

GRADUATE TO SPIRITUALITY FROM RELIGION AND SECULARISM

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1. Introduction

The terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Centre and the resulting reckless destruction of life has brought to public consciousness the relationship between religion and violence more than ever before. Numerous books and articles investigating, reasoning and evaluating their congruence and association were published.¹ That fateful event reinforced the presumption of the secular world that religion is equal to irrationality, divisiveness, and violence. Religious people responded to this accusation arguing that the real motivation behind the so-called religious violence is in fact economic and political, than religious. They insisted that the people who do violence are neither religious nor do they know the fundamentals of the religions they profess. These arguments, however, lacked lustre since it was evident that people who engaged in violence were fanatical adherents and promoters of their religions. It is not easy to distinguish religious motives from economic and political motives. All the same, religions cannot and should not be excused of their responsibility on the basis of the ignorance attributed to their followers.

However, the observation that “religions cause violence” demands a critical evaluation. A systematic reflection will reveal the subjectivity and indefensibility involved in this assumption. The most destructive acts of violence in the last century – World War I, Nazism, Fascism, communism, and the use of atomic weapons were not done in the name of religion. Indeed, they were all manifestations of explicitly secular ideologies that claimed to be scientific, or they were manifestations of nationalism. Dividing ideologies and institutions into two opposing categories - “secular” and “religious” is itself arbitrary and incoherent. That attitude

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¹Charles K. Bellinger has compiled an extensive bibliography on “Religion and Violence,” <http://nd.edu/~cpn/religionandviolenceabibliography.htm>

can make one condone violence perpetrated by certain sectors by ignoring or playing it down while condemning those of the opponents. The myth of “religious violence” is often used as eyewash to trivialize and justify the “violence” carried out by the “secular” powers. By presenting religions as irrational, divisive, and prone to violence, the secular powers present themselves as rational, peacemaking, and indispensable. People are often made to believe that the secular powers are working day-in and day-out to make peace between warring religions. This article is an attempt to expose the limits and limitations of religious as well as secular powers and the inevitability of graduating from religion and secularism to the realm of spirituality and gradually treading the path of mysticism to enhance peace and harmony in the world.

2. Religion and Violence: Incoherence of the Argument

It is an often heard argument that in the name of religion more wars have been waged, more people were killed, and more evil perpetrated than by any other institutional force in human history. Many believe that it is a proven and universally accepted fact that religions in comparison to other institutional forces like tribes, principalities, kingdoms, empires, etc., are more prone to violence. However, history bears witness to the fact that religions were never separate entities independent of those political institutions. Division of state and religion is comparatively a modern-day phenomenon and primarily of Western origin.² Though at present we do have a separate concept of “religion,” it is neither coherent nor consistent. Jonathan Z. Smith insists that, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study... Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.”³ Though religion is a central feature of human life it acquires different meaning to different people. To our surprise, anything and everything, including the game of Cricket or Football and a host of other institutions and practices, could be classified under the title religion. If one tries to limit the definition of religion to belief in God or gods, then certain belief systems that are usually called “religions” are eliminated, such as Buddhism and Confucianism. If the definition is expanded to include such

²William T. Cavanaugh, “Does Religion Cause Violence: Behind the common question lies a morass of unclear thinking.” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Vol. 35, No. 2 & 3 (Spring/Summer 2007).

³Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982, xi.

belief systems, then all sorts of practices, including many that are usually labelled “secular,” fall under the definition of religion. Many institutions and ideologies that do not explicitly refer to God or gods function in the same way as those that do.

Equating religions to violence, division and irrationality while secularism to rationality, modernity and progress is problematic. Those who blame religions for being absolutist, divisive, and irrational often forget the fact that the so-called “secular” ideologies and institutions too have turned out to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational. The “secularists” have a tendency to ignore their own shortcomings and blame “religious” ideologies and institutions. However a close observation will reveal that the concerns, the methods, the beliefs, the rituals and practices, and the demands of their followers are more or less the same in both cases. Eminent sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer, in his seminal work *Terror in the Mind of God*, points his finger at religion saying that it aggravates the tendency to divide people into friends and enemies, good and evil, us and them, by ratcheting divisions up to a cosmic level. He laments, “What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless” is that it puts worldly conflicts in a “larger than life” context of “cosmic war.”⁴ According to him, “secular” or political conflicts are “more rational” and are of a fundamentally different character than those in which the stakes have been raised by religious absolutism to cosmic proportions.⁵ However, it is our daily experience that several secular ideologies including Marxism, conservatism, and liberalism have a quasi-religious orientation and form, while religions often exhibit real social concern and actively participate in social reformation. Thus the dividing line between a secular and a religious language is difficult to draw and often involves much contradictions and inconsistencies.

For instance, the self-professed “secular” powers like the U.S.A – in coalition with other “secular” nations – is attempting, through the massive use of violence, to liberate Islamic countries from religious violence. This inherently contradictory effort is destined to fail. Unfortunately its every failure is attributed to the pernicious influence of religion and its tendency toward violence. In the same way the violence perpetrated by certain Hindu fanatics assisted by the silent and covert support of the Hindu

⁴Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 146.

⁵Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 153, 154, 217.

Nationalist Party (BJP) in certain parts of India, invites us to look beyond “isms” and institutions to reach the full human potential of transcending all limits and limitations.

3. India: A Land of Contradictions and Extremes!

‘Incredible India’ is the slogan of the Tourism Department of India. India, of course, is a land of surprises and contradictions. While the Hollywood movie, “Slum Dog Millionaire” turns its camera towards the ugly face of India, the Bollywood movies depict the fantastic and multicoloured version of India’s illusory ‘self-image’. While happenings such as the Babri Masjid destruction, the Godhra riots, Jammu-Kashmir land issue, and the anti-Christian violence in Orissa are haunting examples of the distressing side of the Indian religiosity, the continued existence and thriving of other religions in an 80% Hindu majority nation is often projected as an indication of the Indian secularism. The high Vedic ideal “*Ekam sat vipra behuda vadanti*” (Rig Veda 1.164.46 - The reality is one; learned people speak of it differently) is one of the basic concepts of Hindu religiosity and spirituality.

The people of India severely punished the BJP Government for their misleading claim, “India shines!” - the catchword of their election propaganda, by stripping them off power. Due to India’s complexity it is difficult to understand the undercurrents and the interplay of its secularism, religiosity and its spirituality. Hinduism is the only religion that manages to accommodate and entertain 330 million gods. In spite of this mindboggling number, they manage to live together as a single pantheon! A casual visit to a Hindu temple will disclose the amazing fact that there exist many small temples within the enclosure of the larger one. Within each of those little temples, many gods and goddesses along with their priests would be waiting patiently for devotees to arrive. The devotees would never let them down; they will visit each and every one of them and give them their due. India is exploding – population wise, with her 1.2 billion people. In spite of the overcrowding of human beings and gods, by and large, they try to adjust and accommodate each other. However along with this religious tolerance and open-mindedness, recently separatism and communalism also make their presence felt in India.

4. Credits and Credentials of India

For a few years now an e-mail message to boost the ‘self-esteem’ of Indians has been on circulation.⁶ It enumerates numerous facts about India. It proclaims the fact that India never invaded any country in her last 10,000 years of history. India invented the entire ‘Arabic Number System’ (The Europeans learned it from the Arabs and the Arabs learned it from India) including ‘zero’ which was invented by Aryabhata. Algebra, trigonometry and calculus came from India. Quadratic equations were formulated by Sridharacharya in the 11th century. The largest numbers the Greeks and the Romans used were 10⁶ whereas Indians used numbers as big as 10⁵³ (10 to the power of 53), that too with specific names as early as 5000 BCE during the Vedic period. Even today, the largest used number is Tera 10¹² in English (10 to the power of 12). The place value system, the decimal system was developed in India in 100 BC. The World’s first university was established in Takshasila in 700 BCE. More than 10,500 students from all over the world studied more than 60 subjects there. The University of Nalanda – built in the 4th century BCE – made great achievements in education. Sanskrit is the mother of all the European languages and is reported as the most suitable language for computer software. Ayurveda is the earliest school of medicine known to humans. Charaka, the father of medicine consolidated Ayurveda 2500 years ago. Sushruta is the father of surgery. 2600 years ago he and health scientists of his time reportedly conducted complicated surgeries like cesareans, cataract, artificial limbs, fractures, urinary stones and even plastic surgery and brain surgery. Usage of anesthesia was well known in ancient India. Deep knowledge of anatomy, physiology, etiology, embryology, digestion, metabolism, genetics and immunity are also found in many texts. India was the richest country on earth until the time of British invasion in the early 17th Century. The art of Navigation was born in the river Sindhu 6000 years ago. The earliest reservoir and dam for irrigation was built in Saurashtra. As per the instruction of the Saka King Rudradaman I (150 CE) a beautiful lake called ‘Sudarshana’ was constructed on the hills of Raivataka during Chandragupta Maurya’s time. Chess (*Chaturanga* or *Ashtapada*) was invented in India. When many cultures were only nomadic forest dwellers over 5000 years ago, Indians established

⁶<http://www.nagpurdarpan.com/main/indian.htm>; <http://www.citehr.com/48205-proud-indian.html>

Harappan culture in Sindhu Valley (Indus Valley Civilization). Indians could be proud of many achievements even today: There are 3.22 Million Indians in America - 38% of Doctors and 12% of Scientists in America are Indians, 36% of NASA employees, 34% of MICROSOFT employees, 28% of IBM employees, 17% of INTEL employees and 13% of XEROX employees are Indians. All these facts present the brighter side while communal violence presents the darker side.

5. Communal Hatred in India

It was through a glorious nonviolent struggle that India gained her freedom in 1947. But soon riots initiated by communal rivalry and religious hatred broke out that resulted in the violent death of numerous people.⁷ The mutual fear and suspicion continued among Hindus and Muslims which once again broke out in large scale at Jabalpur in 1961. Ever since, the communal politics got stronger and communal violence was on increase. In Nellie, Meerut, Maliana, Ahmedabad, Bhiwandi, Delhi, Mumbai, Gujarat, and many other places innocent people were murdered in the name of religion. The Babri Masjid destruction and the Godhra riots are all haunting examples of the distrust and hatred between Hindus and Muslims.

6. Anti-Christian Violence

From the 1990s, anti-Christian violence also was on the rise. The horrifying murder of Graham Stuart Staines and his two young sons in 1999 in Orissa attracted international attention due to its gruesomeness.⁸ Orchestrated anti-Christian violence has been reported from the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and recently in Karnataka as well. This was indeed the culmination of a prolonged propaganda against Christians by Hindu extremists. Lack of response on the part of the police force and the ruling government indicates the communalization that is eating into the secularist ideals of the Indian democracy. India claims to be the largest democracy in the world. But what we saw in Orissa was not

⁷Estimates of the number of deaths range around roughly 500,000, with low estimates at 200,000 and high estimates at 1,000,000.

⁸Graham Stuart Staines was an Australian Christian missionary who was burnt to death along with his two sons Philip (aged 9) and Timothy (aged 7) while sleeping in his station wagon at Manoharpur village in Keonjhar district in Orissa, India in January 1999. In 2003, the Hindu activist Dara Singh was convicted of leading the gang.

Democracy, the rule of the people, but “the rule of the mob”, or “demonocracy”. It made a mockery of Indian democracy and secularism.⁹ We needed the French President Nicolas Sarkozy to blow the whistle at that brutality. He cried foul and publically challenged the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for failing to protect the Christians of Orissa.¹⁰ This caused the Central Government to take some action against the Hindu terrorists. However, in Kandhamal, even now things are not back to normalcy – it is the peace of a graveyard that prevails there! This situation demands a closer look into the Indian secularism, and religiosity.

7. Anti-Muslim, Anti-Christian Violence: Why Does This Happen?

Let us begin a search that will be divided into three parts. 1. Emergence of Secularism in India, 2. *Kandhamal*: a ‘National Shame’ and 3. Main problems and their interim as well as the ultimate solutions.

7.1. Emergence of Secularism in India

Religion was never institutionalized and politicized in India. It remained as a powerful motivating factor in life. Religion was a springboard of all the great movements and eras of Indian culture. Then, what is the role and relevance of secularism in India? If by secularism we mean the separation of religion from life and all its activities, then it goes against the Indian ethos since religion has been one of the dominant motivating forces of Indian culture. However, we must be aware of the fact that the governing force of Indian culture was not exactly religion but the spirituality that it enclosed. Whenever a religion failed to exhibit the spirituality it claimed to have, it was ignored while religions exhibiting praiseworthy spiritualities, the Indian people in general were ready to embrace and support wholeheartedly. That is the reason why India is the home ground to many religions and a foster mother to many others.

Spiritual aspiration was the governing force of Indian culture, its core of thought, and its ruling passion. It not only made spirituality the highest aim of life, but it also tried, as far as that could be done in the past conditions of the human race, to turn the whole of life towards spirituality. Since religion was there in the Indian mind, though often an imperfect form of the spiritual impulse, its predominance necessitated the casting of

⁹Anto Akkara, *Kandhamal: A Blot on Indian Secularism*, Delhi: Media House, 2009,14

¹⁰Akkara, *Kandhamal*, 24.

thought and action into a religious mould and a persistent filling of every circumstance of life with a religious sense. This situation demanded and created an all-pervading religio-philosophic culture in India. During and after the freedom struggle, among the Indian leaders, there wasn't any serious debate on secularism and what the character the State of India was to take. It was the late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, who introduced the word "Secularism" into the Indian Constitution in 1976, through the 42nd Amendment of it during the Emergency.¹¹ Since then, the word secularism has become the battle cry of political parties, intellectuals and opinion makers in India.

However, even now there is a great confusion in the minds of average Indians as to what secularism really means. In the meantime, pseudo-nationalists in India are suspicious of and hold an aversion towards everything that comes from the West. Nevertheless, rejection of secularism on the ground that it is a western concept is perverse nationalism. One may, on this ground, reject democracy and even modern medicine! Equality, liberty, education, etc., were once reserved for the high caste and denied to the low caste people in Indian societies – is it wise to reject those values, since they were contrary to our ancient tradition?

7.2. Kandhamal: A "National Shame"¹²

The latest anti-Christian violence, that occurred in the jungle district of Kandhamal, Orissa, was triggered by the gruesome murder of a Hindu leader Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati and four of his disciples by the Maoist rebels, on the night of 23 August 2008. The Hindu fundamentalists took this as an opportunity to carry out their pre-planned agenda of terrorizing Christians and reconverting them to Hinduism. The dead body of the slain leader was taken all around the jungle district of Kandhamal in a zigzag way for two days, instigating people to take vengeance through arson and murder. The silent permission and the veiled support of the police force, politicians and the state administration aggravated the situation. That funeral procession turned out to be the funeral procession of

¹¹Vivek Salathia, "Secularism and Indian Constitution- Is the Secular Character of Indian Democracy Under Threat," [http://www.ialsnet.org/meetings/constit/papers/SalathiaVivek\(India\).pdf](http://www.ialsnet.org/meetings/constit/papers/SalathiaVivek(India).pdf)

¹²Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the Kandhamal violence as a "national shame." <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhubaneswar/European-envoys-meet-Kandhamal-victims/articleshow/5236910.cms;www.thehindu.com/2008/09/29/stories/2008092955551200.htm>

the Secular Indian Constitution.¹³ In two days time, around 50,000 Christians who had lived there for centuries were rendered homeless and were forced to flee to the jungle. Around 5000 Christian homes were looted and burned down. More than 250 churches and Christian institutions were desecrated, looted and reduced to ashes. More than 75 Christians were brutally hacked to death or burned alive. The perpetrators of these heinous crimes are still at large. The State Government’s officials keep on lying that only 34 died and they continue to claim that everything was the result of a sudden outburst of emotions.¹⁴

The statement Sr. Meena, who was brutally raped during the Kandhamal riots, released at the news conference in New Delhi on October 24 is a chilling testimony of the anarchy witnessed in Kandhamal with the guardians of law remaining mute spectators to the ‘rape’ of the Indian Constitution at Nuagam on August 25, 2008: “State police failed to stop the crimes, failed to protect me from the attackers, they were friendly with the attackers, and they tried their best that I did not register an FIR, not make complaints against police, police did not take down my statement as I narrated in detail and they abandoned me half of the way. I was raped ...”¹⁵

There was a calculated effort from the Hindu Jagaran Samukhya to convince the general public that Swami Lakshmanananda’s assassination was a “pre-planned conspiracy executed by the Church.” On October 6 they convened a news conference to announce their findings and exhibit their proofs. To substantiate their claim, the group produced the ‘original’ Minutes Register of Beticola Catholic church, where the entire conspiracy was allegedly hatched and produced proof of it with the original Minutes Register in their possession.¹⁶ The language and criminal intent explicit in the resolution made it easier for anyone to guess on the authenticity of the document.

Vijay Simha, on September 13, 2008, in Tehelka Magazine, gave a graphic description of the ‘reconversion’ ceremony that involved every tactic ranging from threat to appeasement to get Christians ‘reconverted’ to Hinduism.¹⁷ The militant Hindu groups arranged ceremonies to reconvert

¹³ Akkara, *Kandhamal*, 17.

¹⁴ Akkara, *Kandhamal*, 15.

¹⁵ Akkara, *Kandhamal*, 60-62.

¹⁶ Akkara, *Kandhamal*, 65-66.

¹⁷ Akkara, *Kandhamal*, 74-75

Christians into Hinduism during which burning the Bible and forcing them to swear that they have become Hindus were the main events. They were made to chant 'Om' followed by the *Gayatri Mantra*, a sacred chant of the Hindus and slogans proclaiming allegiance to Hindu gods and goddesses. Such 'reconversions' were made mandatory for those who wished to live in Kandhamal, keep their houses and, maybe, get some regular work. At a later stage, these Christians-turned-Hindus would be asked to attend a *yagya* - a Hindu ritual of sacrifice that involves the worship of deities. In the *yagya*, they have to wear saffron clothes and a sacred thread, and get their heads shaved. They would be asked to offer a few goats and some rice as fee. They are given Gau Mutra (cow urine) and Tulsi water to drink and have to take Hindu vows. Then, they will share the mutton and rice (cooked from their offerings) in a small feast. This completes their reconversion. From then on, they will have a Tulsi plant in their homes, have pictures of Hindu gods on their walls, and celebrate Hindu festivals. Henceforth they should pray only to Hindu gods.¹⁸

7.3. The Villain: Religion or Secularism?

The answer is not that simple. Therefore, let us first consider some interim solutions successfully executed elsewhere and then search for the ultimate solution. Keeping religion in its place is the first interim solution to this Indian malady. We cannot expect a socio-political revolution like that of France to be repeated in India or the imposition of secularism, as it was done in Turkey. Moreover, as we have noted earlier, too much power in the hands of the secular authority may corrupt it to an extent that it will trample and take away the freedom of its citizens and force them to servitude. We have seen this happening in the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China, North Korea, Myanmar, and many other countries, some of which are still reeling under the yoke of Communism and despotism. Religions sidelined through dictatorship (once tried by Indira Gandhi and found fatal to herself) too was not acceptable to Indians. However, in a multi-religious secular country like India it can be done by amending the Constitution to separate religion from all state activities and activities on behalf of state. This will put religion in its place or where it belongs - the hearts and the homes of the individuals. Moreover, smooth functioning of democracy demands distribution of power. Separation is

¹⁸Akkara, *Kandhamal*, 77.

therefore a must to curb political and religious absolutism and degeneration of religion into a storehouse of superstition and deception.

Nationalism too can easily degenerate into senseless domination and exploitation of the rest. Our society must be governed by true and self-evident principles, not by false and obscure dogmas. Hence it follows that religion and politics must be separated. In a multi-religious society, the State cannot be entrusted with any functions derived from or dependent upon a religion or religions. The State, after all, is a law enforcing machinery and there should not be coercion in matters of faith. Life must be guided by reason and a life guided by reason must take into account the material as well as the non-material needs of human personality. Let religions be followed by those who want to follow. State should not sponsor or show a preferential option for any particular religion. Separation of religion and state is essential on account of the following grounds: First, religious and political institutions are powerful institutions that command peoples' unqualified allegiance. Secondly, secularism is required in order to ensure equality so that no person by virtue of being a member of one institution should be guaranteed membership in another institution.

8. Limitations and Problems with Religions

There are certain serious problems and troubles in the practice of religions. The most serious are those when religions become creedal and insist on imposing their views, beliefs and ethics on everybody else forcing them to accept them as revealed truths. This leads to narrowness and fanaticism. Laying exclusive stress on dogmas, forms, and ceremonies, on some fixed and rigid moral code, on some religio-political or religio-social system they take away the freedom of conscience. I do not mean to say that none of these we need. They are not altogether unworthy or unnecessary. Human beings need them for communion and communication, especially because the lower members have to be exalted and raised before they can fully walk the path of spirituality and transcendence. However, they must be treated as aids and supports rather than as the essence. If too blindly insisted on, they may even hamper the progression of the individual. They have to be offered and used, but not to be imposed on anybody as his/her sole law by a forced and inflexible domination. In the use of them toleration and free permission of variation is the first rule which should be observed.

Religions have often stood violently in the way of philosophy and science. By way of self-defence they too attacked religions and wanted to eliminate them to have for themselves a free field for their legitimate development. Religions should be ready to avail themselves to constant scrutiny and challenge. However, often religions tried to put down the scrutiny and challenge by demonstrating divine revelations and divine authority. This gave an impression that scientific and philosophical truth had to be denied in order that religious error might survive. Religion often showed a tendency to oppress and impoverish the joy and beauty of life, either from an intolerant asceticism or Puritanism. It failed to recognize and proclaim that asceticism and austerity are only a part of religion, though an important side of it. Religious fundamentalists often forget that love, charity, gentleness, tolerance, kindness, etc., are also and even more divine than self torture. It is a known fact that at times religions supported rigid and outdated social systems, because they thought that their own continued existence was bound up with certain social forms with which it happened to have been associated during a long portion of its own history and erroneously concluded that even a necessary change would be a violation of religion and a danger to their survival. This error in its many shapes has been the great weakness of religions. Religions often degenerate into excessive externalism of ceremony, morality, routine, and mechanical worship.

9. Limitations and Problems with Secularism

Almost every limitation and problem which was indicated in the case of religion could be repeated here as well, because secularism is a reflection of religion - a pseudo-religion. Whenever and wherever secularism had the supremacy it turned out to be autocratic, irrational and blind. History bears witness to this truth. The violence perpetrated in France, Russia, and elsewhere tells us that even democracy will not survive when absolute power is transferred into the hands of secularists. The destruction of religion and enthronement of secularism will not ensure the reign of reason but another kind of barbarism. We can pinpoint numerous barbaric violations promoted by secularists, denying life to the fetus, saying that the embryo is a 'clump of cells' good for experiments, is just one among them. Killing an old man because he doesn't have a family to care for him anymore, or is of no use to the society is another instance. Terminating the life of people with incurable diseases is welcome and acceptable to

secularists. Ultimately utilitarianism, the benefit of the fortunate few, becomes the rule of the day.

10. The Ultimate Solution: Graduate to Spirituality from Religion and Secularism

The present problems we face in India cannot be blamed on Hindus or Hinduism. Those problems are the result of the misadventure of certain people with vested interests and political ambitions. They want and are trying to make Hinduism a ‘regular religion’. In fact, ‘Hinduism’ is a name given by foreigners to the life style and belief system of the people who lived in the Indian peninsula. Technically a Hindu is a person who inhabits the land of river Indus. Hindus called their religion “*sanadhana dharma*” (The Eternal Duty or Perpetual Righteousness). For them it is a way of life rather than a religion. Hinduism began to be treated as a religion like the other world religions only after the arrival of the westerners, even though the ingredients of a ‘regular religion’ are absent in Hinduism. It has no founder, no hierarchy, and no magisterium. It is unity in diversity and diversity in unity – a marvellous civilization that flourished on the banks of the mighty river Indus, accommodating and appreciating, understanding and respecting the views of others. Their generosity and openness enabled them to incorporate even atheism into their thought pattern. Anything and everything can survive under the umbrella of Hinduism unless they themselves refuse to be a part of it. This unique philosophy and mentality enable them to absorb all sorts of views into itself without any difficulty. Hindus had no difficulty to accept Buddha as one among the ten incarnations of Vishnu. Jesus, Mohammed or any enlightened or non-enlightened person could easily be accommodated into the grand Hindu pantheon without experiencing any threat or fear. Fortunately even now the majority of Hindus hold the view “*ekam sat vipra bahuda vadanti*” (The reality is one; learned people speak of it differently). Theirs is not a religion but an attitude, a way of life, and spirituality. This may be the reason why after independence Pakistan became a theocratic State that often slipped into dictatorship, while India remains a secular democracy. Dr Abdul Kalam, the former president of India, said “The solution to the problems of India lies not in getting rid of religion but in graduating from

religion to spirituality.”¹⁹ Learning from him, I suggest that let us not make Hinduism a religion, let it remain a spirituality that continues to inspire a vision of universal friendship and openness.

Saving Hinduism from those who wish to ‘religionize’ it is the only hope for a prosperous India. At present Hinduism is plagued by people who want to use it as a weapon to realize their selfish political ambitions. Hinduism is nothing other than a way of life, a spirituality of openness and generous accommodation. The only hope for the survival of minority religions in India is this generous attitude of the Hindu majority that prefers to remain Spiritual and refuse to be “Religious.” The minority religions too can learn a lesson or two from this magnanimous attitude and try to transcend their limits and limitations because religion is above all a call to transcendence. If our beliefs, dogmas, theology, morality, rites, rituals and everything that we practice in the name of religion bind us and blind us instead of liberating us from myriads of worldly bondages to launch us to transcendence they must be considered as waste of time, energy and precious human life.

11. Relationship between Religion and Spirituality

The Buddha’s enlightenment made him aware of the passing nature of reality and the resultant suffering. He tried to show his disciples a way out by following his eight steps towards transcendence. All religions have a similar purpose and origin. They are the outcome of an extraordinary (some call it mystical) experience or consciousness which liberated them from bondages and sufferings and made them fearless and serene. A religion may have originated on the foundation of the mystical experience of an individual (Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) or that of numerous individuals (Hinduism). The origin is the extraordinary experience somebody had, which brought about a conspicuous and drastic change in the attitude and life of an individual that attracted the attention of the people and drew them towards that person wanting to share that very same experience in their own life as well. Moved by compassion, those people tried to teach the seekers ways and means to acquire that same experience they already enjoy. Thus spirituality, liturgy, rites, rituals, morality, scriptures, theology, dogmas, and everything that is done in the

¹⁹Quoted by Kittu Reddy, “Secularism, Religion and Spirituality,” www.auromusic.org/online%20books/articles/Kittu/secularism,religion%20and%20spirituality.html

name of religion originate. Here we can observe a gradual and progressive materialization of the original consciousness. An amorphous experience gradually gets solidified; a spiritual consciousness gets concretized; wisdom becomes knowledge. It is a steady movement from life to death, from transcendence to bondage, and from enlightenment to ignorance.

In this process unfortunately spirituality is the first casualty. Religions reject their spirituality and prefer to protect the rest because spirituality is comparatively more amorphous and less containable. Spirituality often questions religious authority and tend to survive on its own. It is not as docile as the religious authority wants it to be. Therefore, there is a tendency among religions to sacrifice their spirituality before any other sacrifice. However, we must be aware that spirituality is the first child of the mystical experience and the most powerful tool available to humanity to trace our path towards transcendence.

The more an experience is concretized or captured into signs, symbols and dogmas, the far it gets away from its truth and reality. It is a danger that every experience is exposed to. However, there is a way out of this vicious cycle of progressive concretization, which is a continuous rebellion against concretization. Challenging every structure, concept, icons, idols and images is the way, since they stand on the way to the realization of truth and transcendence. This is precisely what Buddha and Jesus did in their own time. But custodians and protectors of religions resisted those rebels and did everything to silence them. There is a saying among Zen Buddhists, “kill the Buddha on your way.” The one who adores Buddha will never dare to do that and will never go beyond that idol either. The transcendent Yahweh wanted to remain so for ever and resisted the desire of his people to catch him. He called his people to transcendence and prevented them from making images and idols. But the people of Israel insisted on concretizing him and caught him in the form of a mighty bull. Even now we see many golden bulls around and Moseses being chased back to mountains, because ‘ordinary’ people prefer bulls over a God who prefers to remain ‘No-thing’. An ascent to nothingness is a call to the brave and not to cowards.

12. Conclusion

True Religions will never reject new light, new means, or new materials available for further human development. Spirituality, as we have seen, is an attempt to transcend all limits and limitations, divisions and discords, to

realize the highest human potential of unity in love, peace and harmony. Let me conclude this article quoting a dialogue from a recent popular Hindi movie, “In our country a woman of Catholic origin stepped down to let a Sikh man become the Prime Minister, who was sworn in by a Muslim president in a majorly Hindu nation.” This happens only in a ‘true’ spiritual environment, and not in a ‘regular’ religious environment. When secularism and religion give way to spirituality *Dharma* will prevail and fanaticism in the name of religions or other ideologies will subside.