes to God: 'I set myself. . .to enter into Kali worship, as one would set oneself to learn a new language, or take birth deliberately perhaps, in a new race'.<sup>61</sup> She all the more appears to fall in with the view that religions are alike human and therefore inadequate responses to divine reality as she cites, in connection with another presentation of this theory, individuals who have contributed to the development of their respective religious traditions: 'Are Catholic possibilities not richer for Cardinal Manning, or Protestant for Frances Ridley Havergal?'<sup>62</sup> She suggests, in the same passage, the undoubted usefulness of this view to the student of religion who must study various traditions side by side: he may come to feel, as she does, that 'Only by realizing the full sense of every symbol can we know the whole thought of humanity about God'.<sup>63</sup>

But in fact Nivedita herself had difficulty with this theory in so far as it insists upon the relativity, and therefore the relative insufficiency, of experiences of theistic devotion. Early in her training by Swami Vivekananda she felt drawn to the forms of Indian devotion. Her own works testify broadly to this direction of her mind and spirit because there is in them relatively little exposition of *vedanta* philosophy while there is much more of the study and interpretation of popular theistic Hinduism.<sup>64</sup> Her concern for the religious observances to be instituted in her school is another indication of her thought along this line, though no doubt she was concerned in this for the provision in the school of common forms of religious life. The point she seems to have realized is that a judgement of the relativity and relative insufficiency of religious experience, as seen from outside, cannot be applied to an experience seen, so to say, from inside; a general theory cannot mediate the felt authority or absoluteness of a particular religious experience.<sup>65</sup> So Nivedita's view of Kali worship as 'language'

<sup>60</sup> II, p. 426.

<sup>61</sup> I, p. 117.

<sup>62</sup> I, p. 462.

<sup>63</sup> I, p. 462.

<sup>64</sup> In this connection one may cite not only *Kali the Mother*, but also sections of *The Web of Indian Life*, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* and her superb introduction to the *Ramayana* in Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Myths of the Hindus and Bhudhists*, (London, George G. Harrap & Co., 1913) pp. 14-22.

<sup>65</sup> There is a fascinating section of Nivedita's short biography of Swami Vivekananda, "The Master as I saw Him" in which she reports that he too had experience of the 'absoluteness' of particular theistic experiences and of

becomes inadequate to express her view of the inner meaning of such devotion. Reacting to criticism from the Brahmo Samaj of her defence and interpretation of Kali worship Nivedita declares,

We worship Her for what she is. She is God, one of those conceptions which are so powerful as the names of God. As you respond when your name is uttered, in tones of need or of love, so God to this name of Kali—as much as when we say 'Our Father'.<sup>66</sup>

Christian experience provides at least a parallel for this protest. Christian theology begins with the conception of the 'Word' that 'became flesh'.<sup>67</sup> Emphasis on the priority and authority of the divine communication is maintained thereafter in different ways by the central Christian tradition. Doctrine is defined as developing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; priests and prophets are divinely 'called' and 'chosen'; the whole sacramental life of the church is understood to be a means of communication with the eternal in time. There is, from this Christian point of view, no intellectual 'higher ground' from which these various points of meeting with divine reality may be surveyed and understood. But of course this same orthodox point of view is precisely that from which Nivedita's devotion to and defence of Kali, not to mention her adoption of Hindu ceremonies and forms, would be most vigorously condemned. What seems to be called for is

the difficulty of mediating such experiences through a general theory: 'He (Swami Vivekananda) had returned from a pilgrimage in Kashmir saying "These gods are not merely symbols! They are the forms the Bhaktas have seen!" And it is told of Sri Ramakrishna that he would sometimes speak, coming out of Samadhi, of the past experience of that soul that dwelt within him,—"He who came as Rama, as Krishna, as Jesus dwells here"—and then he would add playfully, turning to his chief disciple, "But not in your Vedanta sense, Noren!"

"Thus we are admitted to a glimpse of the struggle that goes on in great souls, for the correlation and adjustment of the different realisations of different times. On the one side the Mother, on the other side Brahman. We are reminded of the Swami's own words, heard long ago, "The impersonal God, seen through the mists of sense, is personal". *In truth it might well be that the two ideas could not be reconciled.* Both conceptions could not be equally true at the same time. It is clear enough that in the end, as a subjective realisation, either the Mother must become Brahman, or Brahman the Mother. One of the two must melt into the other, the question of which in any particular case, depending on the destiny and past of the worshipping soul.' I, p. 120. Emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> Reymond, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>67</sup> John 1:14. Cf. Ignatius of Antioch's phrase in his letter to the Magnesians, VIII. 2: 'Jesus Christ is his son, who is his Word proceeding from silence'. Kirsopp Lake (Trans.) *The Apostolic Fathers* (London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1959), I, p. 205.

some larger sacramental point of view, some conception of the indispensable plurality of meeting points with spiritual reality which yet does not call in question the consistency of God's dealings with humanity, nor yet seek to replace this language of faith with a theory of spiritual reality as a kind of dead backdrop against which are projected so many human imaginings. Nivedita makes some effort in this direction, it seems, with another analogy, when she says that it is a virtue of Hindus that 'the application of their symbols is many-centred, like the fire in opals'.<sup>68</sup> But this analogy, suggestive though it is, merely restates the problem, of how one may conceive of a plurality of meeting points with divine reality without making them relative to a larger experience which nowhere exists for finite mortals except as a theory.

The strictly Christian parallel to Nivedita's experience in theistic Hinduism might allow, however, for sympathy if not comprehension, for some degree of positive appreciation of Nivedita's 'dual loyalty'. Christian thinkers have in recent times expressed positive appreciations of the spiritual depth of religious experience in various 'non-Christian' religions. The Declaration on this point of the Second Vatican Council is well known. This document declares that in Hinduism 'men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an unspent fruitfulness of myths and through searching philosophical enquiry'.<sup>69</sup> This statement is made on the basis of the acceptance of no general theory of religious truth; it is rather brought into line with the traditional Christian claim that the divine mystery is disclosed in Christ, who is seen as central in the issue of the religious quest. This Declaration has probably had many echoes in India—as it undoubtedly had precursors.<sup>70</sup> One recent description of Hindu religious practice from a Christian point of view goes even farther: Murray Rogers, in his introduction to *The Mountain of the Lord*, interprets the faith of Hindu pilgrims of the northern *tirtha* and says, 'The more (the authors) shared the life of the pilgrims. . . the more clearly was revealed to their bewildered eyes the divine Presence in the holy mountains, and even more in the rites, devotion and faith of their Hindu brethren'.<sup>71</sup> No basis is given for this judgement. It appears to issue from a kind of empathy, a feeling of faith for faith. While this by no means solves the problem of attaining an understanding of the relation of Christian faith to 'non-Christian' faith, does it not indicate an approach to a Christian appreciation of the Hindu experience of Nivedita?

The point can be made with reference to her description of the northern pilgrimage. She too wrote of it,<sup>72</sup> and her interpretation

<sup>68</sup> I, p. 468.

<sup>69</sup> W. A. Abbott, S. J., Editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, (New York, The Guild Press, 1966), p. 661.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. K. Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity*, (Bangalore, C.I.S.R.S., 1969).

<sup>71</sup> "Two Pilgrims of the Way". *The Mountain of the Lord, Pilgrimage to Gangotry* (Bangalore, C.I.S.R.S., 1966), p. iv.

<sup>72</sup> In *Kedar Nath and Badri Narayana: A Pilgrim's Diary*, I, pp. 395-440.

of the faith of the pilgrims is very like that of Murray Rogers. The difference is that she feels herself one with them more intimately—having done, one might say, everything humanly possible to make herself one with them. By her commitment to the work of Swami Vivekananda and by her impulsive entry into Indian life she was precipitated into a variety of experiences within Hinduism, of which this was one. And no doubt, as her biographer stresses, this pilgrimage had a special poignancy for her because it recapitulated an earlier pilgrimage to a shrine of Shiva with the Swami himself, one in which Nivedita was acutely conscious of being unable to comprehend or share the experience of the pilgrims.<sup>73</sup> As noted above, it does not follow that this pilgrimage was for Nivedita the decisive turning point her biographer represents it to be.<sup>74</sup> There is rather, in Nivedita's observations of the route and in her discussion of points of historical interest an objectivity that suggests a distance from the immediacy and passion of religious devotion. There seems to be a quality of tentativeness in the essay which accords with a poignant expression of hope in *Kali the Mother*—one which, incidentally, is cast finally in the language of theistic religion:

For each of us there is a chosen way. We ourselves may still be seeking it, where and when still hidden from our eyes. But deep in our hearts is rooted the assurance that the moment will come, the secret signal be exchanged, the mystic name will fall upon our ears, and somewhere, somewhen, somehow, our feet shall pass within the gates of peace, we shall enter on the road that ends only with the Beatific Vision.<sup>75</sup>

Christian in the background and substance of her life, Hindu too in love and expression, Nivedita says, like another 'apostle', 'I press on'. Christians of this generation may indeed be able to identify themselves not only with the impulse that carried her into her involvement in Indian life, but also with the spirit expressed in her devotions.

In many ways Nivedita still speaks instructively to the problems of today. Some of her sharp words of advice to 'missionaries' now appear, after half a century, to be sage and loving counsel for an Indian church. Some of her advice is admittedly a 'counsel of perfection'—and, as such, is addressed to individuals—for example, her view that the one who wishes to preach in India should do so in poverty and simplicity and in the power of holiness; 'The apostle need not be a scholar, he need not be an artist; he must be a saint'.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Reymond *op. cit.*, p. 128, quoting a letter written after the pilgrimage to Amarnath: 'It is such a terrible pain to come face to face with something which is all *inwardness* to someone you worship, and for yourself to be able to get little farther than the external'.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 358-9. Cf. the comment in note 9 of p. 2 (above).

<sup>75</sup> I, p. 463.

<sup>76</sup> IV, p. 530.



More widely applicable and probably still necessary advice, in spite of the present maturity of the Indian church, concerns knowledge of and love for Indian culture and the common struggle of the nation.

Let them ('missionaries'—or Christians) relate themselves organically to the life and effort of India. Let them love the country . . . Let them become loving interpreters of her thought and custom, revealers of her own ideals to herself even while they make them understood by others.

From one Christian, much moved by some at least of Nivedita's writings—Peace, to Nivedita. In spite of all that has been said it is perhaps possible to see her as doomed, mad, mistaken. But if so, what judgement would one make of other generous loves, of the examples of other ardent souls from St. Francis to Dietrich Bonhoeffer? There seems rather to be a case for a more or less formal recognition of Nivedita—by reason of her pioneering role in discerning some of the problems for faith posed by the forces of modern life, in gratitude for her perceptive criticisms of Christian involvements in the past and her suggestions for the future, in recognition of her loving service to the Indian people. She was in her way a 'notable Christian' and might well be recognized as such, as one of those 'lights of the world' for whom the Church continually gives thanks.



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