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Book Review

Ralph Tanner, *The Researching of Religion and Spirituality*, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2010, ISBN: 978-81-89958-33-6, Pages 334.

The title, *The Researching of Religion and Spirituality*, speaks about different approaches to research in religion and spirituality. Religion is any specific system of belief about deity, often involving rituals, a code of ethics and a philosophy of life. On the other hand spirituality is one's character or quality that makes one transcend the barriers of worldliness, caste, creed and sensuality and realize one's connection with the Truth. Tanner explains the significance of social sciences in the study of religious behaviour and spirituality. Any research on spirituality and religion is the prerogative of the highly educated human psyche. Public religion and private spirituality contribute to the wellbeing of individuals, groups and societies. Religious minded and dedicated people try to make their religious ideas more distinct and we have to accept that virtually all human activities have transcendental elements in them. Therefore, it is necessary to see and assess religious and spiritual behaviour which is the mixture of secular and sacred realities.

In his book Tanner tries to explain four ways in which we can seek to understand both the realities of religious behaviour and their importance for those involved in it. First, there are things observable, that is what is recorded. Observers and the observed come and go in public religious matters. Secondly, self reports by individuals of what they believe and do. Thirdly, the information we gathered about religious thinking and behavior. Lastly, the data which has been gathered under experimental conditions which are said to be scientific and observable. According to Tanner, a study of public religion and even more with private spirituality is more difficult than researching the factual realities of illness or economic planning. Religion and spirituality are shadow realities which we can only know from their personal experience.

In the process of research in religion and spirituality, the researchers have to face the following difficulties: the researchers are unable to collect exact information from the people of different cultures and religions; the social situations with which researchers are confronted may adversely affect the qualitative rather than quantitative data from the public, and so on. The greater the social distance between the researcher's natural understandings and that of the researched community, the greater the likelihood of these total barriers existing. Most of them, if not all, nonnational researchers want to be accepted by the communities in which they are working as fellow human beings rather than as foreigners. Most of them do not stay

long enough in their area of field work to become emotionally involved, but always there in the backs of their minds to become accepted persons rather than as researchers. Certainly what is researched is often the result of accidents rather than being based on what might need to be systematically and scientifically researched for the betterment of the society.

Any kind of research methods on religion and spirituality, however defined and clarified, has weak boundaries over which people and ideas come and go and which cannot be controlled by even the most talented researcher. As we read this book critically we realize that Tanner has tried his best to bring out the socio-cultural basis of any religion and the spiritual life experiences of the people from different life situations. He clearly explains that any attempt to take religion and spirituality out of the social and psychological context in which it occurs obscures the reality of its existence. We must never ignore the influence of economic, political and social factors in individuals' and communities' religious practices and spirituality. The value of research into public religion and private spiritual ideas and practices have several aspects: such researches provide theologians and those directly involved in the services of religious institutions what may be taking place in the minds of the people for whom and with whom they work. It also shows distinctions between orthodoxy and the unorthodoxies of popular religion and private spirituality to which much attention should be paid. From sociological research analysis it is clear that Western religious thinkers have paid little attention to the private spiritualities of the individuals. On the other hand Eastern thinking has never so formally divided them as individual and general spiritualities. Eastern thinking has always avoided definitions, perhaps realizing that to do so is to miss its metaphysical, elusive, enveloping comprehensiveness.

This book is indeed an asset to the study of religion and spirituality. The language and style of expression used in the book is simple and definitely serves its purpose of understanding religion and spirituality in a socio cultural context. I hope that this work will have greater readership and influence among the scholars as well as the students of religion and spirituality.

Dr Mathew Anatharackel CMI,
Director, Vinayasadhana, DVK Bangalore,
India.