

Mysticism in the French Tradition

Eruptions from France

Edited by Louise Nelstrop and Bradley B. Onishi

CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS IN CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

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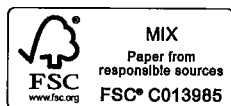
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For Pol

Mon rayon de soleil

Chapter 9

Mystical Eucharistics: Abhishiktananda and Teilhard de Chardin

Richard Kearney

The story of the modern articulation of the category of mysticism is only beginning to be written [and there is] more than one story to be told.¹

This chapter tells the story of Henri le Saux (Abhishiktananda) and Teilhard de Chardin through the lens of their 'mystical Eucharistics'. It follows these two twentieth-century French priests, retracing their journeys to the East as each set out to recover the liturgical dynamic of the mystical, which today's uses of the substantive 'mysticism' often overlook. As Amy Hollywood stresses in her introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*:

For reasons that contemporary scholarship has yet to fully uncover, with the use of the substantive mysticism, and the notion of mystical theology as a specific mode of doing theology that stands independent of historical, biblical, or dogmatic theology, the Christian mystical tradition is often disengaged from the practices of biblical exegesis, liturgy, prayer, and contemplation with which it was always intimately bound in pre- and early modern Western Christianity.²

Turning to the East, both le Saux and de Chardin sought a new understanding of the Eucharist as a mystical hospitality towards strangers.

The first, Henri le Saux, sought an 'open Eucharist' through interreligious liturgical sharing with Hindus and Buddhists in India. Thus he declared: 'A restricted Eucharist is false [...] Whoever 'loves' his brother has a right to the Eucharist.'³ The second, Teilhard de Chardin, worked towards what he called a mystical 'Mass on the World' as he travelled through the heartland of China. It

¹ A. Hollywood, 'Introduction', in A. Hollywood and P.Z. Beckman (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 1–36 at 6.

² Hollywood, p. 7.

³ See Abhishiktananda/Henri le Saux, *Spiritual Diary 1948–1973: Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998). In what follows I will be emphasizing the deep etymological link between 'eucharist' and the act of 'thanking': the English term Eucharist dates from late Middle English; from Old French *eucariste*, based on ecclesiastical Greek *eukharistia* 'thanksgiving', from Greek *eukharistos* 'grateful', from *eu* 'well' + *kharizesthai* 'offer graciously' (from *kharis* 'grace').

was in action and ritual dialogue, not isolated intellection, that these pioneering thinkers discovered the mystical pulsing through our embodied existence. It was at the point that they engaged – physically enacting rituals that took them beyond themselves – that they transcended the familiar ego and truly encountered the other-than-self. It is this appreciation of mystical engagement and expansion, especially in an inter-religious context, that this chapter explores. And it was for embracing such a notion of Eucharistic hospitality, where self and stranger commune in radical hosting and guesting, that both men suffered censorship and suspicion in their time, although today they are being rediscovered as prophets of an ever-expanding eucharistics.

Henri le Saux (Abhishiktananda)

The discovery of Christ's I AM is the ruin of any Christian theology, for all notions are burnt within the fire of experience.⁴

In 1948 the Benedictine monk Henri le Saux left his monastery in Brittany, France, and sailed to Pondicherry in India. Like several missionaries before and after him, Henri le Saux (renamed Abhishiktananda in India) felt compelled to rethink some of his Catholic dogmas when confronted with 'strangers'. It is no accident that it was after his encounter with a spiritual culture deeply foreign

⁴ Abhishiktananda (Henri le Saux OSB) (1910–73) is one of the great twentieth-century pioneers in interreligious dialogue. See John R. Dupuche, 'Abhishiktananda Centenary Symposium', *Australian Journal of Theology*, 18.3 (2011), 249–57; also Shirley du Boulay's excellent biography, *The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda* (London: Orbis, 2005). Du Boulay informed me in a correspondence in 2012 that Abhi became less and less preoccupied by the particular doctrinal restrictions on the Eucharist in his later days, in spite of what seems to have been a continuing, and often fertile, tension between his deep Catholic vocation as a Benedictine monk and his passionate commitment to encountering Christ in other faiths. Several other contemporaries and friends of Abhi have made similar observations. Bettina Bäumer told me she felt sure Abhi shared the Eucharist with Hindus, and Joseph Prabhu suggested he probably engaged in interfaith Eucharists alongside Murray Rogers and Raimon Panikkar. I still, curiously, have found nothing in Abhi's own writing which explicitly confirms this; but several entries from his *Spiritual Diary*, cited below, hint in this direction. It is still, to use Abhi's own terms, an 'open space' over which the Spirit 'hovers and beckons'. What is sure is that Abhishiktananda, for all his devotion to his Church, realized that his experience of interreligious sharing represented a real challenge to the traditional Christian theology of single church salvation. 'If at all I had to give a message', he wrote, 'it would be the message of "Wake up, arise, remain aware" of the Katha Upanishad. The coloration might vary according to the audience, but the essential goes beyond. The discovery of Christ's I AM is the ruin of any Christian theology, for all notions are burnt within the fire of experience.' Letter to Murray Rogers (September 2, 1973), in James Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through his Letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), pp. 310–11.

to his own that his approach to the Christian Eucharist underwent radical questioning and finally issued in an opening to other faiths that we can, I think, call 'mystical'. This opening was especially evident in his ultimate embrace of the Vedantic doctrine of 'advaita' or 'non-duality' – a deeply mystical notion of union which he held to be reconcilable with the Christian belief in the Holy Spirit.

One such opening occurred in 1972, during an Easter Saturday Vigil in Pune (northwest India). His friend, Sara Grant, a Sacred Heart sister from Scotland and a fine theologian in her own right, described the ceremony as a major 'breakthrough' in interreligious communion. She writes of how her Christa Prema Seva (CPS) ashram at Pune – a 'multi-religious household' functioning as a centre of liturgical 'experimentation' – hosted a particularly meaningful Eucharist with Abhishiktananda (Abhi) and a Hindu Panditji, and other Hindu and Jewish guests, during that Easter weekend. The ritual was performed out of conviction that 'liturgical celebration is the setting par excellence for reflection on the mystery of Christ in the light of both biblical and non-biblical scripture'.⁵

Though Abhishiktananda was the chief celebrant, he himself wrote little about this event – though there are some telling hints in diary entries which we shall consider below. It was the host, Sara Grant, who provided the best account, describing the Vigil as a genuinely 'trans-cultural celebration' which was much more than a 'preparatory para-liturgy'. And while the sharing of scriptures from different biblical and Hindu sources was central, what was most striking for her personally was the 'bodily' aspect of the being and the fact that we experienced it as community'. She explains:

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 as *Sat purusha*, the archetypal Man of Vedic tradition in whom every member of the human race can recognize the truth of his or her being.⁶

While we find no explicit reference to this mystical 'breakthrough' in Abhishiktananda's published works, there are a number of journal entries which provide some revealing context for what transpired.⁷ On Good Friday (March 31, 1972), the eve of the sharing between Abhi, Grant and their Hindu guests, Abhi writes: 'The disciple of Jesus does not "boast" that in the Cross he knows

⁵ Sara Grant, *Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), p. 72. See also my account of this interfaith Easter ritual in *Traversing the Heart: Journeys in Interreligious Imagination*, ed. Richard Kearney and Eileen Rizo-Patron (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 20–24.

⁶ Grant, p. 72.

⁷ Abhishiktananda, *Spiritual Diary 1948–1973*; all subsequent diary citations below are from this source.

some higher secret of wisdom. He lives in conformity with his experience of the Cross and in all humility he gives an account of it to anyone who asks him.' On Easter Sunday (April 2, 1972), the day after the Vigil, Abhi adds this note on the importance of interreligious dialogue:

Grace is the answer of both the Christian and the *bhakta* (seeker of God) [...] Jesus is still only understood by Christians as the guru who is other – *anya iva* – as the Purusha, Creator, Sacrificer, Savior. Only too rarely has the flash of 'Thou art Thou' (*tat tvam asi*) shone forth and the I am! (*aham asmi*) sprung up simultaneously.

Six days later, still reflecting back and forth across Christian and Hindu scriptures, Abhi expands on this idea that Christianity discovers its true self by journeying out through the other, the stranger, the outsider. He describes this pilgrimage from self to other as a mystical revolution of the Spirit:

Truth cannot be formulated [...] Christianity is neither knowledge, nor devotion, nor ethics and ritual – nor is it duty, religion (formulas, institutions). It is an explosion of the Spirit. It accepts any religious basis (*jnana/bhakti/karma*) to the extent necessary in each case [...] But what makes the Christian inspiration distinct? Why this search for distinction, for identity? [...] Christianity is the discovery of myself in the other. (April 8, 1972)

Such thoughts resonate deeply with the quest of antique and medieval mysticism in which the mystic finds no peace until he or she rests in the God, discovering that true self defies any defined sense of selfhood, but is only found in abandoning self when faced with that which is totally other.⁸

On October 25 of the same year – just one year before his death (October 6, 1973), Abhi's interreligious hospitality stretches to more explicit formulations:

Do I call him Christ? Yes, within one tradition, but his name is just as much Emmanuel – Purusha. Can he be Krishna? Rama? Shiva? Why not, if Shiva is in Tamilnadu the form of that archetype which seeks to become explicit at the greatest depth of the human heart? (October 25, 1972)

And while Abhi normally refrains from mentioning the actual role of the Mass as such (silence being his preferred voice), on November 1 he explicitly addresses the question of the Eucharist, making the bold claim that:

⁸ For a fascinating discussion of the concept of selfhood and the mystical sense of 'no self', see Ben Morgan, *On Becoming God: Late Medieval Mysticism and the Modern Western Self* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

when you pass beyond the *namarupa* (external forms), the mystery takes all forms (*sarvarupam*). The clash is not with a particular *namarupa* but with those who absolutise it. The Church is so immense a mystery that the apologists water it down in trying to make it fit into their narrow historical views!

And then, at this crucial point of critical reflection, he poses the question: 'The liturgy, the Mass – is it not a necessary compensation for the drastic *neti*, negation of *advaita*?', suggesting that 'psychic health spontaneously (unconsciously) calls for this complement [...] to keep one's balance! However liturgy, Mass, should never be forced. Read the breviary, celebrate the Mass, never out of duty, but as if by instinct, spontaneously' (November 1, 1972). The Mass is conceived here, in other words, as a kataphatic corporeal counterpart to the apophatic emptiness of 'beyond God'. It is the affirmation which accompanies negation; the resurrection after the kenosis of the Cross; food and wine after hunger and thirst; the sharing of Emmaus after the solitude of Gethsemane; liturgical advent preceding and following mystical *advaita*. Both are essential.

But there is more. As death approaches, Abhi's mystic-cosmic sentiments become bolder and clearer. On February 17, 1973, he claims that:

the mythos of the Purusha (Spirit) is wider than that of Christos, not only does it include the cosmic and metacosmic aspect of the mystery, but it is also free from the attachment to time entailed by the mythos of Christ. Rather it recognizes all the symbolic value contained in the mystery of Time, but refuses to compress the absolute separately into a particular point of time.

'The Purusha', he insists 'is simply there, like the Atman, Sat, Brahman, once the human being awakes to himself. "Before Abraham was, *I am*". In short, the mystery of the divine is greater than any particular confessional mythos in time, place and history.⁹ It is transconfessional and transhistorical, without denying the indispensable need for symbolic, ritual instantiations. In the same entry, Abhi

⁹ See my reading of Andrei Rublev's 'perichoresis' as a hermeneutic refiguring of the Abrahamic Eucharist (Abraham and Sarah feasting with the three divine strangers) as a Trinitarian Eucharist (the three divine persons around the chalice of bread and wine) in Richard Kearney, *Anatheim: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 24 f; and also in 'Eros, Diacritical Hermeneutics and the Maybe' in *Philosophical Thresholds: Crossings of Life and World*, ed. Cynthia Willett and Leonard Lawlor, *Philosophy Today*, SPEP Supplement, 55 (2011), 73–85. It is important, I suggest, to embrace a hospitable hermeneutic capable of reinterpreting and refiguring the Eucharistic imagination in terms of multiple scenes of feasting and sharing, bringing together, for example, the primal scenes of Abraham and the strangers in Genesis and the Jewish Passover/Seder with the Christian scenes of not only the Cross and Last Supper (where service and sharing precede sacrifice) but also Cena, the loaves and fishes and the post-paschal Eucharistic hosting of the disciple-guests at Emmaus and on the shore of Galilee.

goes on to see the 'symbols of Christ' as 'bearers of universality' and offers this explanation: "They radiate their Catholicity (ecumenism=universality). They exist *ad* (towards) the totality, *pros* (towards) the totality=*sarvam prati*!" And he follows this immediately with one of his most radical claims for interreligious communion – a key statement for our thesis in this chapter: 'A restricted Eucharist is false. "Leave your offering before the altar!" [...] Whoever "loves" his brother has a right to the Eucharist' – a freedom that is truly mystical.

Several weeks later, struggling with illness as he prepares a series of lectures for the Jesuit faculty at Delhi (Vidyajyoti) on Christology, Abhi enters some subtle and complex reflections in his journal on the unicity and uniqueness of Christ. He suggests that the most elective 'only one' contains the most expansive 'only one'. The ostensible paradox of *coincidentia oppositorum* signals a sacred mystery – a delicate balance between singular election and universal embrace, which the writings of many Christian mystics have sought to hold in tension. Abhi offers the following articulation of this insight:

If Christ is the 'only one' for me [...] may I discover in him the glory of the Only One. And what does it matter if I discover the glory of the Only One in whatever created form there may be! For the glory of the Only One is in all one. This alone is important: that Christ should be Everything for me [...] Let every human being be the only one for me, my everything to whom I give myself totally. In this alone I will have the experience of the Only One. (March 22, 1973)

In other words, the point of the most intimate exclusivity (Christ is the only one) becomes here the most expansive point of inclusivity (Christ is each 'only one', that is, *every* one I welcome in their singular uniqueness and 'thisness'). It is not stretching things, I believe, to find echoes here of Christ's identification with each stranger (*hospes*) in Matthew 25; the singular and universal in one. And perhaps even an echo of the powerful Scotist notion of divine being incarnate in each person's irreducible 'thisness' (*haecceitas*):¹⁰ an idea that was central to Gerard Manley Hopkins' entire mystical poetics,¹¹ as well as to the Eckhartian tradition of no self.¹²

On April 21, 1973, one year after the interreligious Easter Vigil with Sara Grant at Pune, Abhi returns to the idea of mystical intercommunion. Perhaps it was the lapse of time, a certain interval of reflection, which enables him to

¹⁰ I am indebted here to Julia Kristeva's notion of a Scotist ontology of the singular ('thisness') in 'Disability: A Tragedy and a Dream Revised', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 78.3 (2013), 219–30 and 'Disability: A Tragedy and a Dream', in Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (eds), *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

¹¹ See here Kenan B. Osborne's *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World: A Theology for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

¹² See Morgan, *On Becoming God*.

find the 'breakthrough' experience after the event, *après coup*, *nachträglich*. The repetition of the Paschal ritual, one year later, seems to have triggered a revisiting of the original event – an event as ineffable as it is profound: 'Easter night, night of the awakening to being (*sambodhi*). The vigils of *Sakyamuni* which culminate in the Awakening [...] Neither Jesus nor Buddha *described* their Awakening.' And it seems Abhi is following suit allowing that which cannot be said to remain unsaid. And yet, on April 28, he breaks his silence and strives to say the unsayable in the following terms:

People are converted [...] they become Christian, Muslim, Sufi, Vedantin etc. All those are superimposed forms. Whereas the essential thing is to strip oneself of all that is superfluously added [...] The *advaita* formulation is just as much a superimposition as are the Koranic or the Trinitarian formulations. And people fight to defend their own formulations and to condemn those of others! (April 28, 1973)

This is not, I think, a perennialist confession, but the experience of moving through the ritual beyond it; an experience of the Other/other that has learnt to let go. Two days later, brushing the limits of 'negative theology', he touches on the anatheist notion of a God who is reborn after the death of God.¹³ Citing John of the Cross on the night in which we witness the 'disappearance of God', Abhi observes that 'the God that I project, the God of superimposition is surely dead'; and he claims, consequently, that out of this demise emerges – paradoxically and mysteriously – the 'dazzling light of the true "I"'. From this experience of no-self flows a refusal of all dogmatic apologetics and a revolutionary embrace of pluralism: 'One who knows several mental (or religious and spiritual languages) is incapable of absolutizing any formulation whatever – of the Gospel, of the Upanishads, of Buddhism etc. He can only bear witness to an experience – about which he can only stammer'. Yet it is out of this apophatic humility of stammering witness that there may arise, Abhi insists, the Awakened person who 'rides upon the Spirit'. And 'his place is open space' (May 4, 1973). This proclamation of an open space of the Spirit underlies and is undergirded by Abhi's experience of an equally open (i.e. 'unrestricted') Eucharist. His plea for all to embrace this was made less than six months before he finally passed away.

These ruminations in the year leading up to his death can, I believe, be read retrospectively as a radicalizing not only of Abhishiktananda's Pune liturgy but also of his first dream of setting up an interreligious ashram in Shantivanam in 1958. It is worth recalling here his original founding vision.

¹³ On Anatheism see Kearney, *Anatheism*.

Should we say that the Revelation of Christ has absolutized Semito-Greek 'ideology'? (That is the point of view of *Humani Generis*). Or else should we say that this Revelation, although providentially poured into Judeo-Greek culture, so transcends it that there will be new, deeper, purer, more real expressions of this Revelation that will develop providentially in other cultures, and above all in this far-eastern world of *atman-nirvana-Tao*. (June 4, 1958)

This pioneering act of trust in interreligious communion, made by a young Benedictine from Brittany arriving in India for the first time, was to carve open paths for many Christian interreligious pilgrims who followed – from Bede Griffiths (his immediate successor at Shantivanam) to Sara Grant, Sister Vandana, Murray Rogers, Raimon Panikkar and Bettina Bäumer, not to mention the countless Hindu Swamis and Buddhist lamas who engaged with Abhi on his interreligious journeys from Pondicherry and Shantivanam to Rishikesh and Gongotri (Chidananda, Shivananda and more). From beginning to end, I would suggest, Abhishiktananda embodied an 'unrestricted' Eucharist of sharing Grace, Spirit and food. He was a host of interconfessional communion par excellence. In his life and testimony, the Eucharist expanded outwards and upwards from a specific Catholic rite, which he always cherished, to a radical act of hospitality to strangers that was deeply mystical – a missionary expansion which he believed was one of the most fundamental messages of Christianity: namely, 'the discovery of oneself in another [...]. For whoever loves his brother has the right to the Eucharist', for Christ's I AM immolates all that prevents us from fully encountering the other.

Teilhard de Chardin: Mass of the World

Teilhard de Chardin was another mystical pilgrim of the Eucharist. Also travelling east – in his case to China rather than India – he too discovered a passion to share an open Eucharist with the world.

In an early essay entitled 'Cosmic Life' (1915), the young French priest spoke of a global communion with the earth leading to a communion with God. Echoing Paul's notion that 'because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, because we partake of the one bread' (1 Cor: 10), de Chardin envisaged forms of 'sacramental union' which might contribute to the mystical body of Christ. The earth itself, matter in its lowliest forms (and what is more simple and alimentary than bread) is hallowed as part of a sanctifying moment:

Since first, Lord, you said, '*Hoc est corpus meum*', not only the bread of the altar, but [...] everything in the universe that nourishes the soul for the life of Spirit and Grace, has become *yours* and has become *divine* – it is divinized, divinizing, and divinizable.¹⁴

In a timely and illuminating commentary entitled *Teilhard's Mass*, Thomas King details de Chardin's various efforts to formulate a 'Mass on the World'.¹⁵ From early in his life, as both priest and explorer, de Chardin envisioned the flesh of God extending outwards into the universe from the tiny Host in the Monstrance. 'It was as though a milky brightness were illuminating the universe from within, and everything were fashioned of the same kind of translucent flesh', he wrote. 'Through the mysterious expansion of the host the whole world had become incandescent, had itself become like a single giant host.'¹⁶ De Chardin spoke accordingly – and I think this is one of his most signature insights – of 'extensions of the Eucharist', each amplifying out from the consecrated host to the 'infinite circle of creatures [which] is the total Host to consecrate'; and, by the same token, the 'crucible of their activities is the chalice to sanctify'.¹⁷ The *bread*, for de Chardin, was conceived as the element of nourishment and growth, the *chalice* that of suffering and pain – both elements calling to be blessed.

It seems there were few limits to the expanse of this mystical Eucharistics, including all forms of organic matter. Indeed, de Chardin recorded how as a child he first recognized God in stones! 'The Sacramental consecration', as he later put it, 'is haloed by a universal, analogical consecration'.¹⁸ Nothing is alien to this sacramentalizing of the universe; and the role of the celebrant is to 'Christianize the organic and spiritual currents from which come forth the Body of Christ'.¹⁹ No one is excluded from the cosmic Eucharistic body, which is why de Chardin saw his own vocation as a call to become 'more widely spiritual in my sympathies and more nobly terrestrial in my ambitions than any of the world's servants'.²⁰ No small mission. The operative words here are *sympathy* and *terrestrial*. De Chardin's ontology of flesh defied the dualisms of both Platonic metaphysics and Cartesian rationalism which split the human being into body and soul and cast matter as an impediment to spiritual ascension. With de Chardin's host, as

¹⁴ Thomas King, *Teilhard's Mass: Approaches to the Mass on the World* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), p. 9. The volume includes the full text of de Chardin's 'Mass on the World' and a related 'Prayer Service Based on "The Mass of the World"' (pp. 145–67). I am deeply indebted to King's very insightful and exhaustive research work on de Chardin's texts, letters and diaries for the citations of de Chardin which follow.

¹⁵ King, p. 9.

¹⁶ King, p. 9.

¹⁷ King, p. 10.

¹⁸ King, p. 10.

¹⁹ King, p. 10.

²⁰ King, p. 11.

with Jacob's ladder, there is no way up that is not equally a way down. Word and flesh beat with the same heart; systole and diastole of matter. However, unlike earlier Christian mystics, like Hugh of St Victor and Bonaventure, for whom the world was sacralized through the Word, Christ, and only then became a subject worthy of investigation, for de Chardin material science itself was revelatory.

Thus on his first trip to China in the 1920s, to conduct anthropological and archaeological fieldwork, de Chardin started making notes for what would become his path-breaking 'Mass on the World'. As he documented various ancient fossils and bones, he saw parallels between the development of the human body and the divine body. The Eucharist was increasingly revealed as an exemplary emblem of this evolving theo-poiesis, the prolongation of God's love through creation. 'Each communion,' he wrote, 'each consecration is a notch further in our incorporation into Christ.'²¹ As the Word becomes flesh in humanity, humans become God through the same process of mutual embodiment. One finds an echo here of the Athanasian teaching that God became man so that man could become God. And a powerful rebuttal of Docetism and other Gnostic attempts to deny the full carnality of Christ.²² The cosmos itself is deemed a mystical body through which we become God – a movement beyond self that is also central to Eckhartian mysticism.²³

In 1924 de Chardin wrote a personal and passionate essay entitled 'Mon Univers', where he articulated one of his most powerful accounts of the 'extensions of Eucharistic Presence'. Given its importance, I cite it here at some length:

We must say that the initial Body of Christ, his *primary body*, is confined to the species of bread and wine. Can Christ, however, remain contained in this primary Body? Clearly, he cannot. Since he is above all omega, that is, the universal 'form' of the world, he can obtain his organic balance and plenitude only by mystically assimilating all that surrounds him. The Host is like a blazing hearth from which flames spread their radiance. Just as the spark that falls into the hearth is soon surrounded by a wide circle of fire, so, in the course of centuries [...] the sacramental host of bread is continually being encircled more closely by another, infinitely larger Host, which is nothing but the universe itself – the universe gradually being absorbed by the universal element. Thus when the Phrase '*Hoc est Corpus meum*' is being pronounced,

²¹ King, p. 11.

²² Joseph O'Leary notes that in its reaction against Docetism the early Church insisted on the reality of Christ's flesh and blood and on the physical reality of the resurrected body, and of the bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In his famous work, *Against Heresies*, Saint Irenaeus argued against those who wished to deny the carnality of Christ and, by implication, the salvation of human flesh: see Joseph O'Leary, 'The Eucharist as a Work of Art', *Archivio di Filosofia*, 76 (2008): 169–76; also O'Leary, 'The Eucharist: A Work of Art', *Japan Mission Journal*, 62 (2008): 93–7. I am greatly indebted to O'Leary's excellent scholarly research.

²³ See Morgan, *On Becoming God*.

'*hoc*' means '*primario*' the bread; but '*secundario*', in a second phase occurring in nature, the matter of the sacrament is the world, through which there spreads, so to complete itself, the superhuman presence of the universal Christ.²⁴

De Chardin leaves the reader in no doubt as to which 'host' has ultimate priority, from both an historical and eschatological perspective. The latter, 'the world', he insists, 'is the final and the real Host into which Christ gradually descends, until his time is fulfilled. Since all time a single word and a single act have been filling the universality of things: '*Hoc est Corpus meum*'. Nothing is at work in creation except in order to assist, from near at hand or from afar, in the consecration of the universe.'²⁵

When word reached de Chardin in 1926 of the 28th International Eucharistic Congress to be held in Chicago, he wondered if there would be a single voice in all the thousands of theologians, priests and scholars present that might dare explain the 'true extensions of the Eucharist and its animating place in human work'; and he prayed to be given just 10 minutes in the giant Chicago stadium to shout aloud what it means to 'sympathize'.²⁶ A rhetorical prayer, perhaps, but not a sentimental one. For de Chardin, such *sympathy* was no devotional piety; it was a radically transformative pathos extending from fellow humans – acting and suffering – to all living, organic, sentient beings in the universe. Though de Chardin was no partisan of Buddhism (he remained somewhat critical of its acosmic tendencies), his capacious understanding of Christian *caritas* often seems co-extensive with the Buddhist notion of loving-kindness.²⁷ At the level of

²⁴ King, pp. 16–17.

²⁵ King, p. 17. One still finds traces and hints in de Chardin of theodicy and, more specifically, of a Christocentric theology of fulfilment and sacrifice, especially in relation to the celebration of the Mass during times of war and tragic suffering. O'Leary goes on to suggest how research into early forms of sacrificial religion, often based on mystery nature rites, already reveals a rich body of interpretations and practices which defy any attempt to establish some kind of 'essentialism' regarding the Eucharistic origins. See here Joseph O'Leary's illuminating critical commentaries on this complex link between the Eucharist and ritual sacrifice: http://josephsoleary.typepad.com/my_weblog/2011/05/rethinking-the-eucharist.html. (All subsequent references to O'Leary's work are from this site.) Though O'Leary does not cite de Chardin, many of these observations are relevant to his deliberations on the sacrificial role of the Mass (see King, pp. 96–7, 106–7). See also my critical analysis of the role of the Christian mythology of blood sacrifice in relation to war and political violence in 'Myth and Martyrdom' and 'The Triumph of Failure', in Richard Kearney, *Navigations: Collected Irish Essays 1976–2006* (Dublin and New York: Lilliput/Syracuse University Press, 2009), pp. 32–59; and 'Terrorisme et Sacrifice: Le Cas de L'Irlande du Nord', *Esprit*, 47.4 (1979), 29–44. For an important new discussion of the place of sacrifice within modern theology see J. Meszaros and J. Zachhuber (eds), *Sacrifice and Modern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁶ King, p. 17.

²⁷ See R.F. Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (London: Equinox, 2009).

ultimate mystical sympathy, both Christian and Buddhist forms of identifying self with other are congruent.

It was during a visit to China in the same year – 1926 – that de Chardin began to practise what he called a 'Mass upon the altar of the world'. The purpose of such a Mass was to divinize each new day in a 'Sacrament of life animated by God'.²⁸ The original Eucharistic offering and gift was, he insists here, that of Jesus of Nazareth, but extending and expanding outward from that in an evolving 'Sacrament of the World' (the title for a major work he planned but never completed) – because, he explains: 'as our humanity assimilates the material world and as the Host assimilates our humanity, the Eucharistic transformation goes beyond and completes the transubstantiation of the bread on the altar'.²⁹ It was de Chardin's belief in the 'theo-andric' nature of the cosmos that underpinned the co-dependence of liturgy and mysticism, and that for him enabled an ever-expanding sense of otherness that was constantly pushing beyond the confines of exclusive individual identity. Liturgy universalizes bread into cosmic body and self into cosmic being – both Alpha and Omega.

From 1926 on de Chardin worked ceaselessly on what came to be called the 'Mass on the World'. But it was on New Year's Day 1932, when he first wrote explicitly of celebrating this Mass with non-Christians on an expedition to the Gobi Desert, that a new movement towards otherness truly begins to emerge. He was the only Christian in the group, but every member of the scientific trip attended. His sermon on that day contained the following prayer of universal sacred presence, embracing not only those present but also absent friends and fellows. Here we witness the powerful example of expanding circles of incorporation:

What we ask of that universal presence which envelops us all, is first to reunite us, as in a shared living centre with those whom we love, those who are so far away from us here, and themselves beginning this same new year [...] I offer to [God] this Mass, the highest form of Christian prayer.³⁰

De Chardin does not offer details here of consecrating and distributing hosts; but it is clear from the context, and from his ongoing thinking about the Eucharist, that the Host is the real presence that includes all those attending the desert Mass as well as those remembered or imagined during its celebration – a movement towards an open mystical Eucharistics.

De Chardin did not see Eucharistic communions as discrete isolated performances but as successive 'contacts' and 'assimilations' to the power of the

²⁸ King, p. 20.

²⁹ King, p. 21.

³⁰ King, p. 23.

Incarnate Word – a whole developmental theogenesis ultimately co-extensive with the duration of a life. 'All the communions of our life are', he explains, 'only successive instants or episodes of one single communion – in one and the same process of Christification':³¹ a process he describes elsewhere as the 'innumerable prolongation of [God's] incarnate being'.³² Well into the 1950s – during further scientific expeditions to Africa and America – de Chardin recorded several new versions of his 'Mass'. And in the weeks leading up to his death in 1955, he entered a final account of his belief that 'the words of the Consecration [be] applied not only to the sacrificial bread and wine but, mark you, to the whole Mass of joys and sufferings produced by the Convergence of the World as it progresses'.³³ On April 7, Holy Thursday, de Chardin cited three verses of Paul that ended with the prayer 'that God may be all in all' (I Cor. 15). At Easter Sunday dinner, celebrated with his close friends Rhoda de Terra and her daughter in their New York apartment, de Chardin finally passed away. His Paschal departure may be interpreted as a true fulfilment of the prayer, expressed in *The Divine Milieu* – 'Teach me to treat my death as an act of communion'.³⁴ His life of mystical Eucharistics ultimately included death itself.

De Chardin's mystical view of the Eucharist informed several of his other theological views. First, it vindicated his childhood conviction that God exists already in rocks: the persuasion that it is through tasting, touching, seeing and sensing matter that the divine enters our world, and only secondly through knowing. Hence de Chardin's alertness to the material findings of the sciences, especially anthropology, archaeology and the forensic research which discovers the universe in a grain of sand or a curve of bone.³⁵ De Chardin fully endorsed Tertullian's view that Christ must be present in the full carnal particularity of 'shaped bones and cross-veined hands', for even if we can *believe* without seeing and sensing, we cannot *adore*. De Chardin was with Thomas and Mary Magdalene: he wanted to touch the body of God. He believed that matter would achieve its 'definitive salvation' in the words of the Mass: 'This is my Body.' Christ had claimed the cosmos as his *corpus mysticum* and it is for humans to Eucharistically respond, one way or another. Even if for de Chardin there was only one Christ, there were many ways to Christ – for Christ was the one of many ways.³⁶ His

³¹ King, p. 28.

³² King, p. 138.

³³ King, p. 32.

³⁴ King, p. 33.

³⁵ See Teilhard de Chardin 'The Spiritual Power of Matter', in *The Hymn of the Universe* [1919] (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), cited King, p. 129.

³⁶ King, p. 181.

own church's 'Roman theologies' had, he felt, sometimes reduced the Christ of universal and multiple 'adoration' to a restrictive code, 'too small to be adored';³⁷ they had placed doctrinal belief over seeing, touching, eating, tasting – the deeply corporeal idioms of the Eucharist itself. They had abandoned its carnal mysticism. Christ, after all, spent his last hours sharing food, washing feet and suffering bodily passion – and the first hours after he arose, he fed his disciples with fish on Lake Galilee and with bread in the inn at Emmaus.

The problem with contemporary Christian society was that it separated the world of belief and the world of work, the extraordinary world of faith and the ordinary world of sensible experience. De Chardin believed the Eucharist was the crossing of these worlds. And he was persuaded that his everyday work on fossils and bones was part and parcel of a mystical divine labour. 'Adoration's real name', he once claimed, 'is research!'³⁸ He even held that, in his own case, without scientific research and experiment there would have been no possibility of 'real mystical life'.³⁹ Moreover, it was, curiously, in this light that he understood the appeal of Marxism and vitalism as a recall to the things themselves, the working of the Word through the material world of acting and suffering flesh; and here too Christ needed to be rediscovered and revered. This is what the cosmic Christ of St Paul was originally about – discovering the transcendent in the immanent and the immanent in the transcendent. A mystic paradox central to the transformative power of the Eucharist: converting what appears absurd and incoherent into something 'adorable'.⁴⁰ Eucharistic adoration and sharing, Teilhard continued to profess, involved all the complex, conflicting fibres of the 'unifying universe'.⁴¹ The world was nothing less than an altar of matter becoming 'Christifiable'.⁴² But this cannot occur without each believer becoming its poets, mystics, servants, researchers and priests. The goal for every Christian was to be present where 'Christ may inform the very growth, through man, of the universe in movement'.⁴³ Or, as he put it later in life, 'the communion with time, understood as the communication with the *becoming of things*, is the supreme form of adoration. In communion, both sensing and believing become one'. Only then can we say, 'with Thomas after touching the wound of Christ: "My lord and my God"'.⁴⁴

Equally radical was de Chardin's reinterpretation of the priesthood itself. All of humanity – 'believer and unbeliever alike' – is, he held, possessed of a single

³⁷ King, p. 133.

³⁸ King, p. 133.

³⁹ King, p. 134.

⁴⁰ King, p. 134.

⁴¹ King, pp. 134–5.

⁴² King, p. 138.

⁴³ King, p. 136.

⁴⁴ King, p. 137.

desire and hunger: a mystic longing for great communion. And those who work as scientists, scholars and in other activities that serve the growing unification of humanity may thus be viewed as priests of a kind, for 'every work of discovery is in the service of Christ, which thus hastens the growth of his mystical body, shares in his universal priesthood'.⁴⁵ Considering things in light of the sacred work of communion, de Chardin went so far towards the end of his career as to claim that 'everything becomes the business for consecration – the business of the priesthood'.⁴⁶ He did not hesitate to declare – long before Vatican II – that laypeople may also be 'true priests' who can offer their spiritual Mass on the World. Or, more exactly, all Christians may be spoken of as 'lay quasi-priests' in keeping with I Peter 2:5, which talks of believers forming a 'holy priesthood'. When God is seen present everywhere, continually embodied in the flesh of the world, all of life becomes a communion.⁴⁷ Flesh is matter animated by the word, and Christ is the soul of the cosmos. Everything that happens is adorable insofar as it is part of God's love. Or, more emphatically, the universe may be conceived as an 'immense host made flesh by the touch of the Word'.⁴⁸ Accordingly, genuine prayer enables us to contemplate – and touch – the world not as a 'veil but as flesh'. Even the red earth of China appeared to de Chardin like the 'wounded flesh' of Christ. The entire world, he insisted, becomes the 'flesh of Christ' for those who believe; and this belief is incarnational. Anticipating the claims of fellow French thinkers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gabriel Marcel, de Chardin argued that we do not see the spirit of anyone or anything except through their flesh (voices, gestures, movements, hesitations, glances). When we recognize Christ as the soul within people and things, matter becomes animated as 'flesh'.⁴⁹

In short, flesh is the 'divine milieu' of the world, a carnal Eucharist indeed. We are all involved in the 'mystery of the flesh of God'; or, as he puts it amorously at the end of his *Mass*: 'I can preach only the mystery of your Flesh, you the soul

⁴⁵ King, pp. 103–4.

⁴⁶ King, p. 104.

⁴⁷ King, p. 104.

⁴⁸ King, p. 108.

⁴⁹ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty on this idea of Eucharistic sensation: 'Just as the sacrament not only symbolizes, in sensible species, an operation of Grace, but *is* also the real presence of God, which it causes to occupy a fragment of space and communicates to those who eat of the consecrated bread, provided that they are inwardly prepared, in the same way the sensible has not only a motor and vital significance, but is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon by our body, provided that it is capable of doing so, so that sensation is literally a form of communion', *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 246. See my commentary on this notion in *Anatheism*, pp. 89–94; and also the cogent argument made by Joseph O'Leary for a Eucharistics of love and witness which obviates both a sacrificial fetishism of body and blood, on the one hand, and an essentialist metaphysics of substance on the other (O'Leary, *op. cit.*).

shining forth through all that surrounds me [...] Like the Flesh, it [the universe] attracts by the charm which floats in the mystery of its curves and folds and in the depths of its eyes.⁵⁰ De Chardin inscribes himself here in a long tradition of mystical poetics from the Shulammite's cry in the Song of Songs to the theocratic imaginings of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila and the Beguines; right down to the sacramental lyricism of George Herbert or fellow Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins. Not to mention the 'cosmotheoandric' tradition running from Saint Francis to Raimon Panikkar. 'Sun and moon bless the Lord: that is what the sun and moon, in adoration, are doing.'⁵¹

And yet de Chardin was not naïve. He was keenly aware of the dangers of pseudo-mysticism – and especially the temptation of undifferentiation. He warned against the 'destructive fusion of which pantheism dreams', preferring instead a unity that differentiates. 'Within us without being us' (*in nobis sine nobis*), was his catch-cry; transcendence within immanence without ever abandoning transcendence. Life for de Chardin was a divine milieu increasingly disseminating and diversifying even as it simultaneously mutates – in joy and pain – towards unification. There is no denying darkness, death or depression (from which de Chardin himself greatly suffered at key periods in his life). Wrestling with both *thanatos* and *eros*, one struggles towards communion: 'To bring Christ by virtue of a specific organic connection, to the heart of realities that are esteemed the most dangerous, the most unspiritual, the most pagan – in that you have my Gospel and my mission.'⁵² For de Chardin, nothing human was alien to the Eucharist's transfiguring power. Flesh, the focus of the divine milieu and signal of transubstantiation, is what animates life as single life, in each particular instance, and resists the temptation of indefiniteness. Even the tension of remaining within a specific, historically and hierarchically determined church – one which limited, confined and sometimes even censored him – was for de Chardin part of the work of differentiation and dialogue. If everything is declared materially (or spiritually) one in premature fusion, there is no room for sacred *eros* – holy longing and love. There is only the boredom of sameness. Genuine mystical communion is anything but that. 'Unity differentiates' is de Chardin's final word.⁵³

⁵⁰ King, p. 108.

⁵¹ King, p. 121.

⁵² King, p. 123.

⁵³ As such, he enters into a long mystical debate within French mysticism on the nature of deification. Different views first appear in the twelfth century in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry and Richard of St Victor. Later, from the thirteenth century onwards, the topic became the centre of intense debate – evidenced, for example, in the burning

Lonely Roads

But Abhishiktananda and de Chardin could only go so far. These Christian pioneers of a mystical Eucharistics were pilgrims on the way, not gods who had arrived. Their brave searchings for ways to amplify the Eucharist as a gift for all hungering beings was not without its hazards, obstacles and omissions. When Abhi or de Chardin were reprimanded for their liturgical experiments and mystical writings, they acquiesced and remained silent. They did not leave the Church or resign the priesthood as certain others did out of protest or indignation. They did not publicly defy the Vatican authorities. Indeed their obedience, while consistent, might even appear to some as compromising or complicit (though hindsight is easy after Vatican II or the election of Pope Francis in 2013).⁵⁴ The Eucharistic masses and liturgies which they performed with friends and colleagues – for Abhi, fellow travellers on the path of Christian–Hindu dialogue like Sara Grant, Murray Rogers and Bettina Bäumer; for de Chardin, mainly fellow researchers in China and Africa – were not done as public acts of ecclesiastical revolution: they took the form of quiet everyday rites made in the name of love and hospitality. And the hospitality – however deeply mystical – had its limits and conditions.

In de Chardin's case, for example, one does not find formal interreligious invitations to concelebrate communion in a reciprocal way. Non-Catholics were invited to become guests, rather than hosts, at the Mass on the World; and he rarely if ever spoke of what he as a Catholic priest learned from the Taoist or Buddhist mystics of Asia which might have altered his own Christian understanding of the Eucharist. Indeed de Chardin was, as noted, quite critical of what he saw as the non-incarnational character of much Asian spirituality. Nor did de Chardin or Abhi, to my knowledge, ever contemplate inviting women to concelebrate at the Eucharistic altar, although they had deep spiritual friendships with women – Lucile Swan and Rhoda de Terra in the case of de Chardin; and

of Marguerite Porete and her mirror in 1310. See R. Kearney, 'Ravishing Far/Near': *The Work of Sheila Gallagher* (New York: Dodge Gallery, 2013).

⁵⁴ Pope Francis is perhaps gesturing in such a direction when he recalls that the Eucharist is for 'the hungry' rather than as a reward for those who follow rules. See James Carroll, 'Who Am I to Judge?', *The New Yorker*, December 23, 2013. O'Leary anticipates Pope Francis' 2013 overture with this useful gloss on the connotations of Mt 18:20 for a fraternal Eucharist open to creative and recreative 'supplements' (O'Leary, *op. cit.*). This openness to the possibility of Christic supplementarity in each instance of Eucharistic sharing may constitute a 'semantic surplus' (Ricoeur) inviting endless hermeneutic artistry and acoustics. Christ's ways exceed the limits of any single ecclesiastical doctrine, which is why the Eucharist remains a sacred 'mystery' and why the sacerdotal work of the priest needs to be complemented by the creative work of the poet. See here Sheila Gallagher's extraordinarily innovative experiments in Eucharistic art, *Ravishing Far/Near*, Dodge Gallery, New York, 2013 with a catalogue Introduction by Richard Kearney.

the Bäumers (Bettina and her mother), Sara Grant, Sister Vandana and Shirley du Boulay in the case of Abhi. The question of women's ordination did not seem to preoccupy them as it would so many in the Catholic Church today. And de Chardin's celebration of 'the Eternal Feminine' displays a rather limited view of 'woman' as timeless Virgin.⁵⁵ Nor, at a more theoretical level, did they reflect critically on questions of the incommensurability of religious 'language games,' the hermeneutic diversity of faiths or the attendant sense that Eucharistic hospitality requires that each 'host' respects the strangeness of each stranger, the otherness of each guest – in order to avoid the temptation of totalization.⁵⁶ Indeed, there are even moments when Abhi and de Chardin seem to embrace a sense of Catholic supercessionism: even though for the most part they prefigure the more open Vatican II acknowledgements of the legitimacy of non-Catholic and non-Christian faiths (see Council documents like *Nostra Aetate*) – albeit as anticipations of the 'full truth' which the Church alone possesses.

De Chardin and Abhi were fieldworkers; they were doing rather than teaching, acting rather than preaching; experimenting and improvising in far-flung lands. In this they were mystics of action rather than of intellection. They were not theologians strategizing and networking in Vatican corridors about doctrinal innovation. Yet their voices certainly influenced some of the most visionary reformers of Vatican II – Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac and Hans Küng for example – even if they themselves did not, alas, live to see the great awakening (*Aggiornamento/ressourcement*) that such reform brought about. They travelled a lonely road, with mystical Eucharistics as guide and goal. They paved paths for others to follow. And they knew there was a long way to go.

⁵⁵ de Chardin, *Writings in Time of War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 191f.

⁵⁶ See the challenging recent work of Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Herder, 2008); Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham: Lexington, 2014); and Paul Ricoeur himself, 'Entretien Hans Kung-Paul Ricoeur: Les religions, la violence et la paix – pour une éthique planétaire', *Sens*, 5 (1998), 211–30. It is helpful to recall here Ricoeur's inspiring notion of 'Eucharistic hospitality' developed, in line with his concepts of 'interconfessional hospitality' and 'linguistic hospitality', according to the hermeneutic model of translation. Ricoeur's basic point is that a good translation must always respect a certain irreducible difference and otherness in the guest language which can never be fully subsumed into the host language. Translation as a model for inter-faith dialogue means what the Greek term originally said – *dia-legein*, welcoming the difference between host and guest as well as creating bridges and mediations. Complete fusion between religions, persons – or members of the Trinity – would be the end of hospitality. See my Introduction to Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation* (London: Routledge, 2004); and my conclusion to *Anatheism*, entitled 'Welcoming Strange Gods', pp. 166–81.

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PART III

Words and Images in Action