

Editorial

Interface between Religion and Arts

“I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.”
Ludwig Wittgenstein

40 years back, on the occasion of the Decennial of the Second Vatican Council, *Journal of Dharma* was launched by the **Centre for the Study of World Religions** (established in 1971 at Dharmaram College) as an International Quarterly of Religions and Philosophies “to fill the gap of a felt need in the contemporary society” “to foster intercultural understanding from an inner realization of religions.” Understanding religion as “one of the deepest dimensions of culture” *Journal of Dharma* was committed to “disseminate the seeds of the Sacred in every bit of our secular existence and to re-integrate the entire material Universe in the Spirit of Truth and Holiness” (Editorial of the first issue). Together with the promotion of inter-religious dialogue, *Journal of Dharma* also promoted a dialogue between the sacred and secular with the conviction that the ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ are basic dimensions of reality.

The openness of the Catholic Church to other religions and the secular world in the twentieth century was largely the result of the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council, particularly the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* and the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*. To mark the Golden Jubilee of the Second Vatican Council and the Ruby Jubilee of *Journal of Dharma*, a Conference on “Dharma: Interface between Secular and Sacred” was organized.

Questions of the engagement of the sacred in various secular fields of human endeavours like literature, ethics, politics, law, media, economics, science, and philosophy is quite complex and influential. In a world of mass human migration and ever faster dissemination of ideas and images, no fact of human life is independent of religious influence and it is also true religious life and practices are also influenced by these branches of human

knowledge and life. Though these interactions are inevitable and often fruitful, they also generate sometimes serious tensions. In a world of specializations, the secular branches of culture like Literature, Media, Ethics, Law, Economics, Politics, Science and Philosophy often find the religious roots as irrelevant and sometimes harmful. It is also acknowledged, however, that human beings are religious today even in the wake of scientific and technological innovations and a market driven society. Human beings often want to relate their temporal and secular existence to something that is transcendental and sacred.

The Conference, “Dharma: Interface of Secular and Sacred,” was organized by Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram under the auspices of the Centre for the Study of World Religions and in collaboration with Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK; St Mary’s University, London; and Catholic University, Leuven, Belgium. Fifty scholars from 7 countries belonging to 32 different Universities and Institutes of Higher Education presented papers. Around 200 students from the Departments of Philosophy, Theology, Literature, Economics, Politics, History, Media Studies attended the conference.

The present issue of the *Journal of Dharma*, “Interface between Religion and Arts,” includes the fruits of the research of eight scholars and artists who presented papers in the conference. The first three articles explore the interface between religion and literature. The fourth is truly an artistic expression showing the interweaving of the body-art-spirituality, where it is difficult to separate sacred from secular. The last three articles investigate the contemporary media world and its influence on religion.

The first article, “Dharma and Grief: Secularisation of a Sacred Emotion” by *Purushottama Bilimoria* begins with the moving scene of Vālmīki’s grief over the bereavement of the survivor of the two birds in amorous union as one of them is pierced by a hunter’s arrow. The paper moves to *Mahābhārata* as the women from the warring clans bear witness to the horrendous carnage ensuing the battle, and the constant rebuke that Yudhiṣṭhira, head of the Pāṇḍava clan, faces from Draupadī for wandering the earth without finding a stable foundation for

Dharma or grounding it in firm absolutes. Drawing from some comparative work (academic and personal) in the study of grief, mourning and empathy, the paper discusses the treatment of this tragic pathos in classical Indic literature and modern-day psychotherapy. Despite being secularised, the author argues, these emotions continue to serve as the sites of imagination at a much more personal and inter-personal level that are not antithetical to a *Dharmic* (sacred) quest despite their haunting presence even when ‘the four walls collapse around one in the intensity of *duhkha* (suffering, sorrow)’ (Tagore).

Peter Tyler continues the discussion in “Rabindranath Tagore and Ludwig Wittgenstein: Two Sentinels on the Borderlands of Modernity” exploring how the two great masters of twentieth century thought engaged with the mid-twentieth century secular agenda and how one influenced the other. One hundred years ago Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), fought in the First World War and subsequently experienced a personal, professional and philosophical crisis. In the aftermath of the war, as he sought to rebuild his life, he came across the writings of his contemporary Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Tyler investigates the impact of Tagore’s work on Wittgenstein and how it opens up new perspectives for theologians today. Wittgenstein’s Viennese turn not only allowed a new discourse to return to the heart of academic philosophy but also enabled us to appreciate once again the performative discourse that is the ancient practice of *theologia mystica*. The final notations of the *Tractatus* on *das mystische*, once so problematic to hard-core Anglo-American verificationists can now be seen as an invitation to a re-evaluation of the Catholic tradition of mystical theology as a venerable discourse inviting us to move from thinking to seeing to acting.

The third paper, “Joycean Novels: A Broad Secularizing Project” by Anupama Nayar, discusses how the Irish novelist James Joyce used the Novel form as an interface of religion and secularism in fiction. The secularism of his novels is a nuanced, complex project, as he was deeply haunted by the fabric of religious upbringing which he had only partially disowned. Joyce’s works as well as life reflect an ambiguous relationship to

religious texts, themes, and institutions. In his works especially in his novels, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* the secular and the religious exist in an intimately antinomian, mutually defining opposition in many aspects of cultural life, including literature.

Both the creative mind of an artist and spiritual seeker participate intimately in the world they observe. They serve to understand the nature and function of reality as a whole. For a meaningful journey the inquiry has to be into the body and through the body - not outside of it. C. F. John takes the readers into such a journey in his creative reflection, "Body-Art-Spirituality: A Reflection Rooted in Earth and Life." In his view the cause and effect of much of our tension today is the indulgence of mind. When we speak about reality, attempting to reveal its mystery, we inevitably speak in contradictions. The role of a creative mind is to perceive the realms of reality that contradict the gushing force of everyday reality. To make a pause, to recognise the subtler realms that help us re-enter the reality with a new vision.

Paul Poovathingal, a famous musician, in his article, "Karnatic Music and Christianity: An Ethnomusicological Approach" investigates the interface between Christian music in India and the traditional classical music of South India, i.e., Karnatic music. The paper also deals with the structural and melodic analysis of the compositions of the leading Christian Karnatic composers of the past and the present, and the analysis of Karnatic musical forms and musical genres available in the Christian musical subcultures of South India.

From the world of music, Francis Arackal takes us to the influence of virtual world on the secular and sacred in the real world in his essay, "Media: The All-Pervasive Being/Entity of Our Time." By the end of the twentieth century television, 'the big medium', became the surrogate parent, teacher and god and the launching of the internet enabled instant social networking. Technology is integral to media operations as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Pintrest, Instagram, etc., would be rendered

ineffective without the internet. In the early 21st century the world moved beyond the ‘global village’ ending up as a ‘global living room’. No wonder Alexander Bard, the prophet who calls for triumph of the ‘netocracy’ in his latest book *Syntheism – Creating God in the Internet Age*, speaks of the internet as the new Holy Spirit. Indeed with the New Media a new culture, religion, sanctuary idols and priesthood are emerging.

“Understanding the Role of Religion in a Media-Centric Society” by Robert Pen analyzes the changes brought about in religion due to the influence of mass media and explores the possibility of a creative dialogue between religion and mass media. The first part answers the foundational question of media and presents a comparative report of the effect of media. The challenges that religion has to face from the media are investigated in the second part. The third part explores the role of religion in the possible and necessary transformation of media. By being more media conscious and participative, and co-authoring our part effectively we could use mass media as a social institution for fostering harmony, peace and a universal fraternity.

Paul T. Louis explores the religious presence and possibilities in the virtual world in the final essay, “Digital Awakening: Religious Communication in a Virtual World.” An analysis of communication progress leads to the present scenario of new media environment. Based on the idea of revelation and a system of autopoiesis, religion appears like a closed communicator. Religion’s communication needs to be placed within the context of evolving new media environment. Basing on McLuhan’s theory of extension, religious narratives need new forms of presence in the digital world. When it comes to diffusion of innovation (Everett Rogers) the state of religion appears precarious. From a communication perspective adoption of innovation by religion can come under the category of ‘*laggards*’ and ‘*luddites*’. The transference of religion’s presence from the real to the virtual demands new innovative and participatory models to serve the digital natives.

The articles included in this issue, thus, shows that the verbal, visual and performing arts in various forms gave expressions to

religious experience and beliefs. Religions used these forms of arts to express, live and convey the faith. The aesthetic dimension is integral to forms of religious life. Art forms engage with religion and religions engage with art forms. The aesthetic, though live, move and have being in the sensual, transcends the empirical and ephemeral. The discourse between these two fields of human life and experience were not always complementary; as in other fields of relationships, there were moments and events where the mutual friendship and partnership were strained with indifference and enmity. No religion, however, can live without expressions in verbal, visual, and performing arts; no art form can totally ignore and avoid religion either. More importantly no human being can avoid art and religion from their lives. There is a religious dimension to human life and there is an artistic dimension to human life. Conversations and collaborations with these two dimensions are integral to the cultural conditions of the streams of human life. To understand one, one should explore the other and see their interface and mutual influence within a culture and across cultures.

When art took inspiration from religion and religion expressed the religious in art forms, what is common to them together with the sacred is the secular – the hurly-burly of human life with its struggle and passions. The fundamental appeal to life is common to religion and arts. Rather than the logic of reason, it is the logic of living that gives legitimacy to religion and the arts. Both affirm the fact that we experience more than we can speak about; and we speak about more than we can systematize. What we systematize in syllogisms and express in formal definitions and truth tables is only the boundaries of the island where we live and not the boundaries of the ocean which make sense of the former and both religion and art point to the latter.

Wishing you critical and creative thoughts on the interface between Religion and Arts, may I submit this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* for your reading and reflection, enjoyment and enlightenment.

Jose Nandhikkara, Editor-in-Chief