Editorial

RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND SECULARISM

Religion is a structured expression of the human quest to establish and maintain relationship with the divine along with the human and the cosmic without losing the perceived distinctive identity of any but at the same time enabling continued transformation of all in an integral manner. The foundational experience(s) around which a religion evolves becomes the spirit that would overwhelmingly pervade and permeate the lives of those who ultimately accept it/them as their point of view as well as way of life. A particular view of life and the way of life that emerge from the foundational experience in its pure form give shape to a spirituality, which would be characteristic of the life of all those who come under the banner of a particular religion.

The faith-kernel around which a religion comes into existence receives manifold expressions in the process of its evolution. A faithful expression of the faith is called forth, and is usually understood and accepted in a uniform manner by those who come together and are united in one faith. Although it is not easy to accommodate alternative viewpoints at the very early stages, structural expansion and the intake of more members would naturally call for diversified understanding of any particular religion. Moreover, the individual perspectives in understanding and expressing the same faith content adopted by various believers necessitate a more dynamic and diversified expression of the religious tenets of any religion.

It is generally accepted that the augmenting of a religious point of view into a structured religion is facilitated and enhanced by the ability of those who share a faith vision by communicating it effectively to larger groups of human beings. The essential social dimension of religion, especially from its structured development, is catered to by various mechanisms employed by people subscribing to a religious point of view, among which the transmission of a religious tradition (centred around one ore more foundational experiences) through oral and written media deserves special attention.

The necessity on the part of any religion to put across to an audience its central experience (in the form of teachings) with a view to bring them into its fold created an indispensable ambience that enhanced

not only the literacy of those who were involved in communicating it, but also among most of the people whom they had to reach out. Thus, religion turned out to be a principal agency that contributed to the enhancement of literacy in the larger society across the globe. Moreover, wherever religion was in close collaboration with the ruling class, their mutually enhancing collective operations gave rise to still better opportunities to augment the literacy of the people at large.

The advancement in the literacy level of the public, facilitated by a religious predicament, however, had turned out to be a powerful source of challenge as well as a source of inspiration to religion. That is, the advance in the religious as well as general literacy calls for a better or more coherent and consistent articulation of the religious experience and teachings. The initial stage in the development of any religion, considered to have ideally nurtured the foundational experience(s), is abundant in creativity in giving shape to the experience(s) in the form of rites and rituals, teachings and dogmas, traditions and structures, though this early stage is said to be lacking in critical perspective. Literacy facilitated by religious expansion is one of the important factors that later comes to aid critical acumen, at least, among some believers.

It is highly possible that those who wield power[1] within the precincts of a religion would try to suppress diversified understanding and interpretation of the basic tenets. In the normal circumstances, it is said to be resulting from the thrust of safeguarding the original faith content, which has to be protected if the new view of life and way of life are to be established as distinctive and decisive. Although historical records indicate that some of them end up in schisms and bitter divisions, sometimes even based on the challenges posed against the pseudo-spiritual powers assumed by the leaders, from a positive angle, they testify to the undeniable and unlimited sagacity and creativity present in human understanding. While, on the one side, it may cause fragmentation of the structural growth of a religion, on the other, it would obviously highlight the level of literacy enjoyed and the ability to proactively respond to the evolving traditions subscribed by the members of a particular religion.

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[1]At this early stage in the development of a religion, it would be extremely difficult to distinguish between spiritual and temporal powers, though the claim would be made primarily based on the former.

Sometimes, however, the initial enthusiasm and unconditional acceptance among the followers make room for the religious leaders to spin absolutism into doctrinal formulations and ritualistic performances, leading to religious intolerance and even fundamentalist attitudes. This had been the case with some of the organised religions. It leads to another stage in its development whereby some of these religions lose their ability to further integrate emerging viewpoints from among the later generations. Although difference between the foundational experience of the first group of believers and the experience gained by later generations cannot be ignored, a total disregard of the uniqueness of the faith experience of the latter would only close down the possible novel avenues of intellectual openness and faith experience suitable to the times.

Definitive doctrinal formations, though try to provide intelligible formulation to the content of belief, turn out to be a point of contention; the consensus emerging at one point in the historical development of a religion that finally crystallizes into dogmas points to cautious approaches that the authority would adopt later in protecting the authentic doctrinal foundation. In fact, most of the bitter internal conflicts that religions have faced in their evolution may be classified into this category; true, its intensity was augmented by political alliances of those who spun certain nuances and alternative interpretations to the already accepted dogmas.

Although the mainstream believers were all too happy to follow the dogmatic thrusts, there were always a sizable group of 'enlightened' believers who were not ready to accept the dogmas as final. While some of them would accept the dogmas as facilitating factors for the proper but progressive understanding of a religious faith, some others were totally against any definitive structural expression of the faith content. However, those who claimed authority always resisted the moves of the 'enlightened', claiming that any authentic interpretation could be provided only by those who are in authority, thus, in effect, rejecting the understanding and affirmations of the former.

One way of protecting a religion from the onslaught of the 'enlightened' was to brand them as secular[2] as against the spiritual.

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[2]Secular, deriving from the Latin word *saecularis* literally means worldly; in its modern use, the sphere of the secular is considered to be distinct from the religious. Although a secular thrust is said to have made the groundbreaking for

While the spiritual is the authentic (as it has its source in God/Divine/Reality), the secular comprised of all that is considered to be against it (as it is worldly and human in its nature). Or else, from another angle, anything that could not be accepted within the precincts of authentic spirit of a religion was branded as secular, though the use of the term is said to be very late in origin. Although the term was not in vogue, the reality was already there alongside the religious and the spiritual. As secular is generally understood against the spiritual, I propose that these two cannot be realized without the other; that is, there cannot be spiritual without secular, and there cannot be secular without the spiritual, as they assume more of a complementary nature than that of contradictories.

God's revelation is accepted as the source of the spiritual and the religious; human reason is considered to be the ultimate court of appeal in the secular. While the first asserted the need of responses from the human founded on divine authority, faith and the values derived there from, the latter insisted on reinstating the role of reason and human values.

Whatever be the height and depth of a religious experience, and whatever be the breadth and strength of a religious authority, any spiritual endeavour is basically a human endeavour. The moment we lose sight of the human dimension in any spiritual experience or religious tenet, it would lose its sagacity. Religion and spirituality have been of great appeal to the ruling class as well as the masses precisely because they have the human dynamics running through it. As the human is basically characterised by the endowments that human beings have acquired, primarily characterised by reason, any human enterprise – whether it is religious or spiritual or any other – it cannot but be fundamentally human. That is, anything religious is fundamentally secular at the same time. If the secular dimension is missing, secular being associated with all that is human including rational, a religious or spiritual thrust cannot be maintained.

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modern scientific development in the West, it would be practically impossible to rule out the presence of the secular forces all through the history of religions and spiritual movements. In order to focus the thrust on the scientific and an ethos emerging from it, its subscribers took an extreme position of contrasting it with the spiritual, thus further widening the gap between spiritual/religious and the secular/worldly, though such distinct realities remained only on conceptual levels.

Although universal rejection of secular by the religionists could be seen in many a religion, an unprejudiced analysis would show that an integral growth of any religion was facilitated not exclusively by the spiritual that shuns the secular, but only by those who have taken recourse to a balanced approach to the spiritual and the secular. In fact, the secular had a lot to contribute to make the spiritual or religious more appealing to the masses, as a 'worldly' dimension made the spirituality and religious ethos more akin to the world of believers. While aspiration for spiritual solace was a primary factor in the making of a religion, its ability to circumscribe the 'worldly' was equally a powerful element in enabling religion's popularity.

It is true that, in the western model, the secular was found to be missing from the mainstream Christian religion over a long period of its existence. It was one of the reasons why it turned out to be more authoritative and less capable of addressing the needs of the people. Unfortunately, various developments caused Christianity to drift away from the people: a lot of believers failed to find meaning and relevance in following the doctrines that were issued by the authorities from time to time. Moreover, there were cases in which some people who wrongly assumed authority in such contexts started exercising it in opposition to what the masses had expected: they miserably failed in delivering the spiritual; at the same time, they were equally stunted in addressing the secular needs of the believers. In effect, such a religion caused the spiritual and the secular to drift away from each other.

In the modern world we see the net result of all these dynamics: while religious authority continued to claim its own ability to address the needs of the people, many kept away from it as they believed that religion is incapable of delivering the goods for which it claims to exist. Further, as the latter group claimed the failure of religion in addressing the needs of the people, they asserted that all those goods can be redeemed and established by forces that are outside religion, thus affirming the might of the secular against the religious. In fact, it is here that we come across with the western academia insisting on a wide gap between the spiritual/religious and the secular.

As it is clear from history that such a gap has resulted from the lack of due consideration for the essential dimensions of religion proper, any attempt to re-establish the proper role of religion and spirituality in the lives of human beings should harness the aspects that have already

been lost sight of. Principally, religion should take the initiative to assert that the secular is not at all an extrinsic aspect, but an intrinsic dimension to religion, a dimension which would make it more integral and holistic, a dimension that enables it to be a catalyst in human development and social ethos.

In order to redeem this lost dimension within the precincts of religion, a new identity is to be developed. As this has to be an all pervasive process, covering the whole range of believers, it has to start at the level of religious literacy. In the twenty-first century, a kind of re-catechising is called for among all religions. While retaining the sacred literature and the value of traditional interpretation of these texts, an innovative approach is to be initiated in dealing with the sources and their ability to address the issues that believers confront today.

What we need today is not merely a lot more of religious literature, but religious literacy proper, which will enable the believers to develop an integral perspective on the sources that make up the kernel of a religion. It has to be deeply religious as well as human, implying that religious literacy cannot be enhanced without the dimensions contributed also by reason-related capacities.

The much hyped antithetical nature of spiritual/religious and secular is only a misnomer. Some people who want to deny or at least counter the value of the spiritual/religious within the human realm are trying to muster power by themselves claiming that all that is religious is against human; according to them, redeeming the human cannot be a reality as long as the religious reality is affirmed. However, given the fact that denial after denial of the religious reality by intellectual stalwarts over the centuries has not been successful to kill the religious spirit; instead, it is coming out more powerfully, though in more dynamic and diversified forms addressing the variegated needs of the emerging humanity.

Then, in view of redeeming and catering to this fundamental aspiration of humanity, it is essential that we reinstate the integral balance between the spiritual and the secular, though it would continue to be denied and opposed by some, including some world-renowned intellectuals, especially from the West. Each society and its religions need to address the distanciation that had come about between them in the given historical contexts, and bring about a more coherent and amicable settlement for good so that the spiritual aspirations of our human community will not be exclusively constrained to the private

spheres, but would permeate every sphere that is characteristically human.

Secularism, in this context, is not at all a threat to the religiosity and spirituality. The 'worldly' and the 'rational' are not antithetical to the spiritual; they certainly constitute its integral dimensions that would enhance its dynamics and make it more at home with the believers who are thoroughly human. Bringing the secular to the spiritual, to my mind, is not like floating water and oil together; although the natures of these two do not seem to share any similarity, in my opinion, they both stem from the human craving for meaningfulness and commitment to the supernatural which, again, is not to be seen as contradictory to the natural.

Facilitating such an attitude within the precincts of religions can be done only by a collaborative activity of the religious authorities who claim to be the authentic stewards of original revelation as well as the tradition and patrimony that have developed around the original faith content and those who claim that secularism is the only cure for all social and religious woes. When these two camps come together and share a common platform, humanity can be assured of ushering in a new era. As they begin to function hand in hand, and invest their energies in a mutually enhancing manner, it would pave the way for the success of human spirit, positively opening up the avenues and assuring an incessant reaping of the fruits of spirituality and secularism as they have been reaped by human society before they were wrongly bifurcated due to historical accidents or purposeful manoeuvring of vested interests.

Journal of Dharma devotes this issue for a discussion on religious literacy and secularism. The first entry in this issue, "Faith, Knowledge and the Plural: The Problem of Fundamentalism" by Etienne Rassendren, tries to grapple the complexities evolving from fundamentalist tendencies that are visible in religious, cultural, and social spheres, be it in the case of Hindutva in South Asia, Christian Evangelism in Europe or America or Islamic Jihad in West Asia. A critical analysis of faith and knowledge in their entanglement with the this-worldly and the other-worldly realities seen in their specific contexts leads the author to conclude that intellectual dissent is the need of the hour to make room for the plural. So, Rassendren affirms: "to be truly religious and plural is to be inter-religious." David Emmanuel Sing, in his article on the relevance of independent Madrasas in India,

affirms that apart from their commitment to the great Deobandi tradition they recognise plurality and pursuit of inter- and intra-religious peace. Moreover, he records that the Madrasa leadership is concerned about making its system of education more relevant to modern times, offering hope that a more literate Muslim community would re-vibrate with the ideals of modernity without losing sight of the kernels of Islamic faith.

"A Map for the Pilgrimage to the Other" by George Thadathil enters into a discourse on religious literacy in society in the context of its polarity with special reference to Indian society. It looks at the current emergence of this discourse, its specific features in India by situating within the secularist discourse, and then proposes a model that could be applicable even beyond the Indian horizons.

Marco Ornelas, in his entry on "The Catholic Mass in a Secular World," assuming that religions are communication systems, involves in an analysis of the Catholic (Latin Rite) Mass. Though a ritual involving a dogmatisation process, the Catholic Mass is capable of establishing a refined communication system, which, in turn, is capable of responding to the diminishing importance of religion in the secularized lives of its believers.

"Religious Literacy in Interfaith Contexts" by Albert Nambiaparambil offers an interesting narrative on interfaith encounters that have opened up new avenues in inculcating true religious literacy among believers of different religions. After recalling quite a number of interfaith encounters that happened in the eventful life of the author, he concludes that religious language has to be inter-religious language. Another entry on "Relevance of Advaita in Christian and Scientistic Age" by Bruce G. Wollenberg places Advaita Vedanta in conversation with Christian theology, and finds that both speak of a Reality that transcends the purely subjective and linguistic. Yet, he affirms that if these two systems were to involve in meaningful conversation each will have to abandon its hegemonic claim of universal validity.

Enhancement of religious literacy is the need of the hour all through the world of believers, especially against the background of the increasing number of conflicts among religious believers. Just as the believers are increasingly uninterested in grasping the nuances of their own religious literature, there is an alarming decline in the mutual understanding and appreciation among believers of different religions. Although this has resulted in many irreligious activities, and religion itself has apparently lost its relevance, sheer secularism (purporting to

reject everything religious/spiritual) is not the solution to all these problems. Religious literacy – that inculcates respect for one's own religion as well as that of others – will only augment the true religious/spiritual aspirations without being detrimental to the social existence and development of humanity. As religion caters to a fundamental aspiration of human beings, it needs to be brought to its true stature where the values inculcated by the modern secularism could also be integrated. Since these two seemingly contradictory entities are basically human, their integration will only pave the way for the enhancement of human existence, both as individuals and as societies.

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