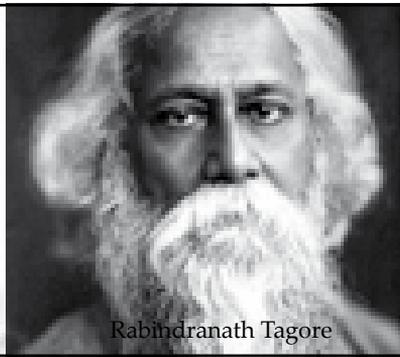


Brahmabandhav Upadhyay



Rabindranath Tagore



Mother Teresa

A Confluence of Minds

As human persons, Jesus Christ, Ignatius of Loyola and Rabindranath Tagore have many things in common. All three are spiritual leaders who have had great influence on their followers and readers >>>



BY J. FELIX RAJ, SJ

Birth anniversaries of many great persons have been observed in the last years. Among them, we have three persons who are very close and dear to us, Jesuits, namely Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (1861 – 1907), Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941) and Mother Teresa (1910 – 1997). Tagore (1913) and Mother (1979) are Nobel Laureates for Literature and Peace respectively. Upadhyay and Tagore were contemporaries whose 150th birth anniversaries are celebrated this year while Mother’s birth centenary was observed last year.

Jesuit Fr. A. Bruder, SJ baptized Upadhyay in 1891 at Karachi. After that, he grew up in the company of Jesuits in Kolkata as a philosopher-theologian. Tagore studied at St. Xavier’s School, Kolkata. Mother Teresa drew great inspiration and spiritual guidance from many Jesuits of Calcutta Province right from the inception of her congregation.

It is a providential coincidence that St. Xavier’s College, Kolkata (1860 – 2010) with which these three exemplary spiritual leaders were closely associated, also celebrated its sesquicentennial anniversary of its foundation last year.

Tagore at St. Xavier’s

Tagore was admitted to St. Xavier’s School, Kolkata at the age of 14. He was uncomfortable with formal schooling and so left the school after a short while. His short period at Xavier’s left a deep impression on him. The person who seems to have had the greatest impact on young Tagore was a Jesuit Father, Alfonso de Penaranda, a Spanish Jesuit. Tagore himself has acknowledged, “I cannot speak for other boys,

but I felt in him the presence of a great soul, and even today the recollection of it seems to give me a passport to enter into silent seclusion of the temple of God”.

Thirty-six years later, at the age of fifty, he wrote in his autobiography: “A sacred memory of St. Xavier’s remains un-faded in my mind – the memory of its teachers”. In 1927, when he was 66, he agreed to a request to serve as patron and vice-president of the St. Xavier’s Alumni Association, and even autographed his photo “with tears in his eyes”. He also presented to St. Xavier’s a white marble bust of Jesus Christ which is still preserved in the principal’s office. It is believed that Tagore’s faith in God, his understanding and relation to God as Father and his deep respect for Jesus Christ were all influenced by what he imbibed at St. Xavier’s.

I want to raise three issues here for readers’ reflection. 1) One can be an extraordinary player in the theatre of the world even without formal schooling; 2) There needs to be sufficient amount of informality, and room for praxis – reflection and application in our studies to bring out the best in us and 3) Jesuits are perhaps the best teachers of the text called life. What is our relationship with our students in schools and colleges? How much influence do we exercise on them? Tagore’s



St. Xavier's School, Kolkata

experience must open our minds to explore new and healthy ways to relate to our students and transform their lives and take them to destinies that dreams are made of.

The beginnings of Santiniketan

Visva Bharati is a Central University of national importance located in the twin towns of Santiniketan and Sriniketan in Bolepur, 200 km from Kolkata. Tagore founded it in 1921 and he called it Visva Bharati, which means the communion of the world with India. Tagore was not comfortable with the word 'University', since it translates to Vishva Vidhyalaya, which is smaller in scope than Visva Bharati. It was a college till 1950 after which it was named as Visva Bharati University.

Brahmachari Animananda Rewachand joined Brahmandhav Upadhyay in 1900 and both founded a school in Simla Street (Swami Vivekananda's birth place), Kolkata. Their idea was to revive the ancient ideal of "acharya" and "shisya". There were twelve boys with Animananda as their teacher. The boys sat on mats. They paid no fees; the teacher received no salary; knowledge could not be purchased.

One morning a carriage stopped at the door of the school. Upadhyay received the guest, a tall princely figure, and introduced him to the boys. The boys touched his feet in reverence, recited a few pieces and answered

the questions of the guest. The noble visitor was Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore was highly pleased with the school. Later Upadhyay visited Santiniketan. The vast fields, huge Sal trees and the quiet abode captivated him.

It was decided that the school at Simla Street would be shifted to



Tagore, with a young learner at Shantiniketan (1938)

Santiniketan to open an ashram. Animananda initially did not like the idea of going to Bolepur as that would mean missing his daily Eucharist. But on Upadhyay's insistence, he agreed on condition that he would visit Calcutta every Sunday. Tagore himself received Animananda and his twelve boys at Santiniketan in December 1901. Tagore's two sons joined them. The warm welcome of the poet and the free environment of the place removed all hesitancy and Animananda put his heart and soul into the work.

This wonderful collaboration of a poet and a philosopher was not

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meant to last. It came to an abrupt end after seven months, and the reason for it has been a matter of keen dispute.

Christ, Loyola, Tagore

As human persons, Jesus Christ, Ignatius of Loyola and

spiritual leaders who have had great influence on their followers and readers.

The Second World War was declared on September 1, 1939. The Indian leaders had suggested that Britain should declare independence before India could help the Allied cause. The request was naturally turned down. India was not free and Europe was at war. For Christmas service at Santiniketan Tagore wrote:

To Christ, Son of Man:

*One day those who killed him,
In the name of the King
Have come back as devotees,
Assailant calls the soldier*

*'Kill him, Kill him', yells,
the yell mixes with prayer hymns
Says, he is in great pain,
this cup is full of poison, Throw it away.*

Tagore had written these lines during the period of his serious illness and as he was nearing death. Probably he contemplated on the sufferings and death of Jesus. Tagore's writings reflect Jesus' teachings. Take a few examples:

Jesus preached: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go first make peace with your brother, and then come back and present your gift" (Mat 5:23).

Tagore wrote: Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?

Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground

and where the path maker is breaking stones...

...Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense!

What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained?

Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.

Jesus preached with authority. He preached against unjust practices. He called the Scribes and Pharisees as fools, hypocrites... He said to the people:

"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach".

In the same way, Tagore was critical of the Indian heritage. He was critical of certain aspects and superstitious practices of his own

Hindu heritage. He wrote:

"Our country is the land of rites and rituals, so that we have more faith in worshipping the feet of the priest than the divinity he serves.... From the solumn gloom of the temple, children run out to play in the dust, God watches them play and forgets the temple."

Tagore in a letter to E.J. Thompson wrote: "I have often felt that if we were not Hindus...I should like my people to be Christians. It is a pity that Europeans have come as imperialists rather than Christians and have deprived our people of their true contact with Jesus Christ". This reminds me of Mahatma Gandhi's words to a Christian missionary: "I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ. If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Gospels, all of India would be Christian today."

Take the following prayer hymn of Tagore:

*This is my prayer to thee, my lord
-- strike, strike at the root of
penury in my heart.*

*Give me the strength lightly to
bear my joys and sorrows.*

*Give me the strength to make my
love fruitful in service.*

*Give me the strength never
to disown the poor or bend my
knees before insolent might.*

*Give me the strength to raise my
mind high above daily trifles.*

*And give me the strength to
surrender my strength to thy will
with love.*

This prayer could well be attributed to St. Ignatius or Francis of Assisi or any Christian mystic. Read it with Ignatius' prayer:

*Take, O Lord, and receive my
entire liberty,*

*my memory, my understanding
and my whole will.*

All that I am and all that I possess

"I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ. If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Gospels, all of India would be Christian today." >>>

You have given me.

*I surrender it all to You to be
disposed of according to Your will.*

*Give me only Your love and Your
grace;*

*with these I will be rich enough,
and will desire nothing more.*

Consider the last line of Tagore's poem and the fourth line of Ignatius' prayer. They are almost the same, expressing their total surrender to the Almighty and to His will. The spiritual depth of a 16th century hero echoes in the verses of a 20th century poet. It is an interesting theme for comparative study.

Tagore is a spiritual realist, a mystic, not an ascetic. The universal poet is still alive in our midst calling us all for a fellowship beyond boundaries.

Let me conclude by quoting the Irish Poet W.B. Yeats who wrote in his introduction to Tagore's own translation of his Gitanjali, "These verses, as generations pass, travelers will hum them on the highway, and fishermen, while rowing their boats; lovers will murmur them while they wait for each other..." Let us hum them as we go about our way.

(The author is the Principal of St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata. This article is based on his Pedro Arrupe Endowment lecture at Sathya Nilayam Research Institute, affiliated to Chennai University.)