

Editorial

TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS WORSHIP

If religion is a reality that epitomizes the Divine-human encounter in the human milieu, worship is one of those essential activities that accentuates the said encounter. Our life here on earth is full of encounters: human-cosmic, human-human, and human-Divine. Interestingly, religion brings an integral and integrating dimension to all these encounters. It is believed that spontaneous involvement in worship presupposes and inspires a reciprocal relationship between/among all the parties involved, including the Divine. This activity, therefore, brings about an affirmation (or, a re-affirmation) of the worth of all concerned. Worship being a human activity, it is natural to religiously oriented persons and groups to evolve patterns of religious worship. These patterns, in turn, are expected to facilitate meaningful human existence, effective bonding of in-group members, and development of an all-inclusive religious consciousness against the background of many people subscribing to other substitutes, religious, secular, or superstitious.

If human history is an indicator, it is certain that no religion or religious movement can survive or thrive without appropriate scope for individual and communitarian worship. Every religion, however, has struggled at various stages in its development to strike a balance between the faith experience of individuals and the collective religious consciousness of the masses. The spiritual consciousness that is derived over a period of time should facilitate the balancing between individual and collective religious consciousness, so that an integral religious world view can be emerged and supported.

Though it may seem that, for some religionists, worship is an attempt to escape from the strife and struggle of the mundane world, a closer look at their dynamics indicates that they all ultimately rest in establishing a transcendental as well as a humane outlook in dealing with the affairs of this life. As Evelyn Underhill has put it, “worship purifies, enlightens, and at last transforms, every life submitted to its influence...”¹ We can, therefore, affirmatively hold that worship is a central and natural event in

¹Evelyn Underhill, *Worship*, New York: Crossroad, 1982, 18.

the life of a person, a family, and a community, if founded on a supernatural world vision.

It is, indeed, true that the continuity of faith and perseverance in worship have sustained the faithful of many a religion through the dark ages of oppression and religious anarchies. As long as religious reality is meaningfully celebrated – seen mostly as a mystery, though approached differently by different religions – through various forms of worship, the members of a religion are held together in communion, and are attuned to maintain an open attitude towards the others; it happens, however, neither through the exercise of authority nor through the organizational management (including religious education), but through the commitment of the people in celebrating the mysteries accepted in faith that permeates every aspect of their daily lived life.

Life and worship cannot be compartmentalized; they are not mutually exclusive. The rites of worship are said to be evolving from the life situations of the people; in fact, the worship patterns accepted by any one religion are inextricably related to the historical and existential situations that have shaped the life and thought of the said people. So also, then, the symbols, rituals, and language that are being employed in any worship are, naturally, the product of the culture of the people. If not, it may be indicative of the fact that the worship forms will have no life in themselves, and will not provide any dynamic and life-giving environment to inspire the participants. Moreover, the whole exercise would remain quite incomprehensible to most, and would have no positive impact upon the life of the people. Paradoxically, such a situation will vitiate any religious milieu, forcing it into a process of disintegration, both at the personal and societal levels of existence. Further, due stress on universality and uniformity with regard to various aspects of worship forms within a religion can naturally minimize confusion and anarchy among the members of the worshipping community, though an excess of the same would certainly stifle personal creativity and scope for continued development.

Worship, if it has to be effective by communicating among the participants, must be conducted in a language that is understood by all. It is, indeed, true that every religion has emerged in a cultural and linguistic context, and to a great extent they have set the pattern in that context; however, over a period of time, and in a distinct cultural and linguistic milieu, it is not only strange but also inhuman to continue to use the same

language under the pretext of a sacred language that is exclusively capable of re-enacting the *mysterium tremendum*, especially with a worship gathering that cannot understand the words uttered in a foreign or archaic language.² Both the language and the symbols should be understandable and inspiring to all the members of the worshipping community.

A question is repeatedly asked: is worship necessary? Human nature is such that it sustains life, meaning, and its relations through various social forms. In a religiously inspired social milieu the same dynamics are present: religious life, religiously-flavoured meaning of life, and the relation among the members of a particular religious group, etc., can be evolved and maintained only if we adopt various socio-religious practices, including various forms of private and public worship. It is also observed that many of the worship patterns accepted among the followers of a religion have evolved in the course of their attempts to crystallize their faith through various external but meaningful expressions. They have come about spontaneously, from among the people who wanted a live demonstration and practice of the otherwise abstract faith of their religious commitment. So, worship is seen as a natural and spontaneous expression of the quest for meaningfulness that every human being is searching,

²For example, the continued recital of Sanskrit verses from the Vedas during a temple worship in a remote village populated by illiterate peasants, or the pronouncement of the 'Institution Words' of Jesus Christ in Syriac language during a Eucharistic celebration in the Syro-Malabar rite conducted among an audience that has not been initiated in the language, tends to create an altogether alien feeling, as the participants are made into mere spectators, except for the 'mystery' being enacted. Although it is claimed that the original words, documented in the sacred scriptures, embody the foundational experience, it must be borne in mind that the participants do not belong to the bygone era, culture, or language, but to another context that can certainly evoke the same response, but only if the worship patterns are conducive to the new milieu and can be understood by the participants. As the words uttered (or the prayers said) in any worship form is expected to initiate a dialogue between the individual/community and the Divine (and, further, among the members of the congregation) and as every worship is carried out by human beings (through their active participation), the language employed at every level must be understood by them; if not, participation in worship would turn out to be quite passive and the effectiveness in terms of self-transformation almost nil. In the modern world attempts to re-establish mysterious and unintelligible 'sacred' tongues must be resisted and rejected. Positively, therefore, sacred texts must be translated into the vernaculars not literally but by retaining the message intact in the language and idioms that would creatively evoke the same experience and transformation.

whether individually or collectively. External expressions are essentially required for bringing out the internal human dynamics, especially when it is relegated to any communitarian dimension. If these expressions are later identified as meaningless, probably by members of a subsequent generation, it is quite natural that they would give up such worship practices altogether. However, this does not mean that they would give them up completely, but would replace them with other practices, religious or social.³ As Mary Douglas has put it, “it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts.”⁴ It is, indeed, a fundamental human need: when one form is suppressed, we look for alternative forms of creating and sustaining meaning and solidarity.

Human society seems to be evolving at a faster pace, and tremendous changes are taking place in the individual and group behaviours. Just as remaining within the old mould seems to be dangerous, embracing fast-paced changes without proper discernment tends to be a risky affair. The same principles find their echo in the arena of religious worship as well. In fact, many a religious community face a waning of interest in attending worship programmes; consequently, there is a steady decline in the number of participants as well. This poses us with a crisis situation that needs urgent attention. Detailing about the reasons of this crisis, Forrester and others conclude as follows:

The contemporary crisis of worship arises from the fact that so many people see the acids of modernity eating away all kinds of worship, true and false, useful and harmful, so fast that soon only vestiges will remain. There is no doubt that many people in western societies look on any manifestation of worship as quaint, disposable and infantile,

³“The vacuum is filled by a strange medley of rituals which attempt to convey meaning and significance to human existence... The occult, spiritualism, even witchcraft and black magic seem not only to continue but to flourish in secular societies where organized religious worship declines in significance. Some worship surrogates are essentially debased and suspect quasi-religious forms; others, like the rituals of the football match or the political demonstration are avowedly secular (although hymns are sometimes sung by football crowds!)... Some religious programmes on radio and television ... are clearly intended to fulfil a felt need for worship on the part of many people who may have only the faintest connection with the organized churches.” Duncan Forrester, James I. H. McDonald, and Gian Tellini, *Encounter with God*, Edinburgh: T. T. Clark Limited, 1983, 169.

⁴Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, 62.

an irrational activity from which increasing numbers of people are successfully emancipating themselves. All worship, in this view, is false. Grudgingly it may be admitted that for a time at least, and for some people, worship may be useful or necessary. But worship belongs to the nursery, and the human race has come of age.⁵

Although this experience is not universal, it must be borne in mind that tendencies much like what is described above prevail among many, and, therefore, must be taken seriously. Worship, being a human activity that primarily results from a spontaneous religious response, can be sustained and can evoke continued response only when various forms of worship and all their ingredients are capable of generating and sustaining meaningfulness in the lives of the participants,⁶ at least, occasionally. Of course, personal involvement and attentive participation in religious services enable a person to identify meaning in relation to his or her life; at the same time, worship forms practised in any religious congregation must be programmed in such a way that not only attentive participants but also passive onlookers can be brought to meaningfulness, inviting them to total involvement leading to complete transformation, *metanoia*. For, worship is the crystallization of the living faith and presupposes appropriate symbolic forms that can give expression to it.

In spite of the above said challenge, there are old as well as new religious movements which attract millions of people, whose lives are sustained by various practices accepted within their structures, including manifold worship forms. It is interesting to note that there is a swing among some from one religion to another, though objectively we may not be able to locate any substantial difference. However, they seem to have identified the solid rock foundation of their faith from which they can quench their thirst for the Divine. Although there may be stray incidents of forced conversion, the overall state of affairs presents us with a picture that is more oriented towards personal preferences and meaningfulness. Of course, in the case of some movements, the personal charisma of the

⁵Forrester, McDonald, and Tellini, *Encounter with God*, 163-164.

⁶In this regard, a passage from Raimondo Panikkar is pertinent: "If worship constitutes a problem in our secularized society, the principal reason is not that the liturgy is outmoded or boring (it was almost equally so 200 years ago), but rather that the principles of the liturgy are themselves in crisis. Fashion and [*sic*] boredom are not in the main obstacles, but the fear of meaninglessness." *Worship and Secular Man*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973, 16.

founders or leaders, including priests or other religious heads, does have a greater impact upon personal convictions and religious experiences of the followers.

Human life never remains static: it is continuously evolving, whether at the individual or societal levels. In fact, we should say that the twenty-first century is not an evolving era but an exploding one in terms of social transformation, information dissemination, cultural adaptation, so on and so forth. From an Indian social perspective it must be admitted that our youth face a cultural vacuum to a great extent because the fast pace of social and cultural explosion leaves them with nothing much to hold on to. The old patterns seem to have become obsolete for some, and the new is yet to be shaped; it poses us with a bizarre situation in which we have to launch an altogether new journey, a voyage into the unknown. This shall not, however, be seen as an irredeemable situation; in fact, every creative generation has been passing through the same agonizing moments, but they have turned out to be so imaginative and inspirational that they are acclaimed to be the path makers in the social and religious histories. We must be more optimistic in the fact that the stakeholders in this venture are blessed with ingenuity and openness; what we need urgently is the will on their part to consciously plunge into every recess of life that is in need of transformation.

New trends in worship within any religion or religious tradition shall be guided by openness to the new vistas of life that creatively crystallizes the foundational religious experience. Care must be taken to make sure that nothing is initiated as part of a worship form with a retrospective ideology. As Forrester and others put it,

worship would quickly become maudlin, wistful and disabling if it were simply concerned with the past. Worship looks towards the future and encourages hope and expectation, for the God who meets his people in the present and dealt with them graciously in the past is also the God who will be with them in the future, when all worship will find its fulfilment and culmination in the immediate presence of God. Worship points forward with confidence, and nourishes people's hope and expectation.⁷

⁷Forrester, McDonald, and Tellini, *Encounter with God*, 8.

From a practical point of view, both extremes are to be avoided: “There is danger in reckless change; but greater danger in blind conservatism.”⁸ Worship forms, therefore, are to be continuously evolved – over the period of time – in the light of the living consciousness of the faithful, which, in turn, would also enhance the dynamic and holistic evolution of the same consciousness. Our heritage places before us a greater task, a task that requires total involvement and greater commitment, a task that will reshape and re-define our heritage for future, opening up new vistas for a holistic life. This can result only from a creative fidelity that we would exercise in matters related to worship. Creative fidelity intends to maintain a two-pronged attitude that includes rootedness in the past⁹ and openness to the future, but at the same time responding to the calls of the present. This calls for two crucial ingredients of worship. They are discipline and freedom. Although human tendency is to go beyond structures, as a social group any religious gathering can sustain its stream of life only if there are certain restraints; exercise of unconditional freedom will only lead to chaotic situations and self-destruction. At the same time, inhuman rigidity with regard to the affairs of a religion will stifle spontaneity and progress, especially in matters of worship. The ability to strike a balance between disciplining and exercise of freedom will seal the destiny of any religion.

Of late, the trend in religious worship seems to have taken home some of the drawbacks associated with it in history. While novel attempts are made to evolve meaningful worship forms, an impartial analysis of many a modern trend in religious worship seem to be almost on par with the old modes, though the modern proponents claim otherwise. For example, a good number of western Christians who have left the ‘dry and meaningless’ formal services in the church have finally reached shores at some of the Ashrams run by certain Hindu gurus, in India or elsewhere. After the initial enthusiasm, many of them realize that any worship form can be as dry as it had been if they are not fully immersed in it. Of course, we can notice a difference: in the new pattern, they are active participants,

⁸Henry George, *Social Problems*, in MacGregor, *The Rhythm of God: A Philosophy of Worship*, New York: Crossroad, 1974, 63.

⁹This, however, is not a clarion call to absolutize any tradition for that matter. The following distinction maintained by Jeroslav Pelikan is telling: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” Jeroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, 65.

and they seem to be part of the worship and celebration. Further, many of them are taken up the mesmerising powers of the gurus/religious leaders, to such an extent that there emerges a total commitment in the newfound religious ethos. Both the above said facts indicate that meaningful exercise of religiosity presupposes a total commitment to the religious reality, and whole-hearted participation in the worship forms. Short of these, any religion, old or new, will fall back into disheartening and lifeless religious observance, which will not provide any enhancing effect in the life of its adherents; naturally, it will end up in meaninglessness and oblivion.

The trend among many religionists is to renew and redefine the world vision and the patterns of worship, with a view to make them more attractive and accessible to the newer generations. A number of popular movements in India present us with sufficient examples. The Art of Living initiated and propagated by Sri Sri Ravisankar, The *Sat Sangh* of Mata Amrtanandamayi or Satya Sai Baba, and many others seem to be making an attempt to redefine religious worship in such a way that it becomes attractive to the modern world; however, they make sure that the traditional ingredients of religious practices (such as recital of scriptures, practice of yoga, etc.) are re-cast in such a way that they address the needs of the new generation at large. Thus, these new movements have apparently succeeded in bringing to their fold people who look for new forms of religious worship and also those who look for retaining the old mode. Surprisingly, these new forms seem to be having all the ailments of the old religious systems, though they have succeeded in keeping them at bay, by doctoring these programmes by way of modern techniques and media manipulations. As a result, the possible 'dry and meaningless' elements are kept away from the public, though a minority of the intellectual elite question the veracity of many a claim made and marketed by these new age gurus. This phenomenon is not restricted to Hinduism or India alone. Take for example, some of the 'most successful' Charismatic Renewal Movements prevalent among the Catholics in India, especially in the South. Though in a different garb, all the dynamics identified in the case of new age gurus can be found verified among the leaders of these charismatic movements as well. While their ability to popularize a religious reality, even through manipulative means, must be acknowledged, especially in terms of the number of people attending their training programmes and worship sessions, it must be said that the credibility and sustainability of these movements exclusively in terms of

their religiosity are still suspect from many angles. Yet, from the perspective of an average believer, it must be admitted that these movements, especially with their impressive worship forms, have been able to re-introduce lively and meaningful patterns of religious worship, which constitute *the* religious thing for many of the faithful. So, they thrive in India and elsewhere, expanding their disciple-base and enlarging their monetary and material-base, even if there crop up allegations of immorality and irreligiosity among the leaders of these movements.

Against this backdrop, *Journal of Dharma* has devoted this issue for exploring various dimensions of “Trends in Religious Worship.” Various entries in this issue try to spell out different dimensions of religious worship and the trends that are in vogue in terms of the changed social and cultural ethos of the day. The first article, “Dynamics of Experience and Expression in Religious Worship,” by Vineeth V. F., is an innovative attempt – both in terms of style and content – in portraying the essential and universal ingredients of worship. The whole discussion is unveiled through an imagined upanisadic character, Jayadev, and his exploration of life, nature, and religion. Prof. Vineeth, finally, comes to the conclusion that “Jayadev’s astounding experience of the Divine, followed by the agony of its articulation for perpetuation, the consequent option of silence and his final decision to surrender his own self as the highest form of worship take us to ... genuine act of worship anywhere in the world.”

Antony Kalliath in his entry, “Christian Worship: The ‘Liturgy of Life’ in the ‘Heart of the World’,” makes a successful attempt in delineating the ingredients of a meaningful Christian worship taking into account the globalized culture of the new generation Christians. The optimistic author is of the opinion that “the present youth who are brought up in a media-savvy (visual) culture, have a creative genius of blending and bonding the diverse strands of cultures and traditions without being unnecessarily biased by ideologies or religious moorings.” After having situated Christian worship in the context of the life’s struggles, he makes a clarion call for a shift of emphasis, a move away from ‘Church liturgy’ to a ‘liturgy of life’, which, according to Kalliath, is quite in tune with the paradigm of worship that Jesus had initiated. He makes his point so impressive in his concluding statement: “Christian worship which is enacted through ‘Eucharistic Memory’ and ‘Eucharistic Hospitality’ right in heart of the world is an ‘Art of Living’ entailing an ‘Art of Dying’ for

building up a social order of love, justice, and peace in the perspective of an Eschatological era when ‘God will be all in all’.”

With an update on some of the well-known pilgrimages around the globe, Paulachan Kochappilly launches a serious analysis of pilgrimage in his article titled “Pilgrimage: Phenomenon of Passage.” Realistically addressing various dynamics of pilgrimages as they are conducted today in varied situations and religions, the author indirectly takes the pilgrims to task, to reinstate the original and religious motives and modalities of a proper pilgrimage. So, pilgrimage is rightly seen as “the sign of the sincere search of the seeker for the Sacred and the significance of life. It gives the direction to encounter the behind and the beyond in the Being. It expresses the incessant search of human being for God, the Source, Strength, and Summit of life.” Hence, this enquiry ends with an invitation to all to become active participants in the pilgrimage of life, a pilgrimage that would transform everything into wholeness, fullness, and holiness.

In another article, “Indigenous People, Indigenous Worship,” Francis Kanichikattil addresses the issues related to a concrete struggle of a Christian community in India to evolve worship forms relevant to the modern life and thought in the Indian context. Though nothing much has been done in this regard, the struggle itself is indicative of a vibrant life and creative attitude among the members of Syro-Malabar Church. After a very brief discussion about the origin of various worship forms among these Christians, Kanichikattil attempts to delineate the historical setting within which various influences have been at work. In his understanding, the application of the generally acclaimed principle, “unity in diversity,” is a must to redeem the situation. Therefore, he opines: “younger generations of today want to practise a religion that gives more importance to human values, adapting valuable elements from their own cultural ethos than a rigid uniform religious practice.” In this context, the author strongly asserts that while “faith in Christ and unity of the Church” must be maintained uncompromisingly, “sociological and religious expression may change according to time and circumstances.”

The final article, a reflection on “Rituals in New Religious Movements in India,” by Mathew Chandrankunnel makes an attempt to highlight various methods of worship evolved and practised among the members of two new religious movements within Hinduism, namely, the Art of Living of Sri Sri Ravisankar and the *Sat Sangh* of Mata Amrtanandamayi. While both these movements claim to have had humble

beginnings, crystallization of various new worship forms coupled with innovative administrative strategies seems to have attracted millions of followers across the globe. An impartial analysis of the various rituals among these new movements indicates that the so-called 'new' is not that new at all, as most of them re-introduce the old forms of Hindu worship, though they are performed now around these new age gurus. Further, the wider horizons and no-boundary religious theory propagated by these movements seem to be only one of the strategies to bring in members who have been votaries of other religions outside the Hindu fold. Yet, the author's final statement is quite obvious: In these new movements "the traditional religiosity is packaged in a globalized, ritualistic, marketable way so that it suits the tastes of the twenty-first century human person."

Just as worship is fundamental within a religion, it is indispensable that the worship forms maintain their living and dynamic nature. Negatively, it shall not facilitate a flight of the 'alone' to the 'Alone', as religion is not a private reality. Meaningful and life-oriented worship must be communitarian in all its elements and dimensions. Although there are elements that are stable and permanent (especially in terms of the foundational events that are being enacted and re-enacted), the patterns of worship built upon them shall never become unchangeable: worship is a human reality, and it shall never be set once and for all. Instead of subscribing to changes according to the whims and fancies of the congregation, each religion, in terms of the local communities under the animation of their religious heads, must make room for organic growth in matters pertaining to religious worship and the issues related to it. Indeed, sensibility to the existential realities, changing social circumstances, cultural patterns, etc., are to be taken into account in facilitating organic growth. Each community shall also employ a lot of imagination so that newly evolved worship forms remain creative as well as life-enhancing.

Moreover, if religious worship has to focus and interact with the life of all individuals and communities, it cannot be restricted to the esoteric interest and imagination of a few; it must be a common concern, a concern that should permeate every genuine quest of the members. That is, the new trends of worship that we identify within old religions and among New Age Religious Movements should make room for the creative spirit not

only of the leader but also of the members of the community at large.¹⁰ This will facilitate a consideration for the need of creative expression and dynamic participation among the members; moreover, it would also facilitate meaningfulness, which in turn would entail a life-giving and life-enhancing social and cultural milieu. Whatever be the novel trends that are introduced in worship patterns, their functionality and veracity shall be determined in terms of their ability to initiate, sustain, and enhance communion among the Divine, human, and the cosmic. Though worship is oriented to the Divine realms, its effects must be permeating the human and cosmic realms by creating and maintaining an elevated human consciousness that values communion among human beings and positive outlook on the cosmic realities.

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¹⁰Many a time an official tag is attached to any change effected on worship forms. Any novelty becomes acceptable only if it is proposed and sanctioned by the officials. However, too much of a centralized control tends to restrict the creative participation. Religious worship is said to be more vibrant and attracts better participation when it emerges from the existential contexts, as they make it more life oriented and dynamic at every level. The following passage brings out this aspect very clearly: "The official and inherited liturgical forms tend to be regarded as of lesser value and are routinely replaced or supplemented by novel forms thought more authentic because they arise from the experience of individuals or groups in particular moments or situations." M. Francis Mannion, "Liturgy and the Present Crisis of Culture," in *Liturgy and Spirituality in Context*, Eleanor Bernstein, ed. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990, 7.