

In Memoriam: Mahanambrata Brahmachari (25 December 1904–18 October 1999)

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Bankim Dasgupta was born in 1904 in Bengal (in a part of India that is now in Bangladesh). In 1925 he was initiated in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition, founded by Sri Caitanya in the fifteenth century, specifically into a sect (the Mahanam Sampradaya) that focused on the power of God's name, 'Hari, Krishna', and at this point took his familiar name Mahanambrata Brahmachari (which might be translated, 'the monk whose dedication is entirely to the "great name"').

His monastery sent him to the United States in 1933 to attend a congress of the World Fellowship of Faiths in Chicago. He recounts his experiences in Chicago in *Lord's Grace in My Race* (Assam: Mahanam Mela, 1987). After the Congress he earned a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Chicago, writing on the philosophy of the sixteenth century Hindu intellectual Sri Jiva Goswami, the premier theologian of the Caitanya tradition. Brahmachari returned to his home in 1939. Although he considered visiting the United States again in the 1960s, he never did. For many years he worked among the poor and taught widely, expounding the beliefs of his tradition and the power of God's name. He wrote more than twenty books in English and Bengali. In 1971, during the violence at the time of the Pakistan-India war that led to the establishment of Bangladesh, he had to flee to India, and at the time of his death was living in an ashram near Calcutta.

In the West he is still remembered, of course, because of the moment when his path crossed that of Thomas Merton in New York. As Merton recounts in *The Seven Storey Mountain* ([New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1948], pp. 194-98), this exotic monk from India, dressed 'in a turban and a white robe and a pair of Keds', was a great help to him in his own spiritual quest. Brahmachari seems to have been one of Merton's first conversation partners on monasticism and

Catholicism too, and it was he who advised Merton to read the *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ*. As Merton recalls, 'it seems to me very probable that one of the reasons why God had brought him all the way from India, was that he might say just that' (*The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 198).



Mahanambrata Brahmachari (1904–99). Photograph by William Buchanan, courtesy of The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, USA.

As the following 1964 recollection (included in William Buchanan's *Dr. Mahanambrata Brahmachari: My Impressions* (Ganges, MN: Vivekananda Monastery, n.d.) indicates, time did not lessen Merton's appreciation of his Indian friend:

Ever since that summer day in 1938 I have realized how true it is not only that East and West may meet, but that they must meet, not in the chance collision of alien cultures in which one seeks to impose upon the other the patterns of power and of technology, but in a profoundly human exchange in which each culture finds itself in the other...Dr. Brahmachari came into my life precisely at the moment when I stood at a crossroads, and my encounter with him helped me to decide upon the road I myself must take... I was impressed with the fact that he frankly

built his life on prayer, meditation and worship...what seems most significant to me was that he was steeped in the ancient traditions of philosophy and worship in India, the embodiment of a wisdom reaching back beyond the dawn of history, and yet perfectly compatible with life in twentieth century America. It was comforting to know that meditation and spiritual discipline were something real, and not just the fantasies of a few eccentric members of fringe groups and of esoteric cults... Dr. Brahmachari made many friends in America. I speak for one particular group of them, many of whom have since that time become Catholics: we all feel that we owe him the homage of gratitude for incalculable gifts (Buchanan, *Dr. Mahanambrata Brahmachari*, pp. 20-21).

Robert Lax taped his recollections of Brahmachari, and these too are included in Buchanan's *Dr. Mahanambrata*. Lax stresses the monk's good effect on people, and the harmony between his personal presence and what he had to say about the spiritual life; most important, indeed, was that presence:

What I felt about Brahmachari is that everything he had to bring to us was, in a natural quiet way, good news. I didn't feel that there was ever a moment when you wanted to argue with Brahmachari about the things he told us, because they were all in the form of a gift. I don't think he even had to talk about nonviolence because he was so clearly nonviolent himself' (p. 29).

What is noticeable, finally, is that Brahmachari's own published writings, in English and Bengali, have a rich specific quality to them: this was no ethereal wanderer, but a monk who was dedicated to his own religious tradition, and who found in it a way to understand spirituality and human interconnections more universally, from that particularity. As mentioned above, he was a scholar of the theology of Jiva Goswami, and able to explain the metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, cosmology, and pathway of religious practice commended in this scholastic theological system. He wrote a number of treatises in Bengali in commentary on the scriptural resources of his Vaisnava tradition. He also wrote for a wider audience. For instance, his essays of 1955-56 collected in *Mother Durga* (Calcutta: Shree Mahanambrata Cultural and Welfare Trust, 1987) argue for the compatibility of the Vedantic search for the Self and the cult of the Goddess Durga. Other essays took up topics such as 'Education and the Absolute Good', the 'Human Soul and Modern Science', and 'Training, Moral and Spiritual'.

His *The Philosophy of Sri Jiva Goswami (Vaisnava Vedanta of The Bengal School)* is an abbreviated version of his PhD dissertation. It was first published in Chicago by the Institute of Oriental Students for the

Study of Human Relations in 1939, and reprinted in his *Lectures and Dissertation* (Calcutta: Shree Mahanambrata Cultural and Welfare Trust) in 1985, in honor of his eightieth birthday. I conclude with a passage which captures of little of the spiritual insight that perhaps makes it so unsurprising that he and Merton could so easily understand and share their spiritual paths:

The supreme bonum or supreme beatitude of human life consists of participating in this eternal live—life of the Godhead. This participation on the part of the monad (Intermediary [human] Power) becomes possible when one transcends one's lower life-center. The Intermediary Power, we observed before, has two life centers. The ultimate goal of his life consists in transcending the lower self and in realizing the higher in intimate communion with the Godhead in sharing his love life in the supra-cosmic realm. This can be achieved through self-dedication, devotion, love, and worship. Due to the Incarnation of the Lord on earth this attainment is made possible here and now. It is not a state of annihilation or extinction. It is the regaining of a new life in a new atmosphere. It is, to be sure, a state of perfect calmness, but being the realization of a fuller life, its essential character consists in growth without interruption as a partner in the march of the dialectical love expression of the Godhead. Krishnadas, a contemporary and follower of Sri Jiva Goswami, writes that God is full and perfect in his love and has no room to grow; but it is a mystery that He still grows without cessation. The devotees who share in this love-life of the 'Sweet' Lord also grow for all time that knows no ending. This growth consists in the expansion and the deepening of love for God and his creatures and in the heightening of this joy of communion with the ultimate source of all (Brahmachari, *Lectures and Dissertation*, pp. 43-44).