INTRODUCTION: A PILGRIMAGE TO THE HEART

Richard Kearney

Boston College

This volume on the inter-religious imagination represents the interactive work of a number of scholars over several years—an exploratory effort which crystallized 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 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 “traversing 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 insofar 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 interreligious 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 most 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 hermeneutic “situatedness” of our discourse, thereby admitting its 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 Shaivite 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