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Introduction: A Pilgrimage to the Heart

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Abstract
The wager of this Introduction is that imagination serves as a special agent of inter-religious hospitality. It suggests that a spiritual imaginary operating at the level of metaphor, narrative, symbol and epiphany can traverse the closed borders of dogma and ideology and open genuine conversations between wisdom traditions. The editor charts a ‘pilgrimage of the heart’ from an international meeting in Bangalore in June 2008 through a series of visits to inter-religious ashrams in western India to a final encounter in the Buddhist-Hindu caves of Ajanta and Ellora. Following in the footsteps of such pioneers of Christian-Hindu dialogue as Abhishiktananda, Francis Acharya and Sara Grant, the itinerary mapped in this Introduction seeks to illustrate key features of the five wisdom traditions discussed in this volume. The paradox of immanent transcendence lies at the heart of this journey.

Keywords
hospitality, inter-religious, imagination, heart-cave, pilgrimage, India

This special issue is about inter-religious imagination. It represents the interactive work of a number of scholars over the last three years which culminated in a conversation between Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims in Bangalore in June of 2007. Most of the proceedings of that gathering are published here, along with several contributions by other scholars who, for one reason or another, could not make the journey to Bangalore but were there in mind and spirit. All share a determination to chart new spaces where a genuine “crossing of hearts” may occur across religious divides—divides which have all too often been the occasion of violent conflict, misunderstanding, and war. If religions have been at the cause of so much hostility in human history, they can also be a source of hospitality and healing. The most effective remedy to perverted spirit is often found at the root of the poison, the hair of the dog that bit you. The spirit answers death with life, or it is not genuinely spirit.
Several of those present at the Bangalore conference participated in a journey afterwards. This took the form of a pilgrimage from the holy town of Kalady (birth place of the Hindu sage, Sankara) in southern Kerala up to the caves of Ajanta and Ellora northeast of Mumbai. The final destination was significant as these ancient caves—some two thousand years old—mark a site of inter-religious sharing between Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. One image in particular struck us as we entered Cave 29 of Ellora: a tri-partite figure of Shiva, the Hindu God, sculpted into the rock face with Jain earrings and a Buddhist hand salute (see Morley fig. 1). It was the last day of our travels and this icon of cross-religious hospitality seemed to epitomize for us, weary pilgrims, a fitting culmination of our odyssey into the “cave of the heart” (guha). Another cave which provoked a keen response from one of our group, Mary Anderson, was the Vishvakarma Buddha-shrine at near-by Ajanta, which she writes about and illustrates below (Anderson figs. 3–7). The theme of descending into underground caverns in order to encounter the sacred is, as we shall see, a recurring motif in the writings and testimonies featured throughout this volume.

Guha is a Sanskrit term referring to a hidden space—in both earth and heart—where the human and divine host each other as “guests.” The figures painted and sculpted in the subterranean passages of Ajanta and Ellora gave a new and vital resonance to the images of the sacred heart of Christ and the immaculate heart of Mary, which several Christians in our group were familiar with since childhood. Crossing these thresholds back and forth, in space and time, embodied a mutual traversal of wisdom traditions.

While a number of contributors to this volume come to the inter-religious dialogue from a Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, or Muslim background, most participants at the Bangalore meeting (co-sponsored by the Jesuit Institute of Boston College and Fireflies Intercultural Ashram) speak from a Christian perspective. It is also important to acknowledge at the outset that the majority of the essays featured in this volume respond to the specifically Indian-Asian context in which our Bangalore conversations took place. The idea of the Indian subcontinent as a laboratory of spiritual experimentation and accommodation is a leitmotif of this issue. We signal this right off by way of identifying the particular hermeneutic “situativeness” of our discourse, thereby acknowledging its special limits and parameters. Our discussion makes no claim to global coverage.

In what follows I attempt to record some pivotal figures, images, and events encountered during our Bangalore meeting and subsequent pilgrimage. They serve as vignettes rather than arguments, soundings rather
than statements, musings rather than manifestos. They trace a path of diverse orientations, detours and traversals which, however various, share at least one common goal: inter-confessional hospitality.

I

I begin with Swami Joseph Samarakone. A Shivaite Catholic and Acharya of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, he ambled into the ashram hall, his hoary-headed, big-boned figure looming larger than life as he prepared to speak. He prefaced and ended his Bangalore address with a sacred chant in Tamil, one of the oldest languages in the world, sung in a cavernous bass voice. It was the same chant to the Sacred Mother which his own guru—the Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths—had him recite each time he visited the Christian-Hindu ashram at Shantivanam in Tamil Nadu in the Seventies.

Swami Sami, as he is known, began by challenging the old doctrine that “outside the Church there is no salvation.” On the contrary, he insisted, Christ is an “inter-religious person par excellence.” The key point I recall from his talk, reproduced below, was that when Christ asks us not to worship with ostentatious rituals and offerings but to “go into one’s inner room” (Matt. 6:5-12), he is not referring to some spare chamber in a spacious house—Palestinians did not have extra rooms!—but to the inner “cave of the heart”: the guha which Eastern wisdom traditions have recognized for millennia as the special meeting place with the divine. Swami Samarakone linked this, in turn, to his belief that when Jesus invokes “Abba,” he is invoking the “Father of all religions,” not just the Father of Abrahamic revelation. And when he announces to the Samaritan woman at the well that a time will come when we will worship the Lord not in temples or on mountains but “in spirit and truth,” Jesus was, once again, proclaiming the freedom to go beyond exclusivist or partisan denominations to a spirituality that includes everyone, even “the least of these.” Salvation is assured to every genuine seeker.

These “inter-religious” teachings of Jesus become more pronounced after his experience in the desert when he renounces the great demonic temptations to become an object of proprietorial worship and power. In his descent into the cave of the heart—in the desert and again in the empty tomb—Jesus signals a “way” which is open to many ways. And this, according to Samarakone, implies for us today the need to renounce the temptation of a “Theology of Fulfillment” which, while recognizing a portion of truth
in all religions, still clings to the supersessionist claim that they all converge on Christ. In other words, if we are to engage in genuine inter-religious dialogue we must overcome the tendency to claim Jesus (against his own teachings) as Last Word or Total Solution. We find here, Samarakone gently confesses, one of the greatest dangers for Christians, namely, to think that one’s own religion is, at the end of the day, the only really true one. Resisting such a temptation does not mean embracing the relativist doctrine that all religions are the same. (Each religion retains its own unique set of faith claims.) It simply means attending to Jesus’ clear message that he was the Way not the End—“I must go so that the Paraclete can come” (John 16:7).

I personally will never forget Swami Sam’s deep, booming voice as he concluded his talk with the ancient Tamil hymn to the divine Mother who cares for everyone, or the time afterwards when, sharing a meal with the other participants, he scooped little mounds of dhal and rice with his enormous fingers and swallowed them one after another, all the while regaling us with mischievous stories about his past life as seeker, priest, and teacher. One could not but be moved by the sheer humanity and humor of this Tamil pilgrim. If Christ is man fully alive, then this inter-religious traveler was a real Christian—or as he himself would say, a Hindu-Christian.

Other Hindu-Christians at the conference were the artists Jyoti Sahi and Caroline MacKenzie. While Jyoti was born of both Christian and Hindu parents, and spent many years in Bede Griffiths’s Ashram at Shantivanam, Caroline had made her way from Catholicism to Hinduism and back, finally espousing a hybrid form of Hindu-Catholicism, combining what she saw as the best aspects of both traditions. Each artist speaks of a rich form of “double belonging,” which prompts me to signal here one or two salient motifs relevant to our issue. Especially suggestive, I find, are Jyoti’s startling analogies between Jesus and integral yoga (Jyoti figs. 3–9); between the Christian Trinity and the three-faced Hindu trimurti (Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva; Morley color plate 6); between the sun salutation (the Surya Namaskar of the yoga sutras) and the Canticle to the Sun of St. Francis; between the Hindu Sun goddess, Savitri, and the bride of the Song of Songs; between the Lord who “stands at the door knocking” (Rev. 3:20) and the divine “guest” celebrated by the Hindu-Muslim poet, Kabir. “There is one thing in the world that satisfies,” says Kabir, “and that is meeting with the Guest.” Jyoti’s portrait of the Madonna cradling the mystical swan (hamsa) in her womb, surrounded by a Pentecostal dance of Dalit harvesters (color plate 1), as well as his Seed of Fire painting (cover), are additional
reminders that images of living flame are central to both the Vedic and Biblical imaginings. Also of note here are Mackenzie's innovative images of double belonging to the compassionate heart of Jesus and the healing Man-Lion, Narasinha. Both images manifest the creative power of the sacred healing-wound. Combining Vedantic imagery with Catholic iconography, Mackenzie displays an innovative audacity to crisscross religious boundaries in an affirmative way (Mackenzie figs. 1–8, color plates 8–15).

Other testaments to the art of multiple religious belonging were delivered by Siddhartha—our host at Fireflies Ashram—Simon Sleeman, and Mary Anderson, yet another scholar-artist at our meeting. Here we find symbols of the poet Kabir consisting with narratives by the French novelist, Michel Tournier; Greek Orthodox icons (the Kardiotissa Mother and Child) juxtaposed with images of the Vishvakarma Buddha-cave. And once again we are reminded of how dramatically the mystical imagination, evinced by these figures, can provide us with a language and liturgy which translates across confessional divides—a point also powerfully illustrated by James Morley and Raghu in their reflections on the inter-religious import of the Yoga sutras and by Catherine Cornille in her exploration of interfaith empathy. As Cornille puts it: "Whereas the religious imagination is usually shaped by a particular religious tradition, encounter with other religions may allow the imagination to stretch beyond its established religious boundaries and to conceive of symbolic universes hitherto unimagined."

To which she adds this crucial note on the importance of our exposure to the other: "It is through the imaginary insights and experiences of other religious traditions that one may come to a new awareness of distinct aspects of one's own religious tradition. The very 'exotopy' [Bakhtin] or alterity of the perspective of the other thus constitutes an important factor in the process of self-understanding and growth." In other words, just as a Buddhist reading of Christian texts may shed fresh light on them, so too a Christian reading of Buddhist texts may in turn reveal unsuspected dimensions of that tradition. It is in focusing on the "experience of the other that one's own religious imagination may be expanded and deepened, and put to the service of genuine dialogue between religions."

II

To illustrate the power of such trans-religious imagination consider some of the breakthrough events of the great wisdom narratives: Kabir welcoming the "uninvited guest"; Abraham and Sarah receiving the three strangers
under the mamre tree; Moses taking an African spouse; Solomon embracing the Shulammite woman (in fact, three of the earliest books of the Hebrew bible are about strangers—Job, Ruth, and the Song of Songs!); Jesus greeting the Samaritan woman at the well and knocking like a stranger at the door of our hearts (Rev. 3:20); Buddha welcoming all outcasts from the caste elites; or in the Greek tradition, the famous instance of Baucis and Philomen receiving Zeus and Hermes as disguised “strangers.”

In our more modern history, we witness the momentous impact of inter-religious exchanges such as the Assisi gathering of all the wisdom traditions in 1986; the pilgrimages of Pope John Paul II to India and to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem in the 1990s; the visit of Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, to the Mufti of Sarajevo in the midst of the Bosnian war; the revolutionary addresses by Eastern spiritual leaders like Vivekananda, Thich Nhat Hahn, and the Dalai Lama to western religious gatherings such as the World Parliament of Religions or the World Council of Churches; not to mention the ordinary healing encounters across sectarian divides witnessed in recent decades in places like Northern Ireland, the Balkans, or Warsaw (see Edward Kaplan’s essay in this volume). 1

One of the main lessons learnt at Bangalore was that “cross-reading” is a precious key to an inter-religious hermeneutics of the heart. By cross-reading I mean an endless and reversible process of translation between one religion and the next. I mean a process of mutual disclosure where imagination and spirit go hand in glove. What happens, for instance, when we read the text about Shiva’s pillar of fire alongside Biblical passages on the Burning Bush (Exod. 3:15) or the Christian account of Pentecostal fire? What new sparks of understanding and compassion fly up when we read Hindu texts on the guha alongside the Buddhist invocation of the “void” (in the Heart Sutra) or Biblical references to Elijah in his cave, Joseph in the well, Jonah in the whale, Jesus in the tomb? What novel

1) Other examples of symbolic gestures, words, or acts taking on a spiritual importance whose fallout extended way beyond the initial event include the famous handshake between John Hume and Gerry Adams in Northern Ireland, Karol Wojtyla seeking pardon of Jews in Jerusalem, Willy Brandt asking forgiveness of the victims of Nazi Germany in Poland, and Václav Havel reconciling with Sudeten Germans, not to mention the historic meetings between sworn adversaries like Mandela and de Klerk, Begin and Sadat, Paisley and McGuinness. These were historical moments when the “impossible became possible”—spiritual breakthroughs translating into political miracles and confirming the maxim that “thoughts which come on doves’ wings guide the world.”
possibilities of semantic and symbolic resonance are generated by juxtaposing Sanskrit invocations of the sacred bird (hamta) alongside the dove of Noah's ark or of the Pentecost? Not to mention the ways in which the Islamic invocation of the Lote Tree (in Mohammed's minaj of nocturnal ascent through the seven heavens) inter-animates with the tree of paradise, the thorn bush of Exodus 3:15, Jesus' crown of thorns, or the famous axis mundi tree of Vedantin cosmogonies and Buddhist mandalas. In the case of our own pilgrim experience, it was remarkable how sculpted images of the Hindu trimurti keenly reinvigorated our understanding of Abraham's three strangers or the three persons of the Christian Trinity. It was as if Andrei Rublev of Zagorsk was consorting with the sculptors of Ellora!

Several of these traversal points are evoked in the essays below (Jyoti, Anderson, Merriman, Rizo-Patron, Samarakone). An initial hypothesis arising from such symbolic crossovers is that semantic inter-animation is at the heart of religious dialogue. Something new arises from bilateral translations between the ancient imaginaries of the great wisdom traditions. Out of the silent dark of the heart-cave—from which many religions originate—emerges a chorus of sounds, images, symbols, and gestures inviting endless translation into different religious liturgies. This very "translatability" fosters the transversality of religions. It makes inter-spiritual conversation into a fertile crossroads where diverse paths converge, traverse, and intersect—a nexus of inter-confessional hospitality, in Paul Ricoeur's phrase.

Such conversing does not lead to some spiritual Super Highway which bypasses the multiple roads. On the contrary, the traversals proliferate in the very semantic diversity engendered by the confluence (without conflation) of multiple sources. Just as fish flourish where sea-tides meet with fresh water streams, so too a hermeneutics of the heart finds its best hatching grounds in the living cross-currents between different spiritual rivers. The wager of this volume is that it is precisely at the level of imagination—prior to and after theory, doctrine, ideology, or dogma—that the aboriginal signs of the heart-cave are first sounded and received. This space is called darshan in Sanskrit, meaning sacred manifestation, the becoming visible and audible of the divine in image, sound, or liturgy. It invites us to attend to the primal scenes and stages of embodying the ultimate, so finely celebrated by Mahayana Buddhism, Hindu puja, or the great religious imaginings of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic art. In other words, we are wagering here on the possibility of a spiritual acoustics capable of re-interpreting the oldest cries of the religious heart.
III

Some who could not make it to Bangalore agreed to meet us on our journey afterwards from Kerala to Ellora. The first of these scholars was Albert Nambiaparambil. He traveled ninety miles to speak with us at the inter-religious ashram of Kalady run by the Jesuits under the directorship of Fr. Painadath. Nambiaparambil arrived in a motorbike rickshaw just as the first monsoons were breaking. He brimmed with energy and wore an irrepresible smile. We met in a small meditation hall on the banks of the Poorna river just yards from where the famous Hindu sage, Sri Sankara, was born in the eighth century. This location had a special resonance for several of us already familiar with Francis Clooney’s “comparative” account of Sankara’s mystical hymn to the Goddess Devi (included in this volume). The rain bucketed down as Albert peppered his talk with spiritual chants and poems—including several of his own—and rehearsed some of the key breakthroughs of inter-faith exchanges in India in recent decades. He mentioned five main “meeting points” where different religions can converge without collapsing into each other. These points chart a middle way between the claims that religion unites while religions divide. They include the use of common images, the creation of a shared liturgy, appreciation of “unknowable” mystery, accommodation of multiple belonging, and the priority of orthopraxis (acts of love, justice, compassion) over orthodoxy (theological dogma and doctrine). Here are some citations illustrating these points:

1. On inter-religious imagery: “As I got more involved with people of other faiths... I picked up an atomic or star-like picture, with a light placed at the center. This picture brought home to me the experience of us all being equal, as fellow pilgrims. My Hindu friends often draw pictures of different paths leading to the same mountain top, of different rivers flowing and merging in the same ocean, of the same moon seen as many moons in the same pond, with the waves reflecting the One...”

2. On inter-religious liturgy: “In-depth interfaith confluence may take new expressions. One such expression is that of an interfaith procession with symbols of different religious and spiritual traditions held or raised in different spots, with the prayer said for each tradition by one or other from a different religion, with the Talisman of Gandhi or the Prayer of Assisi as a banner held in front. Converging in a circle, the participants gave expression to their deep experiences in songs, prayers, with lighted candles in their hands.”
3. On the question of a shared awe before the unknowable (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*), Nambiaparambil described fellow travelers on the interfaith pilgrimage thus: "the partners engaged in new forms of communication from which words returned unable to reach the word... The focus was the *mysterium*, the unknown, with the pilgrims giving expression in total surrender, *sramam gacchami.*" It is of note that even for Thomas Aquinas the end of all our intellectual and spiritual questing is to become united with the sacred "as with something completely unknown" (qtd. in Grant 59).

4. On the fourth possible meeting-point between religions—that of "dual or multiple belonging"—Nambiaparambil spoke of those who, "while rooted in one particular tradition, can also be experientially inserted in another tradition," indeed sometimes even in three or more traditions. He cited instances of Buddhist-Baptists and Shivaite-Catholics, of Hindu-Sufis and Jewish-Yogis. And we recalled how Siddhartha, his friend and director of Fireflies Ashram, had changed his name early in his school years so as to declare his belonging to the four main cultures of his native Kerala—Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim! Such a gesture epitomizes the notion of India as a "laboratory of spiritual experiments," as exemplified in the great religious mixings of wisdom traditions represented by Jains, Sikhs, and later by the spirituality of Ramakrishna and the Vedanta movement. Even Sri Ramana Maharishi—holy sage of modern India—saw it as entirely possible to respect the truth of several religions without compromising any. He taught that "the one point where all religions meet is the realization that God is everything and everything is God." This basic insight corresponds

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2 Osborne 104. The full citation, as reported by Ramana’s close disciple, E. H. Humphreys, is as follows: "Religion, whether it be Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Theosophy, or any other kind of 'ism' or 'ophy' or system, can only take us to the one point where all religions meet and no further... the realization of the fact that God is everything" (qtd. in Osborne 103–104). Once Humphreys himself, already a Catholic, thus recognized the "essential unanimity of all the religions," he saw "no need to change but returned to England, where he entered a monastery" (qtd. in Osborne 106). Ramana’s profoundly inter-religious vision is borne out by the belief that his preferred path of spiritual wisdom, *vichara* (self-inquiry), should in no way be confined to Hindus but should be available to those of all faiths. This was born out by the fact that Ramana’s visitors included Parsees, Muslims, Jews, and Christians, as well as Hindus. (Indeed, one of his most devoted disciples was a French woman who worshipped at Le Sacre Coeur and considered Buddha, Shiva, and Ramana as her gurus in addition to Jesus!) Ramana’s biographer, Arthur Osborne, sums up his guru’s inter-religious
very much to what Siddhartha calls below the unique genius of "open-source Hinduism." Few other traditions, he observes, "have creatively interacted with others, developed new perspectives, and responded to the challenges of the modern era as much as Hinduism" (though he admits that this is still "a minority current" set against the rising tide of Hindu cultural nationalism). For his own part, Nambiaparambil, one of the most intrepid Christian pioneers of interfaith dialogue of Indian provenance, declares it possible to go deeper into one's own faith while simultaneously drawing "nearer" to those of other faiths. This curious "affinity" is, he says, a precious "fruit and flowering of interfaith dialogue"—a fruition that has little to do with "relativism" or the claim that all religions are the "same" (samabhavana).

attitude thus: "The teaching of Sri Bhagavan is the essence of all religions, proclaiming openly that which was hidden. Advaita is the central postulate of Taoism and Buddhism; the doctrine of the inner Guru is the doctrine of the 'Christ in you' restored to the plenitude of its meaning; the vihara penetrates to the ultimate truth of the Islamic creed or shahadah, that there is no god but God—that there is no self but the Self. Sri Bhagavan was beyond the differences between religions. Hindu books were available to him, so he read them and expounded according to their terms, but he was also prepared to expound in the terms of other religions when asked. The sadhana he enjoined was not dependent on any religion. Not only Hindus came to him but Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Parsis, and he never expected any to change his religion. Devotion to the Guru and the flow of his grace leads to the deeper reality of every religion, and Self-enquiry to the ultimate Truth beyond all religions" (160). Hederman shows how mystical thinkers and artists of the Christian tradition reach a similar conclusion in his book Symbolism. In particular, he cites Van Gogh's favorite quote that "les religions passent mais Dieu demeure" and notes that "When Sunday came, van Gogh would go to church three times, either to the Roman Catholic Church, or to the Protestant or Old Episcopal Church, which was commonly called the Jansenist Church. When once [asked], 'How is it possible to go to three different churches of such divergent creeds?' he said, 'Well, in every church I see God, and it's all the same to me whether a Protestant pastor or a Roman Catholic priest preaches; it is not really a matter of dogma, but of the spirit of the Gospel, and I find the spirit in all churches'" (qtd. in Hederman 83). Here was an inclusive mysticism of everyday epiphany which excluded nothing or no one. Van Gogh's famous painting of potato eaters is, for Hederman, a mystical eucharist in its own right (86-7). "Vincent's symbolic art became the expression of the infinite in the mundane and the numinous in day-to-day existence... Il s'agit de saisir ce qui ne passe pas dans ce qui passe, he quotes Gavarni. This is a theology of... panentheism where God is seen in and through nature" (nature being, in this sense, symbolically and sacramentally incarnate). Hederman concludes accordingly that Van Gogh's "paintings are liturgies" (87). In relation to the spiritual role of images and imaginings in the specifically Indian context, see Eck.
5. Finally, we learn from Nambiaparambil that interfaith dialogue is in vain if it does not go beyond words to actions—or to use more technical language, beyond ortho-doxy to ortho-praxis. Hence the concluding call of the World Conference of Religions held in Kochi, Kerala in November 1981: “Let our words be matched by deeds.” The traversing of faiths across historic religious divides can only bear visible fruit in common action in everyday life. The acid-test lies in the questions: Does it give life? Does it alleviate conflict? Does it reach out to the downtrodden and oppressed? Does it foster care for the environment, for the living elements of our earth? Does it bring peace rather than war?

This last question is crucial and was returned to again and again throughout the conference. Interfaith dialogue that remains well-wishing talk is specious. Especially in the face of damning historical evidence of religious perversion, bigotry, and violence (rehearsed in the recent spate of anti-religious tracts by thinkers like Daniel Dennet, Richard Dawkins, Michel Onfray, and Christopher Hitchens). In the specifically Indian context we might cite here the rise of religious nationalism witnessed in the destruction of the Babri Mosque and subsequent riots in 1992, the brutally sectarian rhetoric of the BJP elected to power in 1998, or the internecine slaughter between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. This disturbing alliance between reactionary politics and religion in India cannot be countered by words alone, but only, as Gandhi taught, by a praxis of compassionate, non-violent constraint (satyagraha-swaraj). When it comes to answering the worst perversions of religious fanaticism, far more effective than high-sounding theories are living testimonies to acts of real compassion shown by those of different faiths on the ground. One thinks of the recent example of those who worked tirelessly to dig children from the rubble of the Pakistan earthquake or Tsunami wreckage. In such dramatic calls by the “least of these,” confessional certificates pale into insignificance. Abstract rhetorics are undercut by the actual giving of bread and water. New Age spiritualism bows to the reality of suffering, as does the cruelest form of sectarian dogma. Here we see how doctrine untested by action and suffering is both empty and blind.

The urgency to translate spiritual texts into action—ethical, social, and environmental—is powerfully stressed in several of the contributions to this volume (Makransky, Kaplan, Dallmayr, Raghu, Gowda, and Siddhartha).

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See Nussbaum. She is especially insightful on the danger of the rising Hinduva moment.
The *vita contemplativa*, they remind us, always needs to be incarnated in the *vita activa*. And if it is indeed sadly true that modern (not to mention ancient) history attests to countless instances of religious violence, it also attests to counter-examples where a conversion of hearts led to a conversion of acts. One thinks of the huge impact on our world of religious visionaries like Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and Gustavo Gutierrez in the West, or like Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Dalai Lama in the East, not to mention more recent instances of inter-spiritual transformation such as Jean Vanier’s L’Arche, Thich Nhat Hahn’s Plum Village, or Frère Roger’s Taizé. All these began as tiny seeds, but they steadily grew into flowering movements whose circumference is now as global as their original genesis was local and unique.

Our group had some sense of witnessing such a potential seed for widespread healing in the little meditation chapel at Kalady, a space where persons of different faiths sat around a prayer mat sectioned into the different religious traditions, all converging on a central lamp of fire (Nambiarambil fig. 1). This simple liturgical image spoke volumes.

**IV**

After our exchange with Nambiarambil at Kalady we traveled north to Kurisumala, a Cistercian Ashram high in the Kerala mountains. This special place of pilgrimage was founded by Fr. Francis Acharya and was frequented by both Abhishiktananda and Bede Griffiths (who stayed for several years) as they prepared to found their own inter-religious ashram, Shantivanam, in the neighboring province of Tamil Nadu. Still riding the monsoon, we arrived at the summit of Kurisumala just after a rain burst as hill tops reared their heads again and mists sank and billowed through the valleys. We were met by Francis Acharya’s successor (Francis died in 2001), Yeshudas Thellyiyil, O.C.S.O. He invited us to visit Francis’s study, a small sanctuary brimming with inter-religious symbols and texts. Here Buddhist and Hindu emblems flanked classic Christian and Biblical icons. Particularly striking was the painted Lord rising up from an embryonic seed in the earth surrounded by holy sages and seekers from diverse wisdom paths (fig. 1). There was a deep quietude about this frontier post of the spirit where both prayer and meals are conducted in silence. After meditation and food, we were especially fortunate to share some of the thoughts of Francis Acharya, passed onto us by Yeshudas.
Of particular interest to us was what this pioneer of Hindu-Christian conversation had to say about the *Book of the Heart*. Citing the Second Vatican Council’s “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church with Other Religions” (1965) as a radical opening to the truths of other religions—e.g., Hinduism’s practice of “contemplating the divine mystery,” or Buddhism’s ability to attain “a state of inner freedom” or “supreme enlightenment”—
Francis claims that all living faiths of the world bear witness to "the inner world of spiritual realisation" which we have access to through "meditation" (Francis 11). He does not hesitate to compare the primordial Word of John's Gospel with the Om of Vedantin meditation celebrated in the Upanishads. And he goes on to say that it is the same creative Word which resounds through all the great spiritual literatures, sculptures, and liturgies of the world. It is, as he puts it, the same "charism" at work in the different religions, as evidenced in the Third Book of meditation: the Book of the Heart. The first two are the Book of the Word (Revelation) and the Book of Creation (the natural universe).

The Book of the Heart reflects the other two books and translates into the diverse wisdom traditions:

It is ultimately through the heart that we enter into communion or identify with others, that we become one with God. The heart is the seat of all inner activity. It is in the heart that we feel attuned to nature. The word of God must be received in the heart and can be understood and made to bear fruit only in the heart. In the Bible the heart rejoices, exults in the Lord. The heart is the seat of holy desires and of divine longing. Wisdom, discernment and knowledge are seated in the heart. (Francis 10)

Noting how it is the hearts of the disciples which burn as Jesus reveals himself to them on the way to Emmaus, Francis concludes that this is the most privileged meeting-point for the different religions to converge and converse. "Both traditions, Christian and Hindu," he writes,

see the heart as the innermost spring of the human personality, of the inner self. It is the place of the experience of the self and as such it is directly open to God. God dwells in the heart, his light is seen in the cave-guha of the heart. The heart is the place of God, the point of contact with God. His presence in the heart is experienced as if the coming of rain from heaven. To heaven his rain returns, after watering the very earth of our lives, and making it bear fruit, with crops which provide food for all whose hearts hunger and thirst. (Francis 10)

Rehearsing a number of passages from both Hindu and Christian scriptures, Francis concludes that it is from this inner heart-space of spiritual meditation and self-realization that the waters of eternal life well up and nourish the ground of our being, both spiritual and material. For this, he
says, is what millions of seekers come to “Third World countries of Asia” to seek: the *reunification of matter and spirit* in a world which suffers terribly from their separation. (The heart is, of course, an equally central symbol for other wisdom traditions as evidenced in the articles on Buddhism and Islam below. It is also, as Kaplan reminds us, central to the Jewish thinker Heschel’s understanding of “depth theology” based on a “pre-conceptual apprehension of the divine, preceding formulations of creed and belief”—an understanding which Heschel himself believes is deeply conducive to religious pluralism.)

As director of one of the numerous inter-religious ashrams throughout India which receive pilgrims each year, Francis Acharya spoke from direct experience. Here was someone who recognized that behind the common charge of New Age relativism and spiritual tourism there is often a much deeper instinct at work. Most seekers who come to India are, he recognized, hungering “for a dimension of life of which they find a seed in their hearts (James 14)”; but they do not know how to grow this seed for lack of a favorable environment. It is just such an environment which inter-religious ashrams like Kurismula, Kalady, and Shantivanam provide. For such places—in this instance incorporating the ancient arts of yoga and pranayama (breathing) with contemplative Christian prayer—acknowledge that “human destiny needs to include not only spiritual perfection but also that of the body and the cosmos.” We must, concludes Francis, reawaken to the ancient wisdom that matter and spirit, *prakriti* and *purusha*, flesh and word, are “essentially related to each other,” and that “meditation is the most articulated agent to animate this relationship” (Francis 53). For in meditation we discover that the divine is not just “above” but also “through” all things, transcendent and immanent (Eph. 1:23).

This discovery is ultimately made in the cave of the heart where the freedom of eternal life rises up, here and now. For it is in the depths of the *gūha* that we discover our “innermost life principle,” a life where fearless and calm meditation leads “to a reconciliation of matter and spirit, closer and closer until they become one.” The *gūha* is that sacred existential space where the divine comes to realization in our being. So it is no wonder that Jesus was born in a cave—as were Shiva and Hermes—and that so many

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4) Francis 54. It is telling that Francis ends his reflections on meditation with the inter-religious observation that when Pope Paul VI (the first Primate to visit India) made his historic trip to Bombay in 1964, he recalled and recommended the ancient Upanishadic prayer, “from the unreal lead me to the unreal” (*Asato ma sat gamaya*).
saints and prophets had their deepest insights in underground caverns and
grottoes—Elijah (Horeb), Mohammed (Hira), Vashista (Rishikesh), Mil-
arepa (Tibet), Jerome (Jerusalem), Benedict (Subasio), Ignatius (Mont
Serrat), John the Evangelist (Patmos), John of the Cross (Toledo), Anthony
(Egypt), Bernadette (Lourdes), and so on.

This image of the guha was to accompany us throughout our Indian jour-
ney, from our discussions at Bangalore, Kalady, and Kurisumala to our actual
descent into the legendary cave of Shiva’s birthplace at Gokarna (meaning
“Cow’s Ear,” the holy Hindu pilgrimage town south of Goa). It was in this
cave-womb of Gokarna (figs. 2 and 3) that we witnessed how the combined
spirits of Shiva and Shakti—male and female faces of the divine—are gen-
erated from the darkest abyss within the earth, life returning again and again
from death, as the lingam rises from the yoni, as light reemerges from sub-
terranean night. Indeed, one of the most memorable moments of our pil-
grimage was climbing down into this guha and, having traversed several
winding thresholds and passageways in pitch dark, arriving at the innermost
pit where, seemingly from nowhere, a spear of light traversed the roof of the
cave to illuminate a tiny point of ground at the center of the chamber. Sit-
ting there in quiet meditation, we felt as though we were resting at the still
point of a moving world. Axis mundi. Lumen Christi. Om namah Shivaya.

The guha opened its gates to us again, of course, one last marvelous time
on our final visit to Ajanta and Ellora: an experience eloquently witnessed
to in the essays by Anderson and Morley below. And I should also mention
that the guha as privileged space of the “heart of Shiva” is central to Bäum-
er’s essay on Kashmir Shaivite mystical poetry—though our pilgrim path
did not, alas, extend as far north as Kashmir. Nor should we forget that the
heart is a privileged Hindu symbol for both Lord Krishna and the mon-
key-God, Hanuman, who carries the sacred lovers, Rama and Sita, in the
sanctuary of his open chest.

V

As will be already clear to the reader, our journey was not just geographical
but spiritual. This enabled us to engage with some other significant guides
who mapped and signposted our way. I would like to say something about
two in particular—Abhishiktananda and Sara Grant—whose spirits were
particularly present to us thanks to the testimonies of fellow-travelers,
Fanny Howe and Shirley du Boulay (see their essays below).
Figure 2 and 3. "Shiva's Birthplace." Guha cave, Gokarna, India. Photos: James Morley, 2007.
Abhishiktananda was an inter-religious pioneer and contemporary of Francis. A Breton Benedictine by the original name of Henri Le Saux, he traveled through the ashrams of India in the late 1950s and 60s on his way to the sanctum of Arunachala. Here, some fifty-five years before our own little pilgrimage, he had discovered the chiasmus of Christ and Shiva. This momentous epiphany occurred during his encounter with Ramana Maharishi in the cave of the holy Tamil mountain. In her essay below, Shirley du Boulay recounts how Abhishiktananda first registered the holy presence of Sri Ramana, the “unique Sage of eternal India,” deep in his being. “Unknown harmonics woke in my heart,” he wrote. “A melody made itself felt and especially an all-embracing bass…” The meeting of Hindu and Christian, in other words, took place beyond and beneath confessional doctrines, taking the form of a mystical liturgy of music and silence. Some time after his visit, Abhishiktananda returned to the sacred mountain of Arunachala and lived for months in silence in one of its gubas. He dwelt there as a “Hindu-Christian monk,” expressing his double belonging in morning Eucharists on the mountain of Shiva. This is how Du Boulay describes his early morning worship: “While it was still dark, he would say Mass in his cave, deep in the heart of the mountain. Then he would sit in front of what he called his ‘sacred space’ (or sacro speco as St. Benedict’s cave at Subiaco was known), and wait for the sun to rise. As the dawn broke, blazing with the warm redness that gives the mountain its name, he would greet it in the Indian way, hands together about his head, and, making a full prostration, sing the Lumen Christi and the Gloria as they are sung at dawn in the Syrian Church. He sang Lauds, saying the Lord’s Prayer with his arms stretched out facing Tiruvannamalai, the town at the foot of Arunachala.”

It was during his time in this holy guba of Shiva’s mountain that Abhishiktananda accepted the Hindu life of renunciation, sannyasa, as an end in itself rather than merely as a means of proclaiming the Christian Gospel (as the conventional Theology of Fulfillment held). But this did not mean that he converted to Hinduism. Abhishiktananda was adamant about retaining his role as a Christian sannyasi, that is, as a Christian-Hindu hermit. The hyphen retained the fertile tension between the two religions. It resisted collapsing the difference, or subsuming one into the other in some appropriative, triumphal, or supersessionist gesture. And while he came to agree with Ramana’s insight that the “essence” of Hinduism and Christianity, indeed of all genuine religions, is a common source or well-spring of the Spirit, this was, he believed, only accessible (if at all) in the mystical,
ineffable space of the inner heart. It lay beyond words, thoughts, and dogmas. The closest one could get—apart from silence—was in breathing, music, liturgy, and chant, that is, through the agency of religious imagination. But as soon as one translates the Source—symbolized by the wellspring at the center of the mountain cave—into any specific religious form, one must accept the inevitability of creedal, cultural, and doctrinal differences. Hence the need for the hyphen of double belonging which points to a communion without disowning the necessity of human difference embodied by every historical religion.

Thus Abhishiktananda could indeed say of Ramana that “You are I!” and realize that when Ramana says “I am this heart” (bhrīd-aham), this “I Am” (Aham) designates a space where both Hindu and Christian are one. He could end his famous poem to Arunachala with the ringing apostrophe to “Jesus Brahman!” He could enter the holy of Hindu holies in the inner sanctum of Arunachala temple (usually confined to Hindus) and contemplate the Shiva-Lingam for hours on end in silence and darkness. But he never renounced his role as a Catholic priest of the Benedictine Order. He remained faithful to this double allegiance until the end. He did, however, renounce his initial task as a missionary sent to bring salvation to the idolatrous “heathens of India,” finally preferring the model of conversation to that of conversion. As he wrote to his sister: “I am just a poor Christian monk in the midst of Hindu monks… The Indo-Christian monastic way of life is an end in itself not a means [of conversion]” (see Du Boulay).

One of the most important lessons that Abhishiktananda learned from his inter-religious immersion in Indian spirituality was, ultimately, that the old dualisms between spirit and flesh, inmanence and transcendence, mind and body, which so bedeviled Western Christianity for millennia, could and should be overcome. And he believed that this could happen not by repudiating Christ or replacing him with an alternative Guru or Savior but in becoming more faithful to Christ’s own liberating message of Incarnation: “The human is spirit and flesh at the same time… incarnate spirit.” The famous ascent to the depths of the heart, which Abhishiktananda charted in his account of his stay at Arunachala, led him to an inner space beyond opposites where every aspect of material life became sacred. In other words, the space of Advaita, where all is one without a second. When one enters the cave of the heart, the center in the center where Jesus and Shiva sit side by side, one eventually realizes that this center is “as truly everywhere as it is in ‘myself’” (see Du Boulay). The everyday material world is therefore not jettisoned but rather hallowed as a
sacrament of ordinary things. The one who reaches awareness (satori) does not abandon this universe. On the contrary, he “continues to see grass as green and the sky as blue, to consider rice as something to eat and cloth as something to wear... What he is liberated from is the relationship to himself that until then he projected onto these things. Things are seen in themselves and no longer in dependence on 'himself.' Dear ones are no less dear, but there is no longer the least attachment, the least turning back on 'himself.'”5 In far away Hindu India, Abhishiktananda came home to his Christian self.

VI

A final Hindu-Christian pioneer who inspired and oriented our Indian pilgrimage was Sara Grant. A close associate of Abhishiktananda, this intrepid Sacred Heart Sister spent most of her life practicing inter-faith dialogue in Mumbai and Pune. In this volume, Fanny Howe, a constant presence on our odyssey, writes beautifully of how this Scottish sadhu sought to align certain forgotten spiritual wisdoms of her own Christianity with the teachings and practices of Vedanta and Advaita. As our pilgrim troupe passed by Sophia College in Mumbai where Grant first taught on her arrival in India in 1956, her spirit was almost palpable. Several of her bold observations came to mind, sketched out in ground-breaking works such as Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian. For her the most important shared insight of Advaita Vedanta and Christian incarnation is the great paradox that divinity is immanent transcendence.

5 See the counsel given by Ramana’s disciple, Harilal, to Abhishiktananda in The Secret of Arunachala: “As soon as advaita is presented as a religion, it ceases to be advaita. The Truth has no ‘Church.’ The Truth is the Truth, and it cannot be passed on to others by anyone at all. The Truth has no need of anyone’s help for its propagation. The Truth shines with its own light. He who claims to possess the Truth or else says that he has received it or that he can hand it on, is either stupid or a charlatan... Leave off your prayers, your worship, your contemplation of this or that. Realize that you are that—tat tvam asi... For anyone who has seen the Real, there is neither Christian, Hindu, Buddhist nor Muslim... Stop talking about differences. There are no differences anywhere. There is only the atman. God is the atman, the Self of all that is” (84–5). Or again: “Enter into the ghub, the cave of your heart, and there realize that you are... It is you who fill your cave with that peace (shanti) and joy (ananda) which you yourself essentially are, in the cave of your heart... You are this bliss (ananda) and this ananda cannot even be called ananda any longer, for it cannot either be seen, or conceived, or named. It simply is” (86–7).
Sara Grant's insight is, simply, this: when Christ announced that all things are one he was confirming the Vedantic message that truth is "one without a second." With this basic conviction—and the theological thesis that the Hindu Sankara and the Christian Aquinas could be intellectually reconciled in their respective views of the cosmos as sacrament—Grant became one of the great pioneers of "inculturation" in India after Vatican II, culminating in her role as director of the inter-religious center at the Christa Prema Seva Ashram in Pune in 1975. The aim of this community was to recognize "in daily contact with our brothers and sisters from other religions... the striking resonances of the same ineffable Mystery which Jesus Christ revealed to us beyond all adequate expression" (Grant 25).

Grant's first face-to-face meeting with the non-dualist vision of the Upanishads took the form of an encounter with a Ramakrishna monk who stayed for ten days during Easter 1975. Of this deep sharing in silence and prayer she wrote: "Deep calleth on Deep' and what becomes of outward differences? They are simply transcended and yet we each remained what we were—Hindu and Christian" (26). For her, this trans-religious epiphany testified to three basic disclosures: (1) the whole of existence is permeated by a fundamental unity; (2) this unity is realized not by eliminating differences but by transcending them (or sinking beneath them); and (3) this oneness is experienced not just intellectually but at the level of what she calls a deeper "gut-level instinct," and is epitomized both by a sense of desolation at its apparent absence and joy in its presence—a presence in which, she says, "one's whole being is brought at least temporarily into harmony with all that is or ever can be" (27). Whether one is Christian or Hindu, once one taps the well-spring in the cave of the heart, this hidden Source continues after in the background of one's being "like the mused roar of some great river in spate" (53).

This opening was further confirmed by Grant's meeting with her fellow-pilgrim of the heart, Abhishiktananda. In the depths of their common immersion in the "boundless ocean of Being"—which Advaita signals beyond all names and forms—each came to recognize that "truth cannot contradict truth" and that accordingly Christian revelation and Advaita are both valid (Grant 30–31). This led to the realization of the inadequacy of the traditional presentation of Christ as the only way to salvation, the intolerable view of God the Father in the "satisfaction" theory of redemption (the death of the son as sacrificial expiation), and the almost idolatrous fixation on Christ as an end in himself (contrary to Jesus' noli me tangere and his repeated insistence that he must depart so that the Spirit can come).
But it was, interestingly, once again around an event of shared interfaith liturgy that Grant experienced the greatest breakthrough. It was Easter Week 1972 when her community at Pune celebrated the Eucharist in an especially meaningful way. It was significant for Grant that both Abhishiktananda and a Hindu Panditji were present on that occasion. This was a vibrant time for liturgical renewal in the Indian Church and Grant’s CPS community had been recognized as a center for “experimentation” in what was then called the inter-religious “universe of discourse.” Indian ways of worship and use of certain non-biblical scriptures were permitted. The aim was to seek out some common resonances for “complimentary readings”—texts in the Gospels that might “resonate,” for example, with the Upanishads and vice versa. This was not to underplay the way in which key words like “God,” “Creator,” or “heaven” could mean different things for Hindus and Christians, or to ignore the different historical claims made for the Gospels and texts like the Bhagavad-Gita (where Krishna and Arjuna, for example, are not intended as literal persons). The main purpose was to see how differing religious texts might inter-signify in liberating ways.⁶

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⁶ Grant believed that the Vatican Council document on the Church in the Modern World had opened a door of real promise with its historic admission that “since Christ died for all men, and the vocation of man is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in ways known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this pastoral mystery” (No. 22); and she held that this opening was widened further by the subsequent affirmation that the “liturgical celebration is the setting par excellence for reflection on the mystery of Christ in the light of both biblical and non-biblical scripture” (Proceedings of the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, Bangalore, December, 1974, qtd. in Grant 68). This kind of inter-religious overture is not, as Dallmayr writes in his essay below on Cusanus (the fifteenth-century ecumenical thinker), an invitation to relativism but to “relationalism,” namely, “the conviction that truth or true knowledge cannot be seized or monopolized by a dogmatic authority but is best promoted through the interrelation between distinction perspectives (with each sincerely searching for the truth). The upshot of this conviction is an unorthodox and innovative conception of the relation between the ‘one’ and the ‘many,’ where the ‘one’ serves only as a common lodestar but not as the dominating master of the ‘many.’” Here, inter-religious relationality is not a finite means towards an end but an infinite good in itself—the gift and kenosis of divinity in and through the flesh of humanity. See also here the dialectic between "faith" as infinite relational openness to others and "religion" as an institutional limit and consolidation in the works of thinkers like Bonhoeffer, Ricoeur, Derrida, and Caputo. See in this respect my forthcoming book, Anatheism: An Essay on Sacramental Imagination and the proceedings of the three Villanova Conferences on "Religion and Postmodernism" (1997, 1999, 2001) edited by John Caputo which include such leading contemporary theorists of the religion-faith debate as Derrida, Millbank, Marion, Vattimo, Keller, Hart and Tracy.
But for Grant herself it was in the Easter Saturday Vigil celebrated at their Pune ashram in 1972 that a really new sense of “trans-cultural celebration” was witnessed. In the presence of Jews, Hindus, and Christians of different denominations, the “passover” and Vigil liturgies took on novel and revolutionary meanings. Old inhibitions vanished and the celebrants felt free to introduce readings and chants from Indian sources at the Vigil itself (and not just as a “preparatory para-liturgy”). The Risen Lord was now hailed, borrowing a verse from the Hindu Jnaneshwari, as the “elephant in the garden of the dawn of knowledge,” while the celebrants lit the Paschal candle and restored the sacramental presence to the ashram chapel, after which the Regina Caeli was sung in Hindi. Grant describes the sense of embodied liturgical sharing between different faiths in terms of “feeling almost physically bound, and then free.” What especially struck the participants of the Vigil was precisely the bodily aspect of the being and the fact that we experienced it as community. Suddenly we realized that until his death, Jesus was bound by history and its limitations, but through his death and resurrection he had burst the bonds of space and time and could be recognized as not only Lord and Christ, but satpurusha, the archetypal Man of Vedic tradition in whom every member of the human race can recognize the truth of his or her own being.7

In this way, the reading of the Creation Hymn from the Rig Veda (10.90) alongside Paul’s invocation of the mystical body in the first letter to the Corinthians enabled Christians and Jews to restore a genuinely cosmic sense to the Paschal/Passover Mystery (which Hinduism had never lost); while Hindus were encouraged by the same cross-reading to have a keener historical sense of human liberation (as the diversification of the Purusha into multiple beings is lovingly recovered in a centrifugal movement to the source of the True Self or Atman).

7 Grant 72. Grant continues: “A year or two after this we hit upon the inspiration of prolonging the Vigil by a week of utsungs beginning on the eve of Palm Sunday, several of which are devoted to the themes of the Vigil readings from the old Testament, prayerfully pondered in the light of a parallel reading from Hindu scriptures and our own experience. This not only made it possible to go much deeper into the meanings of the Easter mystery, but also enabled us to feel free to introduce Indian readings in the earlier part of the Vigil itself which would help to make it more intelligible to our multi-religious household” (72).
By juxtaposing texts of the Vedic and biblical traditions in this imaginative manner, members of the different religions were able to learn more about other ways of believing but also more about their own. They were invited to empathize with alternative ways of spiritual emancipation. From such liturgical traversals, Grant’s “multi-religious household” at Pune learnt how “cross-fertilization can bring out very vividly truths in both biblical and other texts which may have been dulled by constant repetition or, perhaps, may never have been perceived at all” (Grant 73). Grant did not hesitate to call the implications of such sharing “epoch-making.”

VII

While written from a largely Christian perspective, the pioneering breakthroughs of people like Grant, Abhishiktananda, and Francis Acharya were readily accommodated, and in some instances anticipated, by their Hindu interlocutors in the Indian subcontinent. Foremost amongst these were members of the Ramakrishna Vedanta movement which was profoundly inter-spiritual in character given the multiple religious belonging of its founder, who like Gandhi, had no difficulty proclaiming that while always a Hindu, he was also a “Muslim, Christian, and Sikh.” Indeed, as several of our contributors (Raghu, Siddhartha, Clooney, Bäumer) point out, the Hindu religion has, at its best, always been open to creative experimentation and hybridization. This is in keeping with the earliest teaching of the Rig Vedas—“Though truth is one, the sages name it in many ways”—a sentiment echoed in the radical teaching of Ramakrishna (who embraced all the great wisdom traditions as his own) and of his famous disciple, Swami Vivekananda, who took the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1896) by storm when he announced the inter-religious message of Vedanta. Speaking to a fellow Hindu in a letter of May 28, 1894, Vivekananda wrote: “Do not insist upon anything dogmatic; do not go against anything—ours is to put chemicals together, the Lord knows how and when the crystals will form.” Our visits to Ramakrishna Ashams in Kalady and other towns along the Western coast of India confirmed this generosity of imagination again and again.

Though the Hindu-Christian dialogue was the one which most informed our Bangalore meeting and pilgrimage, there were also exchanges with other wisdom traditions of India—Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain. These last three have long been acknowledged as generous in their inter-
religious legacies. Jainism was founded as a universal pan-religious faith, Sikhism comprised a rich blend of Islam and Hinduism (see Siraj and Siddharta), and Buddhism emerged by transcending all partisan religious claims to possess some Absolute deity to the exclusion of others (see Makransky and O’Leary). Though Islam is often painted as intolerant towards other religions, fundamentalist in its faith, and zealous to defend the One God of the last Prophet against all infidels, this is not at all representative of the rich and complex Muslim tradition.

At our Bangalore meeting, the Muslim scholar Maqbool Siraj told a very different story. He offered crucial insights that merit special mention here. In contradistinction to the mis-readings of Islam in the early Khalifat (sixth century) or later Wahhabi movements (from which Al Qaeda sprang), Siraj drew an alternative account of Islamic history. His narrative, more in keeping with the original Imamate philosophy, explored the legacy of Islam on the Indian subcontinent as one of creative synthesis and imaginative accommodation. Particularly moving is his description of the inspiring interfaith vision of enlightened Mughal leaders like Babur and Akbar, visionaries who engaged in a vast enterprise of “translation” between Islamic and Hindu texts (including renditions of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Upanishads in Persian). Akbar was even attributed with the promotion of a new inter-spiritual philosophy known as Din-e Ilahi, drawing from the best insights of the different faiths practiced in his jurisdiction. He engaged in frequent discussions with delegates of various religions in his court—from Purkotham Brahman and Sheikh Tajiuddin to Portuguese Christian missionaries and Zoroastrian representatives from Navsari in Gujarat. These exchanges led Akbar to believe in the commonality of

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8 In addition to Siraj’s article see also Zaidi.
9 Dalrymple writes of the “remarkable porosity and fluidity of the frontier” between Indian-Islamic culture and the other cultures (e.g., Hindu and European) of the Indian subcontinent. Exploring various examples of inter racial fusion and cultural assimilation—a process famously described as “chutnification” by Salman Rushdie—Dalrymple celebrates the importance of spiritual “crossing over” between different religions. Indeed, it was a Deccan tradition that Hindu kings would dress in Islamic court costumes in public while every Muslim sultan in the region made a point of employing a Hindu Chief Minister. The cultural and spiritual “hybridity” which resulted from the intermingling of Indian Muslims and Hindus with European and Middle Eastern (mainly Persian, Egyptian, and Yemini) immigrants, “turned the Deccan into the greatest centre of Arabic learning and literary composition outside the Levant,” a cultural richness also evident in Deccani painting and architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (20f). Dalrymple also notes the importance of multiple translations of sacred love scriptures between Indian and Muslim
all religions, or what he called a “general consensus” (Sulhe kul) among religions on certain human values. Indeed, it is humbling for Westerners to be reminded, especially in this time of anti-Islamic prejudice and fear, that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the Christian Inquisition was persecuting witches, Jews, Muslims, and heretics (Giordano

cultures, leading to remarkable cross-fertilization between the two cultures, including much cross-marriage and social mixing. This phenomenon was, he accepts, far more widespread in Indian than in Middle-Eastern Islam. "Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries many of the classics of both Hindu writing on love and eroticism were translated into Persian for the uses of the princes and princesses of Indian Muslim courts. Significantly, it was in the more cosmopolitan and less comprehensively Islamicised courts of he Deccan such as Bijar, Bijapur and Golconda that much of this work of translation and dissemination took place: erotic treatises such as the famous Kama Sutra and the Sringaramanjarai (literally 'The Bouquet of Sexual Pleasure') were translated into Persian or Deccani Urdu, while Indian Muslim authors added new studies to the erotic shelves of the place libraries such as the Buzur al-Nisba (or 'Delights of Women') and the Tadhkira al-Shahwati (‘Book of Aphrodisiacs’), both of which were much read and copied throughout the eighteenth-century Deccan... After the end of the enforced puritanism of Aurangzeb and Nizam ul-Mulk’s period, attitudes changed completely: Nizam Ali Kahan (Sultan of Hyderabad) even founded a department of his civil service to oversee and promote the business of dancing, music and sensuality, the Daftar Arshab-i-Nishwat (the Office of the Lord’s of Pleasure). At the same time there was an explosion of unrestrainedly sensual art and literary experimentation: in Delhi, Lucknow and Hyderabad, poets at this time wrote some of the most unashamedly amorous Indian poetry to be composed since the end of the classical period seventeen hundred years earlier" (134–35). Elsewhere, Dalrymple celebrates the following virtues of Mughal India: "But if the Mughals represented Islamic rule at its most magnificent, they also defined Islam at its most open-minded, tolerant and syncretic. Unlike the Ottoman or the Safavids, who ruled largely Muslim polities, the Mughal Empire was effectively built in partnership with India’s Hindu majority and succeeded as much through diplomacy as by brute force: Akbar in particular was a true humanist who strove for the reconciliation of his Hindu and Muslim subjects, and managed to unite them in the service of a coherent multireligious state. As Emperor, Akbar promoted Hindus at all levels of his administration, married a Rajput princess, and entrusted his army to his former Hindu opponent, Raja Man Singh of Jaipur. He ended the jizya tax levied only on non-Muslims, ordered the translation of the Sanskrit classics into Persian, codified minority rights, and filled his court with Hindu and Muslim artists and intellectuals. Akbar personally adopted many Hindu and yogic practices, and even became a vegetarian... So great an impression did all this make on his Hindu subjects that in some of the Bardic traditions of Rajasthan, Akbar came to be equated with the Hindu divinity Lord Ram. More remarkable still to a modern world lazily used to thinking of Islam and Christianity as sworn and eternal enemies, both Akbar and his son Jahangir were enthusiastic devotees of Jesus and his mother Mary, something they did not see as being in the least at variance with their Muslim faith” ("The Most Magnificent Muslims’’ 26).
Bruno was burnt alive in the Campo dei Fiori for his inter-religious imagination in 1600), Akbar was convening multi-faith symposia in his Indian palace! One sometimes forgets that there are seventy-two schools of Islam, not one monolithic church. Religious minorities and diversities were often better treated under the Mughal Empire than under its Holy Roman counterpart.

It is true, of course, that great Christian thinkers like Aquinas and Cusanus were eminently capable of entering into creative dialogue with their Muslim contemporaries—the former with the likes of Avicenna and Averroes, the latter with the Mufties of Istanbul in the council of Ferrara, Florence in 1439 (see Dallmayr). Such dialogical overtures were richly rewarded and reciprocated by their Islamic brothers, from Cordova and Samarkand to Agra and Madras.

The Islamic tendency towards “cultural blending”—a theme so central to our volume—found cogent expression in the poetic-spiritual works of mystics like Ibn ‘Arabi, Al Hallaj, or Kabir Das. Kabir, mentioned earlier, was a fifteenth-century visionary raised in Islam who brought together what he considered to be the most promising aspects of both faiths in the spirit of bhakti and Sufi practices. Kabir composed his poetic works, renowned throughout all of North India in his time and throughout the world today, in a hybrid language that broke down barriers to experiencing the divine. He, and the woman mystic poet, Mirabai, denounced the bigotry of narrow religious sects and invited people to seek God within themselves in simplicity, integrity, and love. Indeed, Kabir described himself as the hybrid “child of Allah-Rama,” considering these two deities as but different names for the same unnamable God. Legend tells how on his death, when Hindu and Muslim sects rushed to appropriate his body for rival funeral rites, they found no one lying beneath the shroud—only a bed of flowers.

The Islamic imagination is further explored below in the pioneering essays of Islamic scholars James Morris, Steffen Stelzer, and Hannah Mermiman. Morris concentrates on the interfaith resources of enlightened Islam conceived as a multi-sided pyramid: many different paths leading to the one Apex. Commenting on the extraordinary insights of Islamic sages like Ghazali, Biruni, and the mystical Ibn ‘Arabi, Morris shows how they ingeniously sought to reconcile the historical multiplicity of religions with the unicity of the One Din. He also reveals how Ibn ‘Arabi in particular treasured the process of “creative imagination” and translation between languages and religions as a way of articulating the invisible human-divine
reality which the Koran called the "Heart" (al-qalb). Morris concludes, appropriately, with an analysis of a famous painting by Sultan Muhammad of a Hafiz love-poem on divine imagination (khawal). Stelter celebrates the Islamic imagination as a special activity of acoustic and auditory "following," as articulated in a number of Sufi stories and commentaries, while Merriam, for her part, illuminates the story of Mohammed's nocturnal vision (mi'raj) of the Lote Tree as an image of mystical ultimacy. Situated in "the eye of the heart" and only disclosed when the ego-self dissolves (fanft'llah), the Lote Tree is as close as it gets to God—the place beyond which one cannot pass in the journey of ascent to the divine. Here once again, and in keeping with our basic theme, the sacred Islamic images speak as powerfully as the words and ideas which accompany them (color plates 16–18).

VIII

Our journey up the Western coast of India ended, as mentioned earlier, with a visit to the caves of Ajanta and Ellora. These ancient excavations—dating back two millennia and representing the three religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism—vividly illustrate the extraordinary power of inter-religious imagination (see Anderson and Morley). Particularly striking is the way in which, at Ellora, the three sequences of caves exist side by side, respecting both their differentiation and interaction, as one moves from one spiritual tradition to the next, occasionally hitting upon a a trinit (three-form figure) or composite religious sculpture which combines images of all three. At times one had the impression that some bee of the invisible had flown from cave to cave drawing the nectar from each and cross-pollinating their respective imaginaries in startling new fruits of the visible. The Shiva-Buddha with Jain earrings of Cave 29 in Ellora seemed to enshrine in ageless rock the wisdom of the sacred guha as sung by Kabir: "There the bee of the heart is deeply immersed, and desires no other joy" (Hansa, Kaho puratan vat).

Also striking was the deeply sensual and embodied character of the sculptures, not only in the underground Hindu temple of Ellora (Cave 16) where Shiva Lingas, Shiva-Parvati marriage feasts, and other Tantric love emblems proliferate, but also in the cave murals of Ajanta where the previous lives of the Buddha are depicted in vibrant color and shape. Indeed, it is curious how the central Buddhist Heart Sutra—"form is emptiness, emptiness is form"—takes on added meaning here as sculpted and illus-
trated images of the Buddha slowly emerge from the dark void of the cave. Though truth is ineffable and unthinkable for Buddhists, it is not unimaginable: in a rich profusion of jataka—narrative stories, emblems, and testimonies—the memory of the Buddha, as living person and teacher, is recorded and transmitted down through millennia. The narrative murals in the first caves of Ajanta represent a fascinating complementarity of "apophatic" respect for transcendence and "kataphatic" sensitivity for immanence. Wherever one looks in this and other Ajanta caves, matter and spirit are inextricably linked—a point beautifully evoked by Anderson in her account of the Ellora Cave 10 below, Morley in his account of Cave 29, and Dallmeyer in his observation about the root links between wisdom (sapientia) and the human senses (supere).

In the underground gubas of Ellora and Ajanta we found three wisdom traditions concelebrating the mystery of "transcendent immanence." We participated in a veritable feast of inter-spiritual imagining. And we recalled this special verse of Kabir:

The creature is in Brahma, and Brahma is in the creature: they are ever distinct, yet ever united.
He Himself is the tree, the seed, the germ...
He Himself is the manifold form, the infinite space.
He is the breath, the word and the meaning [Sadho, Brahm alakh takhaya].

The wisdom traditions of India, figured in these caves, all bear witness in their unique ways, to the radical embodiment of the divine. And so doing they radiate out to other religions too. In the womb of these gubas one encounters the dancing heart of Shiva, the heart sanctuary of Krishna, and the heart sutra of Buddha. But one also feels the presence of the mystical gahib of Rumi and Kabir and the burning cardia of Mary and Jesus. In the crossing of these multiple hosts and guests, differences are respected, received, and reconciled.

On our last day in India we hired a van to take us back from Ajanta to Mumbai where we were taking a plane back to London. Our driver was a discrete bearded man who hardly spoke during the full day’s journey. It was only as we entered the outskirts of rain-flooded Mumbai—the full monsoon having finally caught up with us—that our driver informed us that he was Muslim. During all our hours of travel we had been so excited by the encounter with the Hindu-Buddhist-Jain caves that we had not taken the
trouble to speak properly with our driver or ask what religion he was. When he did at last speak, revealing a vast wealth of knowledge about the history of the caves and about his own Sufi Islamic tradition (we had, for example, passed through a famous Sufi town without knowing it), it was as if the “uninvited guest” had turned up to meet us: a precious guiding stranger there all the time without us noticing him. As we looked out through our windows at the flooded streets of Mumbai, our driver, Ahmet, recited the words of his beloved Kabir: “The river and the waves are one surf: where is the difference between the river and its waves?” (Dariya ki labar daryao hai jh).

IX

This volume makes no claim to comprehensiveness. We do not presume or pretend, for example, to cover the religions of China, Africa, Native America, or Aboriginal Austral-Asia, although Eileen Rizo-Patron’s essay on “transculturation” in Andean art is an acknowledgement of the importance of the North-South dialogue as a necessary complement to the East-West one addressed in this volume. Like every “hermeneutics of the heart,” this one begins to unfold in a concrete space and time: in this instance, the conversation at Bangalore and the subsequent journey to the Caves of Ajanta and Ellora in June 2007. We would hope, however, that this volume communicates at least one basic lesson learned during our conversations in India, namely, that in our third millennium, religions will be inter-religious or they will not be at peace.

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Works Cited


