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SECULAR SPIRITUALITY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

1. Introduction

The term 'secular spirituality' might sound a bit odd and contradictory at first sight. But we have used it here with some deliberation, knowing full well that there are some problems with this terminology. We have considered alternatives like 'this-worldly spirituality' and 'reality-contacted spirituality' etc, which also could have served our purpose. But we have stuck to the term 'secular spirituality' for some reasons of our own which will become clear, we hope, in the course of this exposition.

The term 'religious fundamentalism' is taken to be well understood by most people in India without the need for elaborate explanations. Basically, there is, in a religious fundamentalist, an attitude of rigid and intolerant orthodoxy, an attitude of historical traditionalism, an attitude of revivalist fervour that opposes 'reform', an attitude of inflexible certitudes, an attitude of crusading opposition to all views and heritages other than that of the fundamentalist. In this context, it may be said in passing, that there are 'secular fundamentalists' as well as 'religious fundamentalists', both revealing very similar characteristic and motivational patterns. The basis of the fundamentalism of the 'secular fundamentalist', is a secular ideology which he clings to with rigidity and fanaticism. The 'religious fundamentalist', on the other hand, roots himself in some kind of a 'religious ideology.'

2. The Problem of Religious Fundamentalism Today

The last two decades have witnessed a steady growth in fundamentalist attitudes to life all over the world. In the Christian world, there has been the revival of the creation theory, the resurgence of the charismatic and pentecostalist movements, the conservative backlash in the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches, all indicating a movement towards conservatism and fundamentalism. In Hinduism and in Islam too, the last two decades have witnessed a visible and palpable fundamentalist trend.

In India, most minority religious groups like Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists have been displaying some sort of fundamentalist postures.

What is most problematic in the fundamentalist posture to life is that it is full of subjective certitudes which cannot be rationally validated, and an intolerance of a pluralistic culture and value system. In a multi-cultural and multi-religious country like India, this sort of fundamentalism creates enormous social and political tensions. The foundation of every multicultural and free democracy is a spirit of liberalism and tolerance. And this is precisely the spirit which is totally absent in the fundamentalist mind-set. His/Hers is a mind-set of intolerance and negativism towards all other belief systems.

3. Signs of Fundamentalism in India

Constitutionally, India is a self-proclaimed secular democracy. But the forty odd years of independent India's history tells us the sad story of a slow erosion of secular ideals, starting even from the times of the greatest of all Indian secularist, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru was reluctant to apply the Hindu Code Bill to Muslims, lest it displease the conservatives among the Muslims. Nehru also used the Muslim League as a weapon to dislodge the duly elected Communist government in Kerala. The Congress Party also encouraged the Kerala Church, a rather conservative and middle class social structure, to carry on 'Liberation War' against the democratically elected government of the Leftists. Thus the seeds of antiseccularism were sown in India in the very infancy of our democracy. The Indian version of 'secularism' came to be the rather odd notion of supposedly uniform patronage of all religions by the state, rather than the more sensible Western notion where 'secularism' meant clearly earmarking different roles to the State and the Church. This distorted notion of secularism has led the state to protect cows, or welcome the Pope under state auspices, or initiate Kar Seva, or keep women behind the pardah or pass the controversial Muslim Women Bill etc. As a result of this kind of unsecular secularism, communalism reared its ugly head early enough in the minority as well as in the majority communities. Perhaps the most natural second stage of communalism is 'religious fundamentalism' in every religion in India today. Almost every religious group in India is resorting to fundamentalist theology and revivalist propaganda. Communal riots and atrocities against the Dalits and the Tribals are on the increase. Communal mobilization of political parties is on the rise.

4. Foundations of Fundamentalism

The social foundation of fundamentalism seems to be a dualistic social system with a significant rich/poor divide, where it is in the vested interest of the richer class to nurture values of conservatism among the masses through the manipulation of fundamentalist sentiments on religious issues. This process diverts the attention of the masses from the real economic, social and political issues of daily life. Thus religious fundamentalism becomes a convenient tool in the hands of the social conservatives and the economically predominant upper class.

The psychological foundation of all forms of fundamentalism is 'inner insecurity.' When people lack self-awareness and self-acceptance, they are likely to be psychologically 'insecure'. The only humanizing way to remove this sort of insecurity is to struggle continuously and hard to develop deep self-awareness and complete self-acceptance. But this is a hard and arduous route to inner psychological security. Instead of taking this route, some people take an escape route which leads them to some sort of pseudo-security, which actually is very dehumanizing. This is the route that fundamentalists usually take. Not for them the hard job of self-awareness and scientific social awareness. Instead of this, they go in for quick and easy religious or social 'certainties' which give them some sense of 'security'. These rigid and unquestioned certainties give them some sort of psychological equilibrium which they are unable or unwilling to produce by the development of self-awareness and self-acceptance. But these are 'certainties' which are brittle and easily threatened by the world of realities. Hence the protective reaction of rejection of all data other than what supports their assumptions and prejudices.

This approach develops in the fundamentalists very narrow but firm loyalties. They identify themselves with their own narrowest social groupings and reject or become negative or prejudiced against all outside groups. A 'fanatic' mind-set develops which is intolerant of other beliefs and social groupings.

5. Religious Fundamentalism and 'Spirituality'

Religious fundamentalism is always associated with a strong belief-system expressed in emotionally powerful ritual practices and devotional pieties. And this combination is often considered 'spirituality' in the

popular sense. There is no doubt that this combination of a rigid belief-system with appealing ritual practices and devotional pieties can be a highly inspiring and motivating force in man. And it is this kind of spirituality which is most prevalent among 'religious fundamentalists.' Their belief-system has a certain quality of exclusiveness by which they reject all other forms of belief-systems and even feel antagonistic to them.

6. Religion and Spirituality

In popular thinking, spirituality is usually associated with religion. People who are 'religious', people who are devoted to the exposition and dissemination of religious doctrines and devotions, people who practise devotional pieties and participate in religious rituals, people who 'pray' and 'meditate' often, are often considered 'spiritual' people. In short, spirituality is often identified with devotional pieties and practices of religion by most people.

It may shock some people to hear that authentic spirituality has very little to do with 'religion' and 'religious practices.' But that seems to be the truth!

7. Devotional Pieties and Spirituality

Since it is quite common to mix up 'devotional pieties' with 'spirituality,' it may be worth understanding the difference between these two. A person full of 'devotional pieties' need not be a 'spiritual' person in any meaningful sense. It is quite possible that a man of great 'pieties' is a very 'unspiritual' person, who has not at all developed the capacity for 'depth-encounter' with the 'mystery' dimension of reality. My point is that, not only is 'devotional pieties' quite distinct from authentic 'spirituality,' but that, most often, the development of 'devotional pieties' prevents a person from moving into the search for a 'depth-encounter' with the mystery of reality. 'Devotions' can easily go with extremely shallow and magical levels of consciousness about Reality.

As far as I can analyse from personal experience, there are three constituent parts to any devotional piety. First of all, there is a framework of 'concepts,' drawn mainly from the religious heritage of the devotee. Secondly, there is a world of 'fantasies' and 'images' brought out from the world of 'concepts.' And thirdly, there is the evocation of emotions and sentiments. It is a combination of these three - concept, fantasies and emotions - that gives rise to the possibility of devotional pieties.

Take an example. Say, I have a 'devotion' to Jesus crucified. This devotional experience is a combination of my concepts (within my Roman Catholic heritage) about Jesus, about crucifixion and its significance (within my Roman Catholic heritage again), about Jesus as an intercessor with God the Father, etc. From these concepts, I bring out images and fantasies that give graphic concreteness to the above concepts. And finally, I combine my concepts and my fantasies with my emotions of 'devotion,' 'piety,' 'faith,' 'trust,' 'love,' 'sense of surrender,' 'hope,' etc. Out of these combinations is often born the 'prayer experience' of petition and pleading for this grace or that. This, it seems to me, is the basic reality of a 'devotional piety.' It significantly does not require an effort to 'perceive' any reality in depth. A very superfluous and very magical consciousness level can be the ambience of all my devotional pieties.

In contradistinction to 'devotional pieties', in a true 'spiritual experience' or 'depth experience' of the 'mystery' of Reality, there is only a sense of wonder, a sense of surprise, a sense of ineffableness, none of which can be captured in 'concepts,' 'fantasies' and 'emotions' as such. Reality is experienced at a depth level, at the level of the 'mystery' that Reality is, and is left uninterpreted, and as uninterpretable. This is a sort of 'transcendence experience' at which level of depth experience we experience the unity and oneness and equality of all Reality. It is this which I call the experience of the Mystery of God in Reality. In my terminology, *God is Reality*, reality manifest in all its myriad forms. This is the foundation of a possible Secular Spirituality. 'Secular' because it is This Worldly and Reality-Contacted. 'Spirituality' because it is a 'depth-experience' of the mystery dimension of reality.

8. Secular Spirituality

'Spirituality', human spirituality, is the product of man's/woman's 'depth encounter' with the 'depth dimension' (or mystery dimension) of Reality. As far as I can see, spirituality in man / woman has two basic components: (1) The development of 'depth' in the perception of reality. (2) The development of the capacity for 'creative interaction' with reality.

It is by the development of the capacity for 'depth encounter with reality' that we get to the 'mystery' dimension of reality. It is this mystery dimension of Reality which we call God. The authentic sense of the

divine is the sense of the 'mystery' of Reality. Hence, all spirituality in man / woman begins with the development of the sense of 'mystery' in all Reality. In other words, 'spiritual experience' is simply the depth experience of a reality to such a degree that the sense of the 'mystery' of that reality is available to the perceiver. This requires a certain contemplative depth in one's perceptual levels. Shallow perceptions of reality do not yield the sense of the 'mystery' of reality. Not even the scientific perceptions of reality are quite adequate to provide the sense of the 'mystery' of reality. What is needed is a perceptual level that goes from the shallow levels to the progressively deeper levels of scientific perceptions of reality (giving us what we call 'critical consciousness of reality') and going further to the 'spiritual level' of perception of Reality as having a 'mystery dimension' to it. When one perceives Reality as a Mystery, what one gets is a sense of 'wonder,' a sense of 'surprise,' a sense of 'ineffableness,' a sense of the 'transcendence' of Reality. At this level, all Reality becomes a Mystery which cannot be fully grasped or interpreted by man / woman. One is just left with the sense of wonder, the sense of surprise, the sense of ineffableness, the 'depth encounter' with reality is what ought to be called the real 'spiritual encounter' with reality. Human spirituality is a mode of human contact or encounter with Reality by what man / woman gets 'humanized'; that is, becomes more and more of a human being; that is, becomes more and more the master / mistress of the Reality within and around him / her. By this definition, of course, 'human spirituality' cannot and should not be associated with any practice or belief-system which will 'dehumanize' (or enslave) man / woman.

Any human spirituality worth its name should have not only a 'perceptual' dimension, but also an 'ethical' dimension. Perceptually, a 'secular spirituality' calls for a depth experience of the mystery of reality. Ethically, the demand of a 'secular spirituality' would be 'to interact with Reality in a creative way as is possible.' So the two dimensions of a 'secular spirituality' would be (1) depth in perception, and (2) creativity in interaction with Reality.

In summary, in the framework of a 'secular spirituality,' Reality is the real divine challenge before man / woman. Meeting reality in greater and greater depth, and interacting with reality in greater and greater creativity is the real challenge of a 'secular spirituality' for man / woman.

9. Characteristics of a 'Secular Spirituality'

'Secularity' : A secular spirituality is a 'this worldly' spirituality and makes no claims and no references to another world or to life after life. It does not deny life after death. But it does not affirm it either. Life after death is not part of the depth experience of any living person. So, no statement is made about what happens after life here on earth. 'We do not know,' would be the answer of a secular spirituality. Since 'ignorance' is the only experience we have, of what will happen after death, this experience of ignorance about the future would have to be truthfully affirmed.

'Reality contact' : Deep reality contact is the very foundation of a secular spirituality. A person with a secular spirituality would meet Reality at its depth level or mystery level. Whether one would want to call this 'mystery experience' by the term 'experience of God' could be left to the freedom of the individual. In the framework of a secular spirituality, God is Reality in all its dimensions. To be in touch with God is to be in touch with the mystery dimension of all Reality.

'Depth in Experience' : A secular spirituality is an invitation to move from shallowness to depth in one's experience and awareness. From shallow and naive levels of awareness and consciousness, we are invited to go deeper into more 'critical consciousness or 'scientific consciousness' and then to go even beyond to the 'spiritual consciousness' of the mystery dimension of reality.

'Creative interaction with Reality' : The ethical challenge of a secular spirituality is the challenge, not only to meet Reality in depth, but also to *Interact with Reality with as Much Creativity as is Possible.*

'Self-Awareness and Social Awareness' : Since depth perception of reality is of the essence of a secular spirituality, and since the 'self' as well as 'the outside world' have to be perceived in depth, the visible signs of a secular spirituality would be a deepened self-awareness and a keener social awareness. Deepening of one's awareness levels will indicate a movement towards a secular spirituality in a person. So also the development of an increasing creativity in interaction with all kinds of Realities will also indicate a movement towards a deeper and deeper secular spirituality.

'A Scientific Temper' : A meaningful secular spirituality is possible only for people with a scientific approach and temper in meeting Reality. People with magical or superstitious consciousness cannot develop a secular spirituality. The scientific habits of objective perceptions, collection of objective data, processing of data in appropriate ways, scientific analysis of reality etc. form the basic mind-set that is needed in a person who wants to develop a secular spirituality.

But it is important to note that this scientific temper or attitude to reality should be open to the idea of transcendence in reality, so that one can accept the 'mystery dimension' of reality. There is a crude and totally materialistic scienticism which is not compatible with the development of secular spirituality.

'A Spirit of Search' : A spirit of continuous search into the deeper and deeper dimensions of Reality is also a part of the mind-set of a person with a secular spirituality. A constant sense of wonder and mystery about even the most ordinary Reality is needed for the deepening of a secular spirituality. For a person with a secular spirituality, the quest for the understanding of the mystery of life and Reality is never over.

'No Facile Certainties in Life' : The rigid and facile certainties which are the hallmark of the religious and secular fundamentalists, are simply not there in the perceptual and judgemental world of the person with a secular spirituality. Secular spirituality makes one conscious of the complexity and mystery of Reality, makes one aware of the limitations of the tools with which human beings can comprehend the mystery of Reality and stands before all Reality with a certain sense of wonder and respect. Certainties are not asked for, nor needed. Tentativeness before all reality is quite welcome to him/her. A sense of never-ending 'mystery' of reality is always there. All facile certainties and rigid dogmatism is alien to a person with a deep enough secular spirituality. For, he/she respects Reality as God Himself, manifest before him in the form and shape of the reality which he is confronting.

'A Sense of Equality' : A secular spirituality induces in one a deep sense of equality of all reality. All Reality is perceived as part of the same mystery, and therefore, at the deepest and most profound level 'equal'. Equality of human beings becomes a deep spiritual experience, which is much more than a mere sociological concept. One feels the challenge to

incorporate this mystery of equality in the organization and structuring of socio-political and economic life. In other words, the challenge to egalitarian and democratic modes of living becomes an inner and ethical imperative to the demands of a secular spirituality.

'Universality' : Secular spirituality, as it is enunciated here, is a universal spirituality, which can be practised by members of any religious heritage or even by those who do not profess any religious belief. It can become a spirituality common to all men of all heritages. The insights and the processes of this sort of secular spirituality are based simply on a human being's capacity for depth encounter (rather than shallow encounter) with Reality in its mystery depth. It is not based primarily on any scriptures or traditions or special 'revelations', except the 'revelation' of God in the Mystery of Reality.

'Responsibility' : Another characteristic of a secular spirituality is that it places the entire responsibility of creative and meaningful living squarely on the shoulders of humanity. It is the fundamental duty of man/woman to try to perceive reality as deeply as one can and to interact with all reality with as much creativity as one can. It is a spirituality totally free from all forms of magical consciousness. God is just the mystery dimension of Reality! Reality is God's presence before and in man/woman. Meeting Reality is God's imperative to man/woman, meeting Reality and creatively changing reality into better and better realities, thereby becoming co-creators and co-redeemers of Reality with an in God. There is a tremendous sense of the immanence of God in Reality in this form of spirituality. Not that it denies God's transcendence. God (as Reality) is perceived and experienced as an *'Immanence - Transcendence Mystery'*. God is 'incarnate' in all Reality, including the human Reality. We are the responsible Gods on this planet! Let no man/woman forget that!

'Freedom from Fear' : At the back of a lot of dogmatic certainties of many organized religions is some sort of insecurity, or sense of fear of the 'unknown'. One way of coping with these existential fears or primeval anxieties, is to take recourse to some form of magical or dogmatic interpretations of reality which cannot be validated by 'reality-experience' one way or the other. 'Certainties' are produced, blind faith is generated and tenaciously held, intolerance of deviant opinions is created, all for the sake of covering up or coping with dimensions of Reality. Religious and

secular fundamentalism flourishes and feeds on this natural human fear of the unknown. In secular spirituality one acquires the courage to accept the unknown aspects of Reality as unknown. One simply accepts the fact that there are many aspects of reality which are not yet open and transparent to man/woman, which only affirms the 'mystery nature' of the unknown as unknown, with no fear, and to continue the eternal search for the deeper and deeper dimensions of all Reality. Fearless freedom of thought and continuing search for depth in one's encounter with Reality, and the calm and happy acceptance of the 'mystery' dimension of Reality are characteristic of a secular spirituality. Dogmatism, on the other hand, is totally alien to this spirituality.

10. Secular Spirituality, an Antidote to Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is a clear sign of an absence of a secular spirituality in a person. That fundamentalism is usually born out of a narrow and exclusive sense of identity of all of us with all reality, is forgotten by the fundamentalist, because he has no depth experience of the "mystery" of Reality, at which level all reality is experienced as one and equal.

Historically no organized religion really tries to bring all of mankind together into one humanity. Everyone might preach in public about the unity of mankind and the brotherhood/sisterhood of the human race. But when the chips are down, all organized religions try to keep up an exclusive identity for their own believers. This is not the case with a person with a deep sense of secular spirituality. In his depth experience, he perceives the mystery of God in all Realities. This is a unifying and equalising experience. For him, the equality of man/woman, and the oneness of the mystery of Reality is a prime datum of the depth experience.

The ethical demand of a secular spirituality consists not only in trying to perceive Reality in its depth, but also to interact with all Reality 'creatively'. In fundamentalism there is always an approach of intolerance and negativism towards all reality that is perceived as not belonging to one's own heritage and culture. But a secular spirituality enables one to own up all Reality as belonging ultimately to the same mystery, the 'mystery of Reality' or 'mystery of God' as one prefers to call it.

Where the mystery of equality is powerfully perceived, as in a secular spirituality, there is no question of being intolerant of any reality or negative towards any Reality. Creative interaction with all forms of

Reality becomes an ethical imperative to this form of spirituality. This being a spirituality which can be shared by all men and women of all traditions, beliefs and heritages, it is a spirituality that can unite us all as sharers in the same mystery of Reality.

This is not a spirituality which denies to anyone the freedom to own up one's own cultural or religious heritage. But this spirituality does demand that we become deep (and contemplative!) enough in our perceptions of Reality and creative enough (positive enough) in our interaction with Reality, that we become capable of transcending the negative influences of narrow identity feelings and loyalties. Dogmatism too is alien to the ethos of a secular spirituality because here, Reality, in its deepest depth, is perceived as 'mystery.' A 'mystery', by definition, cannot be 'interpreted' in conceptual terms, or captured in any 'dogma'. A 'mystery experience' is simply a sense of wonder, a sense of surprise, a sense of ineffableness, a sense of transcendence. This is what renders the possibility of a secular spirituality being thoroughly nondogmatic.

When I look into the future, I do not see any probability of mankind becoming one and united by the inspiration or challenges of any one religion or its spirituality. Rather, I see the conventional religious 'spirituality' or devotional pieties and rituals as becoming divisive forces and more likely to lead us to fundamentalist intolerance of one another than towards a universal brotherhood/sisterhood which has always been the dream of all men/women of goodwill. A secular spirituality, on the other hand, can offer innumerable and daily challenges and invitations to experience the 'mystery of God' in the mysteries of All Reality. It can also challenge us to learn to deal with all reality more and more 'creatively', thereby 'humanising' the world and 'naturalising' man/woman-kind!