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CHAPTER 10

On Gurus and Spiritual Direction

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It is interesting to note that in almost every field or specialty, common sense tells us that we need guidance and such is sought from experts. But when it comes to spiritual matters the great majority do not hesitate to choose themselves as both expert and advisor. This happens despite the Muslim aphorism that he who uses himself as his own director has Satan for his guide. Yet this situation is understandable when one recognizes that religion has been reduced to the realm of private opinion and when one considers the innumerable providers of spirituality—it comes in every shape and form—placing one's trust in others with regard to this critical matter is almost impossible. And yet ironically we find many giving their trust to individuals with no traditional affiliations and who proclaim themselves through the media as guides to any and all—usually for a healthy fee.

It is legitimate to use the term "guru" with any preceptor of a professional nature. Thus a surgeon or a musician can refer to his preceptor as his "guru." But in the present paper we are discussing gurus who are giving spiritual direction. Now in India, as in the West, there are a plethora of false gurus who are delighted to receive the financial support of those they dupe. They are, as one wise man explained, the "tinsel" that protects the real ones. It is virtually impossible—and there are of course exceptions to all that is said here—it is virtually impossible for Westerners with their "modernist" convictions and outlook (which includes many Indians brought up in the West) who go to the East to make contact with real gurus—though such of course exist.

Moreover such real gurus are highly unlikely to take on Westerners for the simple reason that they have not lived as Hindus for a long period of time. Living within a tradition forms and molds the soul and prepares the individual for the spiritual life. If one doubts this, one has but to ask such potential *chelas* (disciples) what caste they belong to. They immediately tell you that they don't believe in castes. Now like it or not, the caste system is intrinsic to Hinduism. It is a little like someone saying they are Catholic and claiming that they don't believe

in the Real Presence.[1] Living as a Hindu within the traditional culture is equivalent to what Tanqueray calls "external direction." So stringent is this principle that when an orthodox Hindu (the term orthodox is defined as right faith and true doctrine) leaves India—which is greatly discouraged—he has on returning to go through a purification ceremony. Now it is true that a Westerner can take *sannyasa*, that is, become a monk, and then this stricture does not apply, for the *sannyasin* has no social role in society as such. The funeral rites are said over him and he is as it were "dead to the world." Taking *sannyasa* is a fairly serious affair which means the cutting of all family, friends, possessions, and social ties. Such monks may be wanderers or may have a fixed abode. But no guru is likely to encourage this step—rare exceptions apart—in someone coming from the West who is almost certainly not prepared for all the commitments involved. Furthermore, again with exceptions, there is the problem, even for those brought up within the Hindu tradition, of what is called premature *vairagya,* that is taking such vows when too young, and for most such a step is only taken after he has fulfilled all his social duties and hence usually later in life. Now if these comments apply in India, they certainly also apply to those gurus who travel outside of India, who are almost without exception far from orthodox.[2]

Another dangerous tendency is to adopt spiritual exercises developed within one tradition to usages outside that tradition. I recently came across a Catholic retreat master who sent individuals up into the mountains on vision quests, a practice used by American Indians. Or again, the use of yoga, not for exercise, but as a spiritual method is rampant—one could give many other examples especially among "New Age gurus." Usually such individuals have little if any real knowledge of the traditions from which they seemingly adopt such techniques, apart from what they read in books—and books convey but the externals.

In a previous age and time things were different. As with all the great religious traditions, Christianity also insisted upon the importance of spiritual directors, experts in helping one come to a knowledge, love, and consequent appropriate service of God. In general the

[1] Those wishing to understand the caste system are referred to "The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society" by Ananda Coomaraswamy, in *Studies in Comparative Religion* 15, 1983.

[2] Examples of this are given in my paper on "The Desacralization of Hinduism for Western Consumption" in *Sophia*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 1998.

principles of direction were divided into two categories. The first requirement was submission to the form of the Tradition in question. As Tanqueray, a Catholic authority, says in *The Spiritual Life*: "God, Who established His Church as a hierarchical society, willed that souls be sanctified through submission to this Church." Thus when Saul (St. Paul) was converted, he was sent to Ananias in Damascus to learn what he was to do—teaching us, as St. Chrysostom says, "that we should be taught by God through men." This submission to traditional forms protects individuals from the tendency in all of us to think we have achieved some high state of knowledge and grace on our own. Submission to traditional forms and doctrine provides a sort of fence that acts as a corrective and a defense against self-delusion. This has been called "external" direction. At the same time the "orthodoxy" of the director acts as a guarantee that he is not leading one on some pet way of his own, but in accord with traditional norms.[3]

Beyond this, those who are called to the spiritual life require a guide for what has been called "internal" direction. As Tanquerey points out, "Progress in holiness is a long and painful ascent over a steep path bordered by precipices. To venture thereon without an experienced guide is highly imprudent." It is extremely easy to deceive oneself as regards one's own condition. As St. Francis de Sales says: "We are unable to gaze eye to eye upon ourselves, we cannot be impartial judges in our own case, by reason of a certain complacency, so veiled, so unsuspected that the keenest insight alone can discover its existence; those who suffer from it are not aware of it unless someone points it out to them."

The importance of spiritual direction has always been recognized in Christendom. Cassian, who spent long years among the monks in the East, speaks of this in both his *Book of Institutions* and in his *Conferences*. And what Cassian said with regard to the Eastern monks was repeated in the West by St. John Climacus in his *Ladder of Paradise*. It should not be thought that this need was limited to those in the religious life, for both Augustine and Jerome in their correspondence with those in the world repeat the same admonitions. Down through the ages the same principles are inculcated. St. Bernard speaks of this

[3] More current terminology uses the terms "exoteric" and "esoteric." It is virtually impossible for either to exist in isolation for any long period of time, for the outer form protects the inner content, and the inner content provides the strength and meaning to the outer form.

in both his letters and his sermons, and indeed he states that "whoever constitutes himself his own guide, becomes a disciple of a fool."

St. Francis de Sales tells us that a spiritual director must have three principal qualities, charity, knowledge, and prudence. Charity is a supernatural and paternal affection which makes him see that those under his care are spiritual children confided to him by God Himself. As St. Paul said, "My little children of whom I am in labor again until Christ be formed in you." This charity is not weakness, but a firmness coupled with frankness. Secondly knowledge is important, and St. Teresa of Avila teaches that this is more important than holiness. There are those who are indeed holy, but unsuitable to the task of direction. Without a knowledge of mystical and ascetical theology, how is it possible to direct a person who is traveling in such paths? Finally, prudence and sound judgment are needed in order to direct souls, not according to one's own judgment, but according to the grace, the temperament and character of the penitents, and their supernatural attractions.

St. John of the Cross points out the great difficulty of finding a spiritual guide, for such a one should be at once wise, zealous, discreet, and experienced, or at least well versed in the science of the ways of the Lord. Otherwise, like one blind man leading another, they both fall into a ditch. Inexperienced and ignorant directors do more damage than good to souls. This difficulty in finding a director is particularly evident today—and this is true within every viable Tradition. However, God did not leave us orphans, and He will in one way or another lead us—often in rather unusual and surprising ways—to a director of souls for, after all, He is Himself the ultimate director of every soul. Hinduism speaks of an *upa-guru*, which is anyone who helps one on the spiritual path, as well as a "guru" who is nothing other than a spiritual director. If the Hindu worships his guru, this is not some false idolatry, but rather the recognition that the guru is functioning in the place of God. And this is of course true of all true spiritual directors. Thus it is that when one finds a good director, one should strive to follow him with all docility. By giving obedience to such a director, the soul sacrifices its judgment and will. What is involved in this is the giving up of self-will which, as St. Bernard tells us, fuels the fires of hell.

If the spiritual director is a blind man seeking to lead the blind, as unfortunately happens often, then it is better to seek another. But if one cannot find such, then as St. Teresa of Avila says, it is better to remain without one, to trust in God who has permitted such a thing,

rather than be guided by a blind man. However, those who would follow a Christian path, prior to giving up their search for a director, would do well to acquaint themselves with the literature on spiritual direction—the writings of innumerable saints and theologians such as Tanqueray (*The Spiritual Life*) and Arintero (*Mystical Evolution*), St. Catherine of Genoa (*Spiritual Doctrine*), St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross. Such writings will constitute an intellectual preparation—using the word "intellect" in its full scholastic sense—and at the same time provide the seeker with the necessary guidelines to advance them in their search.

And finally, those who find themselves faced with the task of direction must realize that the very obligations that fall upon their penitents apply above all to themselves. If they do not sanctify their own lives, if they do not let Christ live in them as He did in St. Paul, ("I live not I but Christ liveth in me") they will never be effective directors. It is not themselves that they give to those who seek their help, but the Divine Logos and nothing but that Logos. Spiritual direction is a serious business, both for the giver and the receiver. For the giver, he must face his Maker and answer for any deviation from Truth, and for the receiver, such deviations can terminate in disaster, both in this world and the next.

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Features in

The Essential Sophia
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