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Trouw

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Embraces Sent From God

By Koert van der Velde

Trouw is a major newspaper with Christian background - article placed in weekend section on religion and philosophy.

Thousands are in line today and tomorrow in the Maaspoort sports -centre in 's-Hertogenbosch for a hug from Amma, a small, round 48-year old lady from South-India. Why? "This is not explainable, Amma is a feeling."

A shining Lies van Schaik, 'almost 90' moves back to her seat. "That love that you feel when she presses you against her chest. That is such a wonderful feeling. She must be sent from God, otherwise she could not keep this up."

It is only 12 o'clock and the sports-centre is rather full. Everywhere people are sitting on the floor. A long line leads them up front to Amma. On the left and right there are people in wheelchairs, mentally handicapped, families with children and old people waiting for their priority turn. Amma will embrace at least 5,000 people this weekend. She can add these to the 20 million she's already embraced all over the world.

Up front, she sits in a cane chair, surrounded by long-bearded swami's and sari-clad assistants. While she embraces, hugs, caresses and kisses she can still answer some questions.

Does Amma spread her on love or the love of the gods? She caresses the head of an older, sobbing man and answers rhetorically: "What is the difference between a drop of water and the ocean?" But if love is all but one, why then are people lining up for just her, and not for each other?

"What I do is the same as what every mother does for her child. When I see somebody, I look as in a mirror. I see everyone as an extension of myself. If somebody comes here with a problem, then I feel that problem. If somebody is in pain, then I also have pain. All the world's problems are my personal problem." But still, she looks far from being broken. "Why would be scared, angry or sad? That does not solve anything."

"Sunday night is the highlight of Amma's visit to the Netherlands. She will be dressed like the 'Divine Mother' and embrace the people like that. Is that even more holy? Amma smiles, in the mean time enclosing a whole family in her sari.

"For the people it is more sacred, but to me it does not make a difference. The crown I wear cost six dollars, the sari was a present. That is all show. Christians do something special on Sunday as well no?"

Jandirk Veenstra has been following Amma for seven years. "If you add up all embraces maybe

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there is only twenty minutes that I have been real close to her. Once when I was embraced I wanted to give something back, but then I only felt how powerful she is and how arrogant I was being. Next time I just sat there waiting for my turn with all my pain. Then her embrace had an incredible depth. Now I know that the more you are like a child, the more you will experience."

Veenstra's Christian upbringing helps him understand what his Guru does. "Amma represents the Christian values. She gives, but expects nothing back. Her programs are free. From the proceeds of the things that are sold here she builds hospitals in India and schools and food distribution for the poor. She is nothing but love."

There are sixty white clad followers travelling with her, the women where saris. Most are westerners. They cook Indian foods and sell kitsch, books and CD's to keep Amma and company financially going.

Veenstra attributes strong powers to Amma. "She quotes the Veda's, the Bhagavad Gita and the Bible. But has only 4 years of school. Where does it come from? It must come from above."

Amma is born in a small fishing village, and comes from the lowest casts. Like any respected saint, stories of miracle go around. The Gods announced her birth in dreams. And of course the story of a poor, black girl from South India that grows into an internationally acclaimed saint is a miracle story in itself.

"Amma writes mantras that are so powerful that even the nonbelievers want to have them," whispers an orange clad Indian swami, who is translating her words. "Do you want a Christian one?" Swami talks with Amma. Amma does not see herself as in competition with Christianity, far from that, all religions are the same for her. "You should never change your religion" she states. "I will teach you to be a good Christian. Shall I give you a powerful Christian-mantra? Or do you want one with Mary?"

Amma dictates to the Swami: Om Kliem Christuse Namaha. The meaning of this mantra does not matter. The words have always existed. You have to recite them 108 times each day," explains swami. "It is like washing powder in the washing machine. If you say this mantra often enough it will do its work automatically, and it will purify your mind whiter than white."

Amma asks the Swami to caution me: a mantra is personal and works like a key. Every person can only use the mantra that suits him.

Renée Frankhuizen also received a mantra from Amma last year, she says. "I manage to get to fifty, then I always loose count, but it is about the intention anyway." The moment of the embrace is not that important she says. "It is the living up to it. Also the long waiting in line, the music, the Indian smell, the many that are meditating, it is all adding to the experience. This is one of the few moments of reflection in my hectic life. Besides this, I light a candle in a chapel or at a Buddha-image. That is what I do about religion. To me it is a feeling. Amma is a feeling".



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