

Dark Nights of the Soul: an inter- religious approach.

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St. John of the Cross wrote of the intense loneliness that the soul has to pass before attaining to God. Gautama, the Buddha was repeatedly thwarted by what the Buddhist Scriptures call the Maras (roughly translatable as mental temptations of unimaginable proportions). One of the desires was to leave the celibate, solitary way and return to human concourse. Jesus, who is both Divine and Man at the same time too passed through intense aloneness on the Cross.

Momentarily he felt deserted even by God: *Eli Eli lama sabachthani?* ("My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" *Matthew 27:46*). He was fully human and thus had to experience in all its wholeness, the human condition. This experience of Christ of total powerlessness, total humiliation and aloneness should form the basis of any truly holistic psychology or philosophy.

At the end of the day, both celibate and married, have to encounter the feeling of infinite loneliness in the face of insurmountable odds. For some it may be petty politicking which oppresses, for others it is the worry of where the money will come for the next bill. Yet at the end of the day everything that we can possibly do to further our own ends is playing apish tricks to high heaven (*Shakespeare*). May be I am good at boasting while you are good at playing intellectual games, or may it be that you love to wake up the earliest in your home or community to spite the others; to show how lazy the others are? May be I am good at earning money wrongly, depriving just wages to my maid, or you may be a Pharisee pretending endless love of God. May be I turn out clever sentences while you love to correct others for their imagined sins; the list can go on. Yet in the quiet of the night, in the bustle of the metro-crowd, or among the

lights of our glitzy malls, we are lonely. This place will one day know us no more. Something weird happens, and *voila*, we feel time has cheated us. The faces around us seem so unknown, the world around us cold. And our traditions and religions become meaningless morass of rituals onerous to the soul. This is what the ancient Fathers called 'acedia' which developed into the Renaissance concept of 'melancholia' which finally becomes what we today call 'depression'. Sometimes we are not even aware that we are depressed; it is just that listless feeling which won't let us rest. Often the Cross that we are called to bear is the feeling that nothing really is working out; that intense feeling of emptiness is what we must work through.

'Dharma' has no parallel word in Western languages. It means roughly those laws, often divinely instituted but not always so, which hold the being together. Dharma, in other words, prevents us from becoming either schizoid or polarized within. Turning to *Jesus-Dharma*, we seek answers to our fears of being alienated and misunderstood. Non-religious existential philosophers were swallowed up by what Joseph Conrad calls 'the horror' (*Heart of Darkness*) of nihilism. Christian existentialists like Jaspers on the other hand finally had to look into their Faiths to make a sort of leap to Faith to escape meaninglessness. We on the other hand find this Faith response often impossible. Where is God? Why does He not speak to me? Where is Christ the Immanuel? For me, a confirmed Hindu who believes in the reality and infallibility of the Catholic Church, the answer lies both within Hinduism and Christianity. As I see it, the problem of loneliness has been dealt within the *Bhagavad Gita* as the problem of inaction. The Gita sees the human condition in terms of its results. *Acedia* implies a resistance to fruitful action. The condition can be thus overcome by intense righteous action. Do what is needful but never unrighteous at any specific moment. In the dark nights of the soul, one must just carry on

doing what is proper to one's own state in life at even those moments when one is under the illusion that nothing really matters. The Cross is to bear this private horror with a cheerful face. It often suffices to know that God wants us to trust Him through darkness; that God alone matters and everything is only vanity. Through all our ups and downs, He is there. While the world turns, the Cross is still (Carthusian motto). The temptation always is to seek quick-fix answers, to seek false peace and a sense of security. True Faith prepares one for an uncertain life, to the extent where one gives up the secret longings for personal miracles. A life where one only knows that prayer is the right way even when it does not bear the fruits we want then and there. Whether you are married or celibate, young or old, prophet or reprobate, the journey is lonely and to quote the *Upanishads*, the path razor-sharp and definitely not for the faint-hearted.

Often it is in vain we search for light in darkness; God invites us to become the fire that lights others' paths. The inculturation project between Hindus and Christians should not be confined to mere God-talk, but rather should be meaningful in a practical manner (*Beyond Dialogue: Pilgrims to the Absolute*, Michael Amaladoss S.J., Bangalore, 2008). This healing of private angst can be further interrogated by theologians of both religions to meaningfully create a new psycho-therapeutic discourse which affectively heals the Indian soul.