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## Recruitment and Training of Religious Leaders in Hinduism

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Frankly, this title took me by surprise. How, I wondered, should I tackle the topic, for I have never heard of recruiting in any of the Hindu Ashrams. Though I have lived mostly in Rishikesh since 1974 I have neither discovered, nor experienced, any particular, explicit “preparation” method for the training of leaders. In these Hindu Ashrams there is nothing similar to the methods the Buddhists have where the aspirant is expected to stand outside knocking for admission for three days and where it is well known that the written petition for entry, slipped under the door, will be rejected for the first two days! In my experience I must say that I have been struck by the absence of any sense of “recruitment”. Gurus sometimes may even persuade a candidate to postpone entry – perhaps in order to test them.

With a view to writing this paper I have held discussions with two venerable and experienced Gurus in a large and flourishing Hindu Ashram, and have had confirmation of the above when they were unable to formulate any precise answer to my question. They spoke of nothing other than the normal training that they give to aspirants. This is a brief outline of the daily schedule all the aspirants undergo in one ashram.

It includes early rising, meditation, “*Pravachans*”, or spiritual talks, group meetings, different appointed works, *Bhajans* and *Kirtan*, that is, singing God’s glory, or *Nama Japa*, that is repetition of God’s Name. There will, in addition, be guided spiritual reading. The aspirants attend the innumerable Hindu festivals and take their full share of their preparation as well, of course, as of the daily *Satsanga*. *Silence* at certain times is an important requirement. Unnecessary, or worldly, chattering is discouraged.

Above all, the disciple is formed through his or her personal relationship with the chosen Guru, though actually as Jesus Himself said: “You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you” (Jn 15: 16). Traditionally, it is believed that when the disciple is ready, the Guru appears and is recognized. Maybe this is the keynote of all the training that is given – it is a matter of awaiting the movement of the Spirit rather than bowing to a set of timing, or any arbitrary programme, which may in no way suit the spiritual progress of the candidate. Could I formulate this as saying that training is essentially personal, individual, in touch with the inner movement and breath of the Spirit. There is

no set number of months, no special span of years in which the aspirant becomes a *Brahmachari*, or later, a *Sannyasi*, as compared with the regulated periods we follow in accord with Canon Law. This freedom of/for the Spirit is very wise and attractive, I think.

### **For any serious seeker in the Hindu tradition the Guru is a “must”**

These spiritual masters, unlike our leaders in the Christian/Catholic tradition, cannot be appointed by some higher religious authority, as, in our case, with a General appointing a Provincial, and a Provincial appointing a Superior. Such appointments, we know, last usually for a limited time and the mandate passes then to another appointed person. It is quite otherwise in the Hindu vision. In the Asian way of formation the Guru appears and is recognized by the disciple who is drawn to him/her by spiritual qualities and powers, which resonate with the aspirant's own spiritual trait. The bond once forged is for life: Such spiritual masters have the remembrance of their own discipleship, and are themselves still disciples at heart, in no way seeking advancement or power, but ready to be used at God's will.

Father Neuner writes in his Introduction to Franz Jalic's book *Called to Share in His Life* that in the Catholic tradition the priest is seen “as the leader of the community, but not as a Guru in the life of the Spirit”.<sup>1</sup> We all know that a community “leader” may be involved in much administration, fund raising and in many social activities. We can guess, too, that he would surely envy the Hindu spiritual leader, who is assisted in ac-

tivities, if there are such, by the “*seva*” (the voluntary service) of trusted and capable disciples. The Guru will apportion this “*seva*” to each disciple, and it is often a rigorous practical training, as also the number of hours of meditation per day, and the number of *malas* (beads) to be said, and he will follow this up personally. However, for the sake of good administration there will be one over-all administrator appointed.

In *Guru-Shishya* relationships, the secret, personal and normal method of training is for the purpose of becoming, not a *leader* but a *lover* of God. In Hinduism the aim is not how to govern and rule efficiently, how to train or teach, how to convert, but essentially, how to attain God. I quote from *Hinduism Today* December 1999 where Swami Krishnanda gives a full interview. He says: “Our aim is that we should realize God in this very birth. Our interest is in the soul, *atman*. Its liberation is the foremost point.” Nothing else really matters during the formation years. The methods are flexible, various, long term and personally “tailored”. Some laymen/laywomen may get into the yellow of the *brahmacharya* robe very soon after admission as a permanent member of the *ashram*. Others may remain in white for years as *sadhakas* and *sevaks*, or even in secular clothes as *ashramvasis*, right until they pass to the Further Shore.

Whatever their status or dress, all members of the Ashram have this one goal: *to attain God-Realization*. Over the years every single time I have heard the Head of the Ashram, Sri Swami Chidanandaji Maharaj, open a talk to any audience from whatever country, he

does so with these words: “Radiant Immortal Atman, Beloved and Blessed children of the Divine.” This beautiful beginning is followed by wise and practical advice, leading to a more fervent following and seeking of this supreme goal. From his teaching, as from all the Gurus’ advice, all learn how to grow in their spiritual life – never with a view to becoming leaders, but always with a view to becoming more God-oriented and more God-like. When the early Christian Fathers said: “God became man, so that man might become God,” they were inspired by an understanding that the Upanishads and Hindu tradition had seized centuries before, and in practice had so made its own that interiority is now the hallmark of its spirituality.

The whole year of the Hindu is a continuous observance of some sacred way of worship, with various expressions of the non-Dual Divine Reality. Each month is significant for the presence of, and preparation for, some aspect of Divine Love. So from the beginning of the year to its end God-orientation is the warp and woof of life, happily devotion-filled for the many who follow the *Bhakti Marg*. Life is based upon worship.

The holiness and sanctity of life and the actions of the followers of the Vedic religion is insured by this great wisdom-based approach. All the twelve months become a composite period of adoration of the Divine Reality.<sup>2</sup>

The talks and writings of Hindu Gurus and Swamis, learned as they may be, normally aim at, and are centred on, the basic thrust of Hinduism:- “*Sarvam Vishnumayam jagat*” “The whole world

is pervaded by Lord Vishnu.” The spiritual psychology and basic conception of Indian philosophy is summed up by Sri Sankara in this couplet:-

*Shlokaardhena pravakshiyami  
yaduktam Granthakotibhih;*

*Brahma Satyam Jaganmithyaa jivo  
Brahmaiva naaparah*

[The Transcendent Being alone is real,  
phenomena are false,

the (apparently separate) individual  
self is the Transcendent alone and  
none other.]

Thence, it is mere *Maya* or illusion to feel different from that which is the Transcendent Being. It is this sense of human individuality that obstructs the experience of Truth.

This *ahamkar*, or ego-self, is considered the outcome of ignorance and the root cause of all bondage . . . “*Ahamkar* or egoism is the chief bar to the experience of inner reality” says Swami Sivananda in *Sadhana*. Understanding this wisdom a Hindu does not need to be attracted, enticed or “recruited”. God Him/Herself powerfully directs the chosen person to disregard the transitory, and to focus his/her full attention, energy, power of loving and dedication on seeking and serving God alone. He/She is, as it were, “impelled” by the Spirit within to “sell all and follow”. Why waste one’s life, considered such a boon, and one’s faculties, on the lesser things, which can never satisfy, which are transitory and evanescent? The genuine Hindu seeker and lover of God spares no pains to obtain that which is imperishable, permanent and true. He/She will pursue the goal with *ekagrata* – a single-minded purpose.

Accepting this norm, it is obvious that only mature persons (not the teenagers whom Christians seem keen to “recruit”) are eligible for a life that is totally and exclusively dedicated to God. Perhaps, there is an emphasis here to note – “dedicated to God” not to God’s service, or even to “mission”. However, it is to be borne in mind that I am writing from my experience in Rishikesh, and I know that methods vary. In the Ramakrishna School of Thought and Mission the aim dictates a pattern which seems to be somewhat based on the Jesuit type. In the Ramakrishna Mission the *sannyasins* are used for missionary work, and they are trained for this specific calling.

“*Sam-nyasa*” i.e. leaving all, they follow Him, God, who is eternally faithful and who has called this person, will enable him/her to “hear all her wisdom, keen observation, powerful logic, deep research, searching analysis and scientific calculation in his/her all out attempt to pierce beyond the veil of passing appearance and to come face to face with the Truth, the Eternal Fact” writes Swami Sivananda in his *Sadhana*. It is into an open community that the new aspirant enters, and one that bespeaks freedom, with constant interchange between the members and the flow of visitors, who may be seekers, families, or the merely curious. There is room for individual spontaneity, personal choice, though all is within that one bond forged between the disciple, the “*prestha*” or dear one, and the Guru – *the bond of an unwavering obedience*.

At each stage the Guru calls, and the aspirants “listening with a disciple’s ear” follows. It is really a wonderful and

enlightening experience for those who have had the opportunity of living within an Ashram to see and admire the alacrity, love and reverence with which the words of the Guru are recorded and acted upon. The disciple is one who has come to the Master precisely in order to be guided until he/she becomes like the Master. This is shown very lucidly in the life of the great contemporary Guru, Sri Ramana Mahrishi, or “Bhagavan Ramana” and his disciple Ganapati Muni. While one can marvel at the beauty of the fidelity and gift of self made by the true disciple it is also inspiring to see the love and total gift of self the Guru is ever offering to all who follow.

However large and impressive the ashram of a genuine Guru may be, one can be sure that there is *no more “given” person* within it than the *guru him/herself* . . . simple, humble, ever-ready to serve. Sri Swami Chidanandaji always takes one’s breath away with his lightening like reaction to those who bend to touch his feet. Before they have touched his, he has touched theirs. Just watching such Masters is training enough, and disciples who have lived long years in their Guru’s presence are blessed in deed. Writing of his guru Sri Swami Sivananda, the present General Secretary of the Divine Life Society, Sri Swami Krishnandaji, says: “I can only say that he is the greatest man I have ever seen. And I do not hope to see another great man like him. Most generous. Most charitable. Everything he will give. Give, give, give and give. He was nicknamed by people as “Give-ananda”.”<sup>3</sup>

Those who are sent out to found branches in other places, carry the

Master’s message, his teaching and his life example with them, and so continue the lineage of their Order. Hindu and Buddhist Masters have been teaching in the West since the 1960’s. Many Catholics, who had given up the practice of their faith have become devout followers of these teachers who, knowing their own Scriptures by heart and being able to expound them, have helped such seekers to a faith in the Divine that they so need.

And these Western followers are by no means “poor relations” of the

Eastern followers, but can rival them in their generous response to austere conditions, demanding practices, regular fasting and simple living. Perhaps a form of comparison could be attempted now, as we look at the different situations with regard to recruitment and training in the two different traditions - Christian and Hindus, always allowing that there will be exceptions and variations to any general rule.

Both the Hindu candidate and the Christian aspirant are called by God. Both respond to that call generously.

Church – Christian	Hinduism
1. Reasoning mind	A heart call
2. Enters an institution	Responds to a Guru
3. Study	<i>Seva</i> to the Guru
4. Theoretical knowledge	Practical obedient service
5. Commanding others	Continuing emphasis on humility
6. Name and fame	Renunciation or “ <i>Sannyasa</i> ”
7. Authority as a Church personage	The <i>Anandam</i> of “God alone”

Could one look at this table as one of *opposites*? In worldly terms, could it be said that on the one side there is an ascent, and on the other a descent. Could we add: a “Descent to the depths of the HEART OF THE MATTER”?

“Jesus never dwelt on doctrinal topics or legal instruction. He guided his disciples to a full, genuine life in loving union with God, in serving and supporting solidarity with the neighbour to build a better world”, writes Father J. Neuner SJ in the Foreword already quoted. He continues: “The search for a fuller, deeper, richer, life... has become an urgent quest. It is not surprising if

we reflect on the religious *formation* which is generally imparted to young people... and this holds good for the formation of priests and religious.”

There is a luminous answer to this, I find, in the experience, the unique experience of Father Jacob Martin CMI, known now as Prasannabhai, who was for three years the *chela* of a Hindu Pandit. Dadasaheb Pandit, a “*Brahmanistha*” (man established in God) and a “*Shotriya*” (learned in the Scriptures), was a true Guru whose simplicity, humble service and love for the “poorest lowliest and least” was as inspiring as his sparkling scholarship and

exceptional mastery of languages. Relating his experience thus gained of the Hindu ways of formation, Prasanabhai wrote in *Indian Spirituality in Action*:

Formation of priests and religious should aim at imparting an appreciation of the values which the Indian sages and saints hold high, such as: *satya, ahimsa, asteya, bramacharya, asamgraha, sari-srama, asvada*, etc.

This demands that the candidates should lead: a) a very simple life b) a detached life c) a devotional life d) a dedicated life e) an action-oriented life f) should eat only vegetarian food - this is important g) should fast frequently h) a life of Gospel-centred spirituality i) there should be teaching & feel themselves to be so they should live for some time in a fully Hindu environment - preferably in a Hindu Ashram.

I am taking the liberty of quoting my good friend, Prasannabhai, as above, though he wrote this passage about twenty years ago, as I am so aware of

the wondrous fruits of his life as a “*chela*”. Both for himself and in his “*seva*” as a formator. Perhaps as the years of training continue there is always for the Hindu seeker an emphasis on *silence*, and this is encouraged by the very way of life. “The seeker’s silence is the loudest form of prayer” and to this statement Swami Vivekananda added: “The Guru’s silence is the loudest counsel.” He has discovered a Source within himself and is able to let others drink of the waters of fullness (*Puram*) and Bliss (*Anandam*)”.

Surely such a person would be ready for the leadership of a spirit-filled community, and will lead by, through and in the Spirit. “The light of the *Purusha*,” as Swami Abhishiktanada wrote in a letter to his disciple, Marc Chaduc, “who dwells in the heart radiates something of her/his Plenitude and Ananda.” Sat-Cit-Ananda is capable of communicating mysteriously this grace of Leadership.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. Franz Jalic SJ, *Called to Share in His Life*, Mumbai: St. Paul Bandra, 1999, p. 11.
2. Sri Swami Chidananda. Preface to *Special Insights into Sadhana*.
3. “Sitting with Swami” - A candid interview with the Divine Life Society’s General Secretary. *Hinduism Today* December 1999, p. 41. Referred to “Sadhana” Sri Swami Sivananda: Motilal Banarsidass: 1958.
4. Ref: Vanda Mataji (ed.) *Indian Spirituality in Action*, Asian Trading Corp. Bangalore: 1973.

## **Formation of Women Religious in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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“The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved” (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 1). This reality is evident in the exceptional prominence that the subject of the dignity, status and role of women has gained in recent years. In women religious circles, ripples of awakening to this reality are also seen and efforts are being made towards empowering ourselves to acquire ‘an effect and a power’ in the Church and the world. But these efforts are too small to have a significant influence on our rapidly changing and challenging times.

Conscious of this overwhelming change in the society, the Major Superiors Conference of India emphasized that “to live fully our consecration we need new models of religious life for our times and in the context of the Indian and Asian reality” (CRI 1993). In the light of this imperative for new models of religious life, we shall endeavour to re-structure its foundation, the formation of women religious. To be true to our prophetic calling in this period of profound transformation, religious formation will have to be “in the forefront of the creative ferment which is

shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (CRI 2000, p. 51).

Our main sources for this task are the reports of the CRI National Assemblies that bear years of painstaking search for how to be relevant disciples of Christ, women set apart for a radical commitment to His people.

### **What do the CRI National Assembly Reports say?**

Scanning through the CRI Reports of the past 15 years, dating from the historic Vijayawada Assembly of 1986 where the CRI made a significant breakthrough to commit itself to liberation, to the Jubilee Year 2000 Assembly that makes a renewed call for prophetic discipleship in pluralistic India, one observes two distinct elements emerging and recurring. The first is a call to radical discipleship of Christ which determines our Christian identity as consecrated women and the second is how this discipleship which is in and for mission in pluralistic India affirms our Indian identity. Our Christian and Indian identities must have a bearing on each other and only a healthy fusion of both will see us as committed, consecrated Indian women. If, however, any one identity seeks to dominate over the other then alienation and superficiality in religious

life will follow, for “the religious is not an aspect or dimension apart, but is the Godwardness and the humanness of all the facets of liberation and life”.<sup>1</sup>

The varied themes of the CRI selectively chosen during this span reveal a paradigm shift in awareness from being inward-looking women, withdrawn from the world, to women with a global vision for a prophetic mission; from being an appendix-daughter of a colonial-mother to being consecrated women of and for our motherland. This new thrust in vision and goal, viz., to be radical disciples of Christ in and for mission (cf. CRI 1991, p. 13) has initiated a slow but progressive movement towards a new thinking about religious formation and its structure.

All Christians are called to be disciples of Christ. What challenges does this radicality of Christ’s call pose to Indian women religious in our present times? What demands does the *Yesu-Krist Jayanti* wake-up call to be Prophets, Pilgrims and Pioneers make to the entire formation system of women religious? Together with my sister-religious, I would like to think aloud of a probable pragmatic direction our formation could take. We shall engage in some re-searching and reflection to revamp our prophetic presence as consecrated women in India. This attempt is not an offer of a new brand of formation but rather a reinforcement of the key elements that have consistently emerged at the annual CRI Assemblies in the light of the new openings available to us since the eventful Council of Vatican II.

The revolutionary statement of the 1986 CRI Assembly generated appre-

ciable interest and was a great sign of hope to the life and mission of consecrated women in India. It spoke about the force of liberation and affirmed that freedom empowers us to love all as children of God. Its manifesto included listening to the voice of the poor, immersion in the lives of the people, experiencing and struggling with them in their joys and sufferings, questioning the existing order and identifying means to change unjust structures. Taking off from this vision of radicality, successive CRI Assemblies have endeavoured to articulate the prophetic nature of religious commitment (cf. 1988, 3:8, p. 6). It was also urgently felt that a fundamental change had to be effected in the method of training, especially of young religious, if the seed of radicality sown in 1986 and watered at the subsequent yearly assemblies was to bear fruit in the life and mission of women religious in India.

Consequently, the 1989 CRI Assembly in Goa undertook the vital task of shaping this vision of prophetic radicality more concretely by focusing on the ground base of religious life, namely, religious formation in the context of India’s pluri-religious and cultural heritage and the multi-faceted forces that dehumanise our people. To be a leaven in society and the Church, a restructuring and revitalizing of formation in faith at all levels was felt necessary. Religious formation must promote rootedness in the revolutionary Jesus “through a gradual identification with Him in His total self-giving to the Father” (*Vita Consecrata* 65). It must also encourage a readiness for creative and challenging responses for his Kingdom