

Alain Daniélou and the Gods in the Age of Conflicts

Joscelyn Godwin

Alain Daniélou (1907–1994) must have been one of the world’s most cheerful pessimists. Although convinced that humanity was hurtling through degeneracy to its inevitable destruction, he led a life full of delights and creative fulfillment. In his last years, honored by the great and the good, he retreated to an old house in the hills of Latium, to paint, raise vines, and translate the *Kama Sutra*. Not for him the nightmare of eternal survival at the mercy of a despotic God. It is the fear of the beyond, he wrote, that makes Christians so afraid of death. “But death is such a simple thing, a final slumber in which all the elements of our being dissolve, become inanimate matter, and return to the workshop of the gods.”¹ No more did he expect to be reincarnated, with a karmic mortgage to pay off in his next life, for the simple reason that “he” as an individual would have ceased to exist. Since he had no children to continue his genetic line, nothing would be left but his work, which he continued to the end. Thus he could say, in retrospect: “Life has brought me so much joy, so much sweetness, pleasure, friendship, happiness, and knowledge that the only fear I have is that I shall not have given all there was for me to give before I sleep.”²

Beginnings

French intellectuals of the twentieth century, whether existentialists, theologians, or postmodernists, are not noted for a sense of joy and contentment. Here as in most other regards, Alain went against the current. He was born into the upper bourgeoisie, his father a government official and freethinker, his mother a fervent Catholic who founded a religious

1. Daniélou, *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 334.

2. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 334.

order. His brother Jean entered the Jesuits and ended up a cardinal. Although not particularly wealthy, the Daniélous had highly placed friends in both church and state, which gave Alain a patrician’s sense of security and entitlement. As a child he suffered from tuberculosis and other ills, which meant that his education was mainly from the rich resources of his home. Yet in adolescence he took his body in hand and trained it to a high athletic degree. At eighteen he dropped out of the *baccalauréat* to become a painter, a ballet dancer, a singer, a pianist, and an exchange student at St. John’s College, Annapolis. Later he calculated that he could have earned his living in thirty-two different trades or professions. He does not list them, but they might include architect, archivist, auto mechanic, carpenter, electrician, gymnast, interpreter, journalist, manuscript conservator, musicologist, philosopher, photographer, racing driver, recording engineer, sailor, Sanskritist, translator, travel writer, vina player, and yoga instructor

As it turned out, Alain did not have to worry about earning a living for a considerable time. A young Swiss, Raymond Burnier (1912–1968), noticed and fell for him on first sight, and so began Alain’s longest and deepest relationship. Raymond was heir to a Nestlé fortune, enabling the couple to spend the 1930s swanning around the globe. They traveled as gilded youth could in that period, mixing five-star luxury with an untroubled acceptance of squalor and discomfort. Their expeditions would be unthinkable with today’s border restrictions and war zones, and even then, the gods seem to have taken care of them. Raymond, whose only pretention to expertise was in photography, took what are now historic photographs of sites in Afghanistan and temple sculptures in India. His skill can be admired in the many plates of Stella Kramrisch’s *The Hindu Temple* and of Alain’s *Hindu Polytheism*.

Having seen the world, the couple decided that North India would be their ideal home. In 1937 Raymond rented a neglected palace in the holy city of Benares. They settled down for fifteen years, restoring its marbled



Alain Daniélou, Zagarolo, Italy, 1986.
(Photo by Jacques E. Cloarec, courtesy of FIND)

halls and mingling with Indians of every degree, from the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and the future president Nehru to penniless sadhus. The world war might not have been going on, for all that it affected them. Alain set himself to learn Sanskrit, the artificial and sacred language of India, and the local language of Hindi, and became fluent in both, though like all educated Indians he habitually spoke and wrote in English. As for colonial society, Alain and Raymond had no taste for it, and still less for Westernized Indians such as the followers of Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and the Theosophical Society.

TYR: Myth—Culture—Tradition

Initiations

More than that, he and Raymond became “the only foreigners who were ever initiated and incorporated into orthodox Hinduism.”³ Whether or not this is accurate, it raises interesting issues. In orthodox Hinduism, which observes strict distinctions of castes, foreigners are excluded from the “twice-born” castes of the Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (princes and warriors), and Vaishyas (craftsmen and merchants). This left them on a par with the Shudras (laborers). Their category, in fact, was that of Mlecchas, “barbarians,” the lowest of the low. Of course, all foreigners in India, from the Viceroy down, were strictly speaking Mlecchas, but it was not customary to remind them of it. Alain accepted the designation with pride, for it confirmed his whole-hearted commitment to Hindu tradition and the caste principle. He titled the later collections of his essays *The Mleccha’s Exercise Books*.

The only initiation accessible to such an “outcaste” was the Shivaite (or Shaivite), which makes no distinctions of caste or sex. Alain had three main guides on his unprecedented path. The first was a Brahman scholar, Vijayanand, with whom Alain took private lessons. He had first to bathe in the Ganges, which conveniently ran outside his front door. Since a Mleccha could not enter a Brahman’s dwelling, they met in a special room, the pupil being very careful not to touch the master or any object belonging to him. The second guide was Vijayanand’s son Brahmanand, “a very strange and ugly young man who was mostly interested in the magical forms of tantrism.”⁴ Alain, who otherwise seems to have known no fear, confesses that “I have always avoided anything to do with magical practices, which frighten me,” but he learned a lot about them. Thirdly there was Swami Karpâtri, a wandering *sannyasi* of immense prestige, who was greatly honored whenever he appeared in Benares. At the first audience, Alain

3. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 139.

4. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 136.

dutifully sat among the lower castes. There followed a classic *darshan* of master to disciple:

The master did not appear to see me. He said nothing to me, but that was not necessary, for he could read people's minds. He began to speak of things that were of very special interest to me. I found it extremely difficult to adjust to this phenomenon: being in the presence of someone who *knew* everything I thought, everything I was. With such a man one could not lie, there was no need for apologies or excuses Later . . . we had many long conversations together.⁵

Swami Karpâtri authorized Brahmanand to initiate both Alain and Raymond. Alain took the new name of Shiva Saran ("protected by Shiva"), by which he was known until his return to Europe. "Here at last was the god I had vaguely sensed in my childhood and had secretly been searching for all my life."⁶ The initiation put him under obligations of ritual and lifestyle specific to Mlecchas. They included the practice of Hatha Yoga, respect for all creatures (in effect, vegetarianism), veneration of a tree and its spirit, dancing to induce a state of trance, sexual activity as a conscious approach to the divine, avoiding physical contact with those of another race or clan, purification in running water, veneration of the masters, feeding wanderers irrespective of their virtue, using *bhang* (an infusion of cannabis) but no other drug, wearing a *linga* (phallus) and venerating it, and observing proper funeral rites.⁷

Castes

Having willingly entered the traditional Hindu caste system, Alain faced

5. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 138.

6. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 140.

7. Daniélou, *While the Gods Play*, 149–54.



Alain Daniélou and Raymond Burnier in Benares, 1942.
(Photo by Cecil Beaton; reproduced in
Cadonna, ed., "Ricordo di Alain Daniélou")

all the objections to it that Westerners have raised since they colonized India, and dismissed them as sheer hypocrisy. He wrote many passages explaining and defending the system as the only way to preserve cultural diversity, such as this one from his essay on "Caste, Egalitarianism, and Cultural Genocides":

A system which tries to recognize and respect the specific qualities, virtues, traditions, and autonomy of diverse human groups, races, religions, and cultures; to recognize the right of diverse human societies to be different, and to avoid the persecution, annihilation, or conversion of minorities by the majority, is opposed by three

imperialisms: Christian, Islamic, and Marxist, in the name of an egalitarianism that is nothing but a tool of dominion, genocide, and general mediocritization.⁸

Castes, on the contrary, allow each person a means of livelihood and a contribution to society in conformity with his nature.

Each caste has its own justice system, administered by a council of notables; its own laws in matters of inheritance, marriage, divorce, and division of family property. It has its own festivals, its own rites, Gods, customs, forming a separate and contented world that collaborates harmoniously with the other castes, but must not mix with them. Hence there are two prohibitions: that of marriage across different castes, and of sharing meals with those of another caste—easily explained because dietary rules differ from one caste to another.⁹

In some ways castes resemble the European guild system, in which one would not expect the tanners to be as hygienic as the bakers, or the butchers to dress like butlers; yet each fills an essential niche in the general economy. While critics imagine the system as an oppressive pecking order, each caste and sub-caste has its own pride and privileges. Shudras, for example, are allowed to have multiple wives, to divorce, drink alcohol, smoke, take drugs, and eat meat, all of which are prohibited to Brahmins. The latter, whether rich or poor, are revered as sacred persons, but are paralyzed by restrictions and by the need to maintain ritual purity.¹⁰ The Kshatriyas, whose European equivalent was the nobility and officer class,

8. Daniélou, *Caste, egualitarismo e genocidi culturali*, 48. All translations by the author.

9. *Caste, egualitarismo e genocidi culturali*, 21.

10. *Caste, egualitarismo e genocidi culturali*, 28.

live extravagantly but are expected to risk life and limb in defense of the community. Here, by the way, is an argument in favor of a professional army, and against the universal conscription that expects to make warriors of types genetically unsuited to the role.

Alain's philosophy of caste faithfully reflected that of his teacher Swami Karpâtri, who beside his spiritual attainment was a political firebrand. In 1948 he founded a party called the Ram Rajya Parishad ["council of Rama's kingdom"], which a historian describes thus:

From its name one can see that the party wishes to return India to the glorious and ideal days in which the hero of the *Ramayana* ruled. It is absolutely opposed to anything foreign, to such an extent that in comparison the nationalist Mahasabha and Jana Sangh are identified with the full range of Western ideas. The party even goes so far as to support the continuance of the caste system, which neither of the other parties do. "Untouchables" are offered, in the 1951 manifesto, high posts in the sanitation departments and in the hide and leather trade. It is not necessary to detail further the obscurantist program of the Parishad.¹¹

Karpâtri's party continued into the 1960s to hold the extreme nationalist wing in Indian politics, until it was absorbed by the Jana Sangh, the acknowledged parent of the Bharatiya Janata Party which now rules India. Current issues such as anti-Muslim sentiment and the opposition to cow slaughter have their roots in Karpâtri's agitations.

Races

The caste principle extends also to peoples and races:

11. Baxter, *The Jana Sangh*, 79.

The essential thing is the right of each one to be black, yellow or white, Muslim, animist, Christian, Jewish or atheist; to be polygamous, monogamous, matriarchal, patriarchal, homosexual, vegetarian or carnivorous, artisan or intellectual, without being continually confronted with a standardized model that can only be that of a certain epoch in a certain civilization.¹²

This challenges an assumption that is scarcely questioned today. The Western belief in progress, plus the Judeo-Christian concept of God-given laws, has planted the conviction that its “standardized model” is the one to which all the world should conform. In Alain’s view, on the contrary, the customs and morals of the modern West are a passing phenomenon, with no inherent superiority over those of other times and places. The Hindus, the Japanese, the Aborigine and the Eskimo had their own customs and morals, which suited them for millennia until confronted by superior force. “Whole races and civilizations have been destroyed by the European conqueror so that he can preserve the illusion of living in a world of justice, equality, and democracy.”¹³

With his defense of the colonized against the colonizers, and of India’s dark-skinned Dravidians against the Aryan invasion, Alain sounds like today’s anti-racists. But far from it: he loathed what he called their reign of terror, in which “The fear of infringing the taboo concerning the blasphemous use of forbidden words causes the greatest scientists, sociologists, biologists, psychologists, and historians to use incredible circumlocutions to avoid being accused of the racist heresy, which would immediately get their works condemned.”¹⁴ His use of the term “heresy” reminds us that its definition, along with that of blasphemy, shifts with

12. *Caste, equalitarismo e genocidi culturali*, 41.

13. Daniélou, *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, and Liberation*, 159.

14. *Caste, equalitarismo e genocidi culturali*, 47.

the times, and that freedom of expression has always been subject to some taboo or other. At one time Alain’s polytheism would have got him burned at the stake; at another he would have been hung for sodomy. Today, even his anti-racism can jar with acceptable sentiments, as when he writes:

There is evidently a strong inferiority complex at work in the violence of American whites against the blacks, who are particularly sexually endowed. A pleasure in masochistic submission confirms this sentiment. The redskins do not arouse sexual jealousy; their extermination was the result of pure banditry. It was simply a matter of eliminating them to appropriate their lands, in a process that continues. The attitude towards the blacks has been much more sadistic, with floggings, tortures, and the death penalty for blacks who seduced a white woman, whilst the whites had free sexual relations with their negro slaves. . . . The most fanatical and arrogant racists, such as the American pioneers, never felt embarrassment at procreating with the slaves, except for abandoning their offspring.¹⁵

Alain condemned such procreation, and not only with slaves, as a criminal act toward the unborn child. Any sexual activity was permissible in his eyes, so long as it did not violate the genetic inheritance of humanity. “Man has no single origin,” he wrote in a late work; “there are four races of men, each of a distinct family. . . . Diversity of species and race is an essential aspect of the harmony of creation.”¹⁶ That this went against current anthropogenic theory, as well as the biblical narrative, would not have troubled him in the least. Just as his Shivaite worldview defended the integrity of each caste, so it urged the preservation of racial purity for all races, each being a divine creation and equally perfect in its own way.

15. *Caste, equalitarismo e genocidi culturali*, 42–43.

16. Daniélou, *Shiva and Dionysus*, 215.

“Whether in the animal or human world, the mixture of races produces degenerate individuals who distort the harmony and beauty of creation, since they no longer possess the characteristic virtues of either race.”¹⁷ He had no comfort to offer the individuals in question, but no mercy for those responsible.

Polytheism

Alain's weightiest book, *Hindu Polytheism*, appeared in 1964 from the Bollingen Foundation: a publisher of serious works on mythology, comparative religion, and psychology, including the collected works of C. G. Jung. Bollingen's prestige, Raymond's photographs, and the novelty of the topic to most readers ensured a warm reception and a long life for the book. However, the reviewer in the London *Times Literary Supplement* sensed that the author was not only a scholar but a believer, and responded with scorn: “The author's interpretation of Hinduism is so wildly idiosyncratic that it would require a whole volume to correct the errors of fact, translation, and interpretation. Here we need say no more than that this is far from being an objective appraisal of the Hindu religion, that it is packed with statements which are unsupported by any book of evidence.”¹⁸ The interpretation was in fact what Alain had learned from Swami Karpâtri. The book quotes from hundreds of ancient texts, with the Sanskrit originals for those who want to check them, interspersed with dozens of passages by Karpâtri, quoted from articles in his periodicals. Alessandro Grossato comments that the book is so indebted to the master's oral teaching that one cannot tell who is responsible for it, but that this is in line with the principle of anonymity in formulating traditional doctrines.¹⁹

17. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 217.

18. *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 March 1965, 179, cited in *Book Review Digest*.

19. Grossato, *La corrispondenza fra Alain Daniélou et René Guénon*, 18.

Hindu Polytheism is an erudite work, without question, but it belongs to the Traditionalist movement as much as René Guénon's *General Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's *Hinduism and Buddhism*, or Julius Evola's *The Doctrine of Awakening*. That is to say, it expounds religious doctrines as paths to a perennial wisdom.

Alain's own words supply the bridge from abstract doctrine to practice. As he explains it, the universe is a Cosmic Being that emerges periodically from non-manifestation, each emergence being somehow the consequence of an anterior one. The fine-tuned state of the cosmos which puzzles materialistic science, or as Alain calls it “a strange equilibrium in Nature,” is the law under which it emerges, personified as the god Brahmā, the Creator.²⁰ “The power that holds the universe together,” “the source and plan of life,” are personified as Vishnu the Preserver.²¹ He and his avatars are the typical focus of religious devotion. Shiva, we are told less helpfully, “is everything,” but more particularly the process of creation and destruction.²² He is more often viewed as the Destroyer, both of worlds and, for the individual, of the illusion of separate existence.

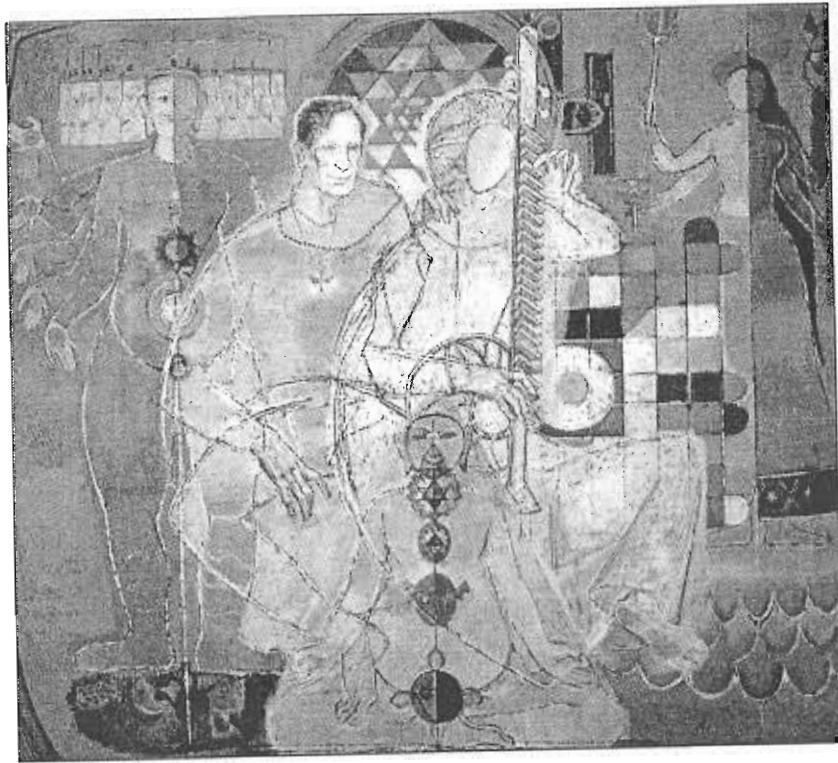
The gods, therefore, are personifications of metaphysical and cosmological principles, but they are not unconscious, as is the dead universe of scientism. As more advanced physics has begun to suspect, there can be no manifestation without a consciousness to perceive it: the two arise together. Thus the universe is alive in every part, and since “there appears to be a strict equivalence at every stage between the structure of man himself and the structure of the universe as he can perceive or conceive it,”²³ it is natural and desirable to depict its principles as anthropomorphic gods and goddesses. In that way the majority can worship them and so

20. Daniélou, *Hindu Polytheism*, 233.

21. *Hindu Polytheism*, 150.

22. *Hindu Polytheism*, 190–1.

23. *Hindu Polytheism*, 43.



Portrait of Alain Daniélou by Mac Avoy, 1978.
(Image courtesy of FIND)

communicate with higher states of being, while the yogi goes beyond the symbol to the impersonal principle.

Yoga is not a religious path, but an almost scientific process in which one's true nature is discovered. Alain writes that the methods developed in pre-Aryan India made its adepts "conscious, through introspection, of an ultimate void within themselves, of a stage beyond thought or dream, beyond perception, beyond knowledge, motionless, indescribable, unbounded by space and time."²⁴ When permanently established, this is

24. *Hindu Polytheism*, 14.

the state of *moksha* or liberation: the *summum bonum* both for the individual and for the rest of creation, though paradoxically both vanish in it:

Wherever the universal principle is realized, the fundamental unity of creation and unity between all beings appears at the same time. No ambition for personal realization is thus possible. The integrated person identifies himself not only with the transcendent being but with all created forms and all living beings. He carries all humanity with him on his spiritual journey, and in this way he reintegrates with the divine.²⁵

Shivaism as Alain explained and practiced it is a *tamasic*, descending, or left-hand path. He explains the difference between the two paths as follows:

The Shivaite way is the Tantric way, the Tamasic (descending) way, which utilizes the physical functions and the apparently negative, destructive, sensual aspects of the human animal as a starting point. The Sattvic (ascending) way employs asceticism, virtue and the intellect as instruments.²⁶

He favors the Tamasic way for two reasons: as being superior in its goal of liberation, and as being more suited to conditions in the Kali Yuga, the "Age of Conflicts" (see below). To use the images of Hermetism, Tamas is the dissolving and centrifugal tendency, Sattva the congealing, centripetal tendency. The Sattvic path is one of purification, and "since it is associated with the principle of concentration, that is with the Vishnu or Apollonian aspect, it can only lead to the realization of the divinity incarnate in the

25. *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, and Liberation*, 133.

26. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 149.

world.”²⁷ The Tamasic path accepts the world as it is, not as we would like it to be, yet it recognizes that “In living beings, everything is organized in accordance with this expression of pleasure, joy, beauty, and happiness, which is the nature of the divine and the secret of all that exists.”²⁸

Midlife Crises and Opportunities

Although the ultimate goal of the Shivaite is liberation from conditioned being, there are way-stations on the path and methods for attaining them. Some of these have been mentioned among the Mleccha’s rules: we might call them sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll, though only a mild form of the second is permitted. Alain, while praising *bhang* and its effects, writes that he would take the smallest possible amount, and that otherwise he had never been able to take drugs.²⁹ Whether he continued to dance after settling in Benares is unclear, but he writes warmly of the “mystic-erotic” dances of the Dionysian cult (assimilated to that of Shiva). He also notes that when dancing to loud music in confined spaces, today’s youth appear to “reach a state of exaltation which, if properly oriented, could easily lead to a form of mystical intoxication.”³⁰

It is sex that brings out Alain’s character and enthusiasms to the full. His first encounter, at college in Annapolis, gave him a one-time mystical experience of light and ecstasy. Having long since thrown off the Christian God, he glimpsed the real God of Love, and “all I needed to do now was find him.”³¹ On his return to Paris, he came out into the Proustian demi-monde of wealthy homosexuals and their pets, until he found his life-partner in the “radiantly beautiful, fair-haired youth of nineteen, wearing

27. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 149.

28. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 157.

29. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 142.

30. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 202–3.

31. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 63.

sky-blue linen pajamas.”³² Alain and Raymond would live together on and off for thirty-eight years, but their relationship allowed for many outside affairs. AIDS was as yet unknown, and India seems to have been both tolerant and rich in opportunities, as was continental Europe after their return.

Alain accepted his exclusively homosexual orientation as a gift. By relieving him of the duties of marriage and fatherhood, it allowed him to pursue his multifaceted and always sacred goal, whether through erotic pleasure, ritual observance, music, or intellectual work. He considered himself as belonging to a type for which Hinduism, in its universality, has a place; that of men with androgynous tendencies, having “a special sacred character, since they symbolize the union of principles, the substance of wealth and of life.”³³

Raymond, on the other hand, was bisexual, and in 1950 was having an intermittent affair with an actress and dancer called Radha Sri Ram. Alain introduced her to the film maker Jean Renoir, who was making a film (*The River*) in India and immediately adapted it to include her. After Renoir took Radha in triumph to Hollywood, Raymond was seized with jealousy. He flew to California and in a few days had married her, to the great glee of the popular press. Not surprisingly, Alain writes, “Raymond’s marriage caused me some very serious problems, not only in our life together, but also because we had sworn at the time of our initiation into Hinduism never to marry outside our caste.”³⁴ Conservative friends deserted them. Since Radha was a Brahman, this violated her status, too, but it did not matter because her father, Nilakanta Sri Ram, was president of the Theosophical Society, which ignored caste distinctions. The newlyweds settled in the Theosophists’ lavish compound at Adyar, near Madras.

32. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 76.

33. *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, and Liberation*, 95–96.

34. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 194.

Alain had never had anything but contempt for the Theosophical cult and the anglicized Indians who flocked to it. Its soft-centered, universalizing tendency was anathema to his hard-edged, traditional Shivaism. Yet when Radha wrote to complain that Raymond was getting bored in Adyar, Alain accepted her father's invitation to join them there. In 1954 he left the palace by the Ganges and became director of the Society's Library of Manuscripts and Sanskrit Editions. He labored to catalogue, preserve, and study its unrivalled collection, meanwhile learning the South Indian language of Tamil and publishing translations. But the puritanism and infighting of the Theosophists were too much for him. To annoy them (and perhaps in homage to the chain-smoking Madame Blavatsky), he took up smoking in the library, and could never kick the habit thereafter. He came to suspect that Radha's father was doing black magic. After two years, the French ambassador helped him into a position at the Institute of Indology in the enclave of Pondicherry, a curious survival of French colonialism. Adyar was also getting to be too much for Raymond, who came to see Alain in Pondicherry every week. The sterile marriage broke up, perhaps to general relief, leaving Radha Burnier to attain her ambition as president of the Theosophical Society, and rule it for thirty-three years.

Independent India had become a less comfortable place for Alain and his kind. In 1948 he had set foot in Europe for the first time since before the war, and begun the difficult process of re-culturalization with annual visits. After considering the various places where they might settle, he and Raymond bought property in Zagarolo, a remote village outside Rome. In 1960 Alain left India for good. He joined the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* [French School of the Far East] in Paris, of which he had been an honorary member since 1943. His reputation had grown, and so had the network of influential friends who always seemed at his disposal. Three years later he was offered a post at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, but turned it down: he wanted his own institute, and he got it.

The Ford Foundation was interested in funding an institute dedicated to non-Western music, on condition that it would be in West Berlin. This was part of the political agenda for asserting the city's independence from the German Democratic Republic (the former Russian zone of occupation) that surrounded and threatened it. Alain was offered the directorship, and writes: "As usual, I chose adventure over security, easy work, pension, and benefits, which the French university was willing to offer me."³⁵

West Berlin was an uncanny and sometimes scary place, but the "International Institute for Comparative Music Studies" attracted musicians, artists, and émigrés of every kind. It enabled Alain to travel the world again, this time to seek out and record indigenous music. Raymond joined him, taking care of administrative matters with Swiss efficiency until his sudden death from a heart attack in 1968. A terrible episode followed, in which Franco, the boorish companion of Raymond's last years, inherited most of his estate. Alain was luckier. He acquired a mysterious creature whom he calls "Le Farfadet," the name of the elves of the Daniélous' native Brittany. He sounds exactly like the young Alain, for "he loved to dance, sing, and tear about in a red English sports car. But there was nothing that he could not do . . . He could manipulate people, charm them, and make them do anything he pleased."³⁶

In time, Alain found that the political situation of West Berlin hindered relations with communist-friendly countries in the Third World, which made it impossible to arrange the kind of international musical events he wanted. In 1970 he started a parallel institute in Venice, where the Cini Foundation welcomed his projects and became the depository of his library.³⁷ For all his gratitude to the city, he did not love Venice, and wrote amusingly about it:

35. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 254.

36. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 267.

37. See Grossato, ed., *Catalogo del fondo Alain Daniélou*.

Venetians loathe all those foreigners who want to save their city and create all kinds of organizations to bring it back to so-called life. The powerful Venetian Republic is as dead as the Roman Empire; consciously or not, its survivors wish only to scuttle their ship and sink down with it into the Adriatic Sea.³⁸

By 1981 Alain had retired from both his institutes,³⁹ and retreated to his house in Zagarolo. The hill on which it stood, called “The Labyrinth,” now revealed its suitably mythological dimension. From the work of Princess Emanuela Kretzulesco-Quaranta,⁴⁰ Alain learned that the Labyrinth and nearby Palestrina had been among the most sacred places of the Etruscan and Roman world. Moreover, in the Renaissance they were the site of an attempted revival of pagan traditions and rites, commemorated in the epic fantasy-novel *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499).⁴¹ It was the perfect place for a modern polytheist, a devotee of Shiva’s alter ego, Dionysus, who continued to wear, along with his suit and tie, a tiny golden phallus.

Music

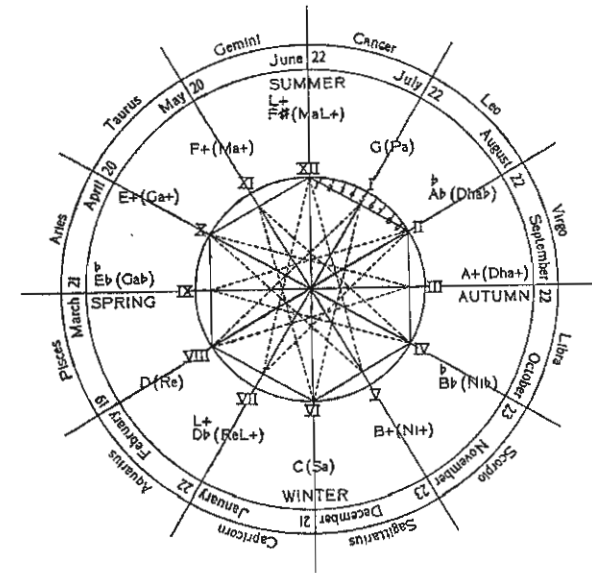
From the moment he arrived in India in 1937, Alain channeled his considerable musical talents into the study and practice of Hindu music. He became adept on the vina, the plucked stringed instrument which dates back four millennia. Once he had mastered Sanskrit, he collected every available text on music, printed and manuscript. The first fruit of his studies was a book in English, *Introduction to the Study of Musical Scales* (1943). The publisher was the Indian Society, founded in London in 1910 to counter the general ignorance about Indian art and culture.

38. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 298.

39. Cadonna, ed., *Ricordo di Alain Daniélou*, X.

40. Kretzulesco-Quaranta, *Les jardins du songe*.

41. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 232–33.



“Cyclic division into twelve, showing the correspondences with the Zodiac, months, seasons, hours, minutes, octaves, angles, etc.”
(From Daniélou’s “Introduction to the Study of Music,” 1943)

The Society’s former publications included Tagore’s poetry and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy’s early works. Perhaps it was Alain’s friendship with Tagore that gave him access to it, while the introduction is fully in the perennialist spirit of Coomaraswamy. Not only that, but the chief modern authority cited is René Guénon, via his articles in *Le Voile d’Isis* and *Études traditionnelles*. Even the title echoes Guénon’s *General Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*. Alain was approaching comparative music theory from the point of view of Traditionalist metaphysics, having the musical expertise that those two great exponents lacked. Later he would correspond with Guénon, and write a measured appreciation based on their letters.⁴²

Alain rewrote the book in French under the no less formidable title

42. Daniélou, “René Guénon et la tradition hindoue.”

of *Traité de musicologie comparée* (Treatise on Comparative Musicology; 1959). When it reappeared posthumously as *Music and the Power of Sound: The Influence of Tuning and Interval on Consciousness* (1995), the English was rewritten by Daniel Rivers-Moore, making the most comprehensible version of a difficult book. A sequel, *Sémantique musicale: Essai de psychophysiology auditive* (Musical Semantics: An Essay in Auditory Psychophysiology; 1967) is more difficult still, but sets out its guiding principles with mature clarity. The first principle is that the simplest numbers are at the basis not only of music but of manifestation in general, and of the perception that is its counterpart:

The existence of the three numerical elements (2, 3, 5) in the practice of all musical systems is easily demonstrated by the experience of all music not conditioned by fixed-tone instruments, so long as measurements are taken from living performance having a semantic and emotional content. Moreover, their systematic use gives psycho-physical results that are immediately observable.⁴³

In a letter of 1979, Alain described how he had arrived at this discovery:

The method I followed was recording the musicians when emotionally involved in the raga, measuring the intervals, obtaining information from the musician on the feeling represented by a particular interval . . . then controlling the scale with them on a tunable keyboard. The result was the very obvious relation of psychophysiological reactions to definite numerical factors.⁴⁴

In *The Ragas of North Indian Music*, the various ragas (in effect, scales

43. Daniélou, *Sémantique musicale*, 56.

44. Deva, *The Music of India*, 65n.

of five to twenty notes to the octave) are notated with the feelings that the musician ascribed to each interval. The terms include sad, interrogative, enterprising, plenitude, awake, adoration, and so on. Even the least critical mind will wonder what musician provided them, under what circumstances, and how far beliefs and expectations affected the experiment. Would the same results have been produced elsewhere than in north India? If they are universal constants resting on mathematical ratios, then the feelings should be universal, but one would need experimental evidence of that. Alain's reply might be that one should discard one's Western prejudices and simply *listen*. To facilitate this he designed an instrument that produces all these intervals, called the Semantic (in French, *Sémantique*).⁴⁵ It is an electronic keyboard with six octaves of thirty-six notes to the octave, and now also exists in a software form.⁴⁶

Such an instrument realized an ambition, already present in Nicola Vicentino's thirty-six-note enharmonic harpsichord of 1555, to achieve pure harmonies in all keys. The tempered system of Western music, which uses only twelve notes, all of them out of tune, was Alain's *bête noire*. He blamed it as one of the chief causes of Westerners' insensitivity to the true nature of things, because it forces our ear and brain to lie: to interpret mistuned harmonies as accurate, or in mathematical terms, wrong numbers as right ones. The process is exhausting (one cannot bear more than a two-hour concert, he says), and worse, it is metaphysically unsound. Listening to music rightly tuned, on the other hand, gives us access to the Hermetic principle of universal correspondence:

Thanks to observing the reactions produced in us by these elementary numerical combinations, we can begin to see the possibility of interpreting sensation, life, and thought by means of

45. See *Sémantique musicale*, 119–31; Daniélou, *Sacred Music*, 202–6.

46. See <http://www.find.org.in/danielou-semantic/> (accessed 28 August 2016).



Alain Daniélou playing the vina, Rome, 1978.
(Photo by Jacques E. Cloarec, courtesy of FIND)

purely arithmetical forms. The association of certain numbers with certain sensations or emotions can give us valuable information on the nature of the cosmos, and also on the nature of life, thought, and sensation. It can explain the similarity of phenomena which are found in all orders of existence.⁴⁷

The existence of numerical bases common to music, to life, and to thought is linked to the very nature of the universe in which we live, and whose possibilities and limits they express. This allows

47. *Sémantique musicale*, 76.

us to explain the continuity that exists between matter, life, and thought, and also to indicate how life may have evolved from matter, and how sensation and thought may have evolved from life. Conversely, we can see how matter and life may be envisaged as issuing from thought. Only on this level can we find a logical and coherent explanation of creation and evolution.⁴⁸

The reception of Alain's ethnomusicological work was mixed. It gained him his first official positions, as professor at the Hindu University of Benares and, in 1949, as Director of the College of Indian Music there. When *Traité de musicologie comparée* appeared, Arnold A. Bake, the grand authority on Indian music, wrote a review that revealed many errors of detail, eventually dismissing the whole enterprise as "chimerical."⁴⁹ More sympathetically, today's standard encyclopedia of Indian music states that "Although there are indeed problems with his mathematical explications and his use of ancient sources, Daniélou's work should be reassessed for its contribution to the interpretation of speculative doctrines."⁵⁰

What is beyond doubt is his contribution in another medium. One of the major projects at the Berlin Institute was to record the indigenous musics of the non-Western world before they were lost forever to the colonizing force of Western music. Alain brought two advantages to this project that previous ethnomusicologists had lacked. He did not share the then prevalent evolutionary view that considered non-Western traditions as primitive survivals: he respected them in their own right as no less complex and evolved than Western music. He also had the know-how to use the latest technology for field recording, and the vision to see the potential

48. *Sémantique musicale*, 77.

49. *Ethnomusicology* 5/3 (1961): 231–37.

50. Robert Simms, in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 5, 53.

of the new long-playing (vinyl) discs.⁵¹ The “UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music of the World” numbered one hundred and forty-two discs,⁵² and many have been reissued, first as compact discs and now in digital form. Although UNESCO did not finance the project, its name lent prestige to it and to the musicians, who “ceased to be neglected, scorned and ignored by their own governments. Radio stations began to play their music, and their financial situation rapidly improved.”⁵³ It awakened a new awareness of world musics, which, besides being valued for their own sake, had a lasting impact on the classical and popular music of the West.

Provocations

I have already mentioned Alain’s provocative views in favor of the caste system and against racial mixing. His exaltation of homosexuality could also be taken as a provocation, especially by Traditionalists who otherwise share many of his sentiments. It does not trouble the socially liberal today, but his defense of pederasty might. With Plato and the Greeks on his side, he celebrates the erotic attachment by which “the elder could lead the younger in the way of wisdom, virtue and courage,”⁵⁴ adding that where pederastic love is the rule, juvenile delinquency does not exist; a contention that would be difficult for sociologists to test.

Prostitution, both female and male, commands Alain’s admiration. “Prostitution is a beneficent and sacred profession, since it allows erotic ecstasy to be practiced by the wanderer, monk, poor man, and even the married man whose relations, having a procreative aim, do not have the same value.”⁵⁵ In his scheme of things, marriage has little to do with lust

51. See Peter Pannke’s memoir in *Ricordo di Alain Daniélou*, 18.

52. *Ricordo di Alain Daniélou*, 15.

53. Daniélou, quoted in *Ricordo di Alain Daniélou*, 22.

54. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 162–63.

55. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 214.

or love: it is a social contract with the serious responsibility of breeding a pure genetic line. Erotic ecstasy is a serious responsibility of another kind, which should not be prohibited, neglected, or denied to self or others. Here again Alain is imagining an unreal, idealized world that has none of the problems that prostitution incurs in our current state.

Like many gay men, Alain attracted women as friends and enjoyed their company. To judge from the character sketches in his autobiography, they were not the types who would appreciate his “official” views on what women should and should not do. In his doctrinal writings he approves of them as erotic partners and, in tantric rites, as vehicles for (male) worship of the Goddess. But if a woman wants to follow the path of knowledge or yoga for herself, she must shun any permanent relationship. He admires the ancient and matriarchal Shivaite society in which women own property, servants, and land,⁵⁶ but “The modern woman who wants to be simultaneously an object of pleasure, a mother, and one who takes part in man’s futile activities is a destructive anomaly in society.”⁵⁷

As for population control, Alain sees each caste as having its own solution. Brahmans limit their own numbers, to maintain themselves as a disciplined, spiritual elite. Kshatriyas can breed freely, because wars and fratricidal struggles keep their numbers down. Since many young men are lost in battle, polygamy solves the surplus of women. Vaishyas take care of themselves, so as not to disperse their assets among too many descendants. That leaves the Shudras or laborers, by far the most numerous caste under any conditions and the real demographic problem. Their most efficient means of birth control used to be exposing female children at birth. This resulted in the maximum number of working men, with the minimum mouths to feed. In some north Indian villages the ratio could be as many as ten males to one

56. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 212.

57. *While the Gods Play*, 173.

on, Mohammed behaved in much the same way. These impostors are the source of religious perversion in the Semitic and Judeo-Christian world.⁶⁴

However, when Alain writes about the Jews, as distinct from Judaism, it is with admiration for their success in preserving their genetic purity, and for being the only people in the West who have not given into the pressure to assimilate.⁶⁵ In India, he adds, they constitute a caste of their own, and consequently have never been persecuted there.⁶⁶

Turning to Christianity, Alain had no desire to aggravate his brother Jean, who in turn was deeply concerned for his brother's soul. But he had no sympathy for the church, whether ancient or modern, or its superstar, John Paul II. The Romans, Alain wrote in the 1980s, are deeply shocked by the Pope's behavior, working the crowd as though he were a candidate for the United States presidency, appearing before busloads of multiracial groups who trash St. Peter's Square, and by his pathological views on sex.⁶⁷ Jesus was another matter: a man after Alain's own heart:

The message of Jesus is opposed to that of Moses and, later on, to that of Mohammed. It seems to have been a message of liberation and of revolt against a Judaism which had become monotheistic, dry, ritualist, puritan, pharisaic [*sic*] and inhuman.⁶⁸

Alain even sees the faint possibility of a Christian restoration, through a return to the Jesus of the Gnostic and apocryphal gospels; a Jesus whose

64. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 228.

65. *Caste, equalitarismo e genocidi culturali*, 47.

66. *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, and Liberation*, 44.

67. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 230–31.

68. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 229.

initiation was probably Orphic or Dionysian, not Essenian, and whose teaching was an adaptation for its time and place of the "great human and spiritual tradition of which Shivaism and Dionysism are the heritage."⁶⁹

In the Muslim world, too, Alain sensed the survival of this heritage among the Persian Sufis, calling them a "secret Dionysian tradition that managed to survive the rigors of militant Islam."⁷⁰ But unlike Christianity, Islam had begun as it continued. He would not have been surprised by the developments that have taken place since his death, for decades ago he wrote with a sarcastic twist:

Wherever Islam has passed, only ruins and deserts can be seen and whole peoples annihilated. Presiding over the disaster is democratic Islam, which treats the few survivors of the civilizations destroyed, who have submitted body and soul to its physical and spiritual conquest, with a considerable sense of equality and justice.⁷¹

The Kali Yuga

Through his studies of the *Puranas* and other Hindu scriptures, Alain adopted the cyclic view of history, namely that humanity rises and falls with a regularity as inevitable as the succession of summer and winter. Each cycle contains four ages, which the Greeks named Gold, Silver, Bronze, and Iron, and the Hindus Sattva Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapara Yuga, and Kali Yuga. Their duration is in the proportion of 4:3:2:1, with the Kali Yuga (in which we now are) being the shortest and worst of the cycle.

The Hindu sources give enormous durations to these ages (432,000 years for the Kali Yuga alone), which Alain, like other Traditionalists, reduces to fit the limits of human imagination and scientific evidence. In

69. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 232.

70. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 247.

71. *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, and Liberation*, 158.

their interpretation the current cycle is the seventh in a series of fourteen. It has lasted about 60,000 years, probably beginning with the appearance of Cro-Magnon man. Neanderthal Man, whose extinction is unexplained by science, belonged to the previous human cycle. There will be a new humanity after the present one has totally disappeared. According to Alain's calculations, that will have happened by the year 2442.⁷²

All the ills of humanity, including wars, poverty, environmental devastation, and false religions, are only to be expected during the Kali Yuga. During this period, only the cult of Shiva is effective, and a collective return to it may forestall the final day, "or at least allow some groups of individuals to escape the cataclysm and participate in the formation of the future humanity and of the new Golden Age, which should appear after the next flood."⁷³ In other words, the death of a humanity, like that of an individual, is inevitable, but the gods can be coaxed into postponing it.

How might such groups escape the cataclysm? Here the alert reader may notice a subterranean stream, banned from serious discourse, that Alain occasionally allowed to surface in his late work. There are allusions to "the end, with the aid of extremely powerful weapons, of a highly technologically advanced civilization"⁷⁴ in the distant past, which recalls the occultists' tales of how Atlantis fell; to "what we consider to be sightings of celestial beings or extraterrestrials [and] the speed with which they disappear,"⁷⁵ which is clearly a reference to UFOs; and to "an extraplanetary world, perhaps the one we attribute these days to the extraterrestrials . . . [where] some men will find refuge at the time of the catastrophe that will destroy the entire

72. For further analysis, see my *Atlantis and the Cycles of Time*, 307–10, and "When Does the Kali Yuga End?"

73. *While the Gods Play*, 222.

74. *While the Gods Play*, 208.

75. *While the Gods Play*, 108.



Alain Daniélou at the piano.
(Photo courtesy of FIND)

species at the end of the Kali Yuga."⁷⁶ Just so, at the end of the last cycle, the Ark of Vaivaswata Manu "may have been a space vessel in which some survivors of the previous human cycle had taken refuge."⁷⁷ When a man of Alain's intellectual stature seems to share common ground with Zechariah Sitchin and Eric von Däniken, does that lower him in our estimation, or raise them?

76. *While the Gods Play*, 218.

77. *While the Gods Play*, 199n.

Alain's friend and disciple Jacques Cloarec wrote that after thirty years of knowing him: "I could never attribute a quality or a fault to him that wasn't immediately contradicted by its opposite."⁷⁸ But this remark concerned the man Alain Daniélou, not the truths of which Shiva Saran sought, all his life, to be the impersonal mouthpiece. This survey is intended to give a taste of both sides, and of one man's solution, both worldly and wise, to navigating the Age of Conflicts.

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78. *Ricordo di Alain Daniélou*, 4.

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female. When the colonizers prohibited infanticide, a population explosion resulted. In consequence, “every year many more Indians die of starvation nowadays than there were baby girls that died from exposure one hundred and fifty years ago. Furthermore, the economic conditions and malnutrition of the others has become a tragic endemic problem.”⁵⁸

Another challenge to Western ethics concerns the slaughter of animals. The principle is that one should only eat those that one has killed oneself, otherwise one is a hypocrite like meat-eating Buddhists who make Muslims do their dirty work, or Westerners who leave it to slaughterhouses. Alain accepts that hunting and killing is part of human nature, and identical with the destructive aspect of deity. Sacrifice properly performed channels this instinct and prevents it from getting out of hand as wars and genocides. “The purpose of the sacrifice is to make the gods bear witness to the terrible cruelty of a world where living creatures cannot survive without killing and devouring one another.”⁵⁹ He himself witnessed mass sacrifices of goats and buffaloes, and observed how after their orgy of blood-letting, the people returned to their “wonderfully gentle selves, always kind towards animals and their fellowmen.”⁶⁰

The gods must only be offered the best of the flock, and as such, the highest sacrifice is of a human being. Like Abraham’s offering of Isaac, the victim must be a young male, innocent and unblemished. Alain says that while uncommon, two or three instances took place while he lived in Benares.⁶¹ At this point, I am glad to say, he withholds his approval, though in the same breath he contrasts human sacrifice favorably with the death penalty, which “deriving from the social laws of the city and the

58. *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, and Liberation*, 98.

59. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 151

60. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 152; *Shiva and Dionysus*, 104.

61. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 169.

protection of material goods, is not a sacrifice, and the gods turn their eyes away from those who practice it.”⁶²

All of these provocative opinions—or, as Alain would have it, impersonal statements of traditional principles—lead to deep and uncomfortable probing of our society’s ethical assumptions.

If Alain was allied in some respects with the Traditionalists, he and they were worlds apart in their estimation of the “great religions” of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The Traditionalists regard them as divine revelations. He accepts neither their message nor their god.

All monotheistic religions—Islam more than any other—are intolerant by nature. Their followers consider themselves a chosen people to whom truth has been personally revealed by “God” through their prophet. This leads to an acute feeling of superiority in the name of which all crimes, genocides, and acts of vengeance are considered heroic deeds in a holy war.⁶³

In the next quotation he echoes a notion that circulated in eighteenth-century France: that the monotheisms were the creation of “Three Impostors”:

Adopted by Judaism, which was not originally monotheistic, the concept of an “only god” in human form is largely responsible for the disastrous rôle of later religions. Moses, probably influenced by the ideas of the Pharaoh Akhnaton, made the Jewish people believe in the existence of a tribal chief, whom he called the “one god” and from whom he claimed to receive instructions. Later

62. *Shiva and Dionysus*, 169.

63. *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 294.