

SUBALTERN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Felix Wilfred[■]

Some Reflections on Its Phenomenology and Social Role with Indian Context as the focus

That the prognostic about the demise of religion in the context of secularization has been proved wrong, is to state the obvious. The low tide of religion and its apparent receding have been deceptive. In the 80's, religion has come to occupy the spaces which were short-sightedly perceived to have been cleared of it. Are we to interpret this as a reassertion of fundamentalism? The experience in the last two decades are forcing us to rethink our traditional paradigms of religion vis a vis the society, and view the inter-relationship in a much more complex way.¹

The whole thing gets compounded when we take into account the fact that the relationship of religion to society can be properly assessed only with due attention to the various layers within the society itself in terms of caste and class. The social location of the various groups gives rise to significant difference in religious experiences, symbols and expressions which in turn become important social forces.

In this brief contribution I intend to reflect on the religious phenomenon as lived by the groups and peoples at the margins of the society, and how their religious experience interacts with the larger society whose victims they are. This phenomenon will, obviously, differ from the way the dominant castes and classes approach religion and interact with the society. The subaltern religiosity represents an important social actor in contemporary situation in India. The focus of study in this essay will be the situation of India, particularly of Tamilnadu, though the theme is reflected upon in a broader context with occasional examples from other parts of the world.

■ Dr. Felix Wilfred, Professor, School of Philosophy and Religious Studies University of Madras, Chennai, India.

¹ For a global perspective cfr Juergenmeyer, *Religious Nationalism versus Secular Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1993; cfr also Ninian Smart, *Religion and Nationalism*, Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies, Rome, 1994.

Being Subjected: A Matter of Difference

Subaltern religion is not the same as folk-religion,² or popular religion, though many elements of folk religion may overlap with the subaltern religiosity. Subaltern religiosity refers to a religious experience and its expression deriving from a condition of being marginalized.³ Popular or folk religion can be practiced also by the elite, or the elements of it can be fashioned by the upper castes and classes and popularized.

Subaltern religion, on the other hand, emerges from the experience of being subjugated, dominated.⁴ The religious experience of the dalits would obviously belong to subaltern religious experience; so too the religious expression of the tribals will have subaltern characteristics. Because of their being continuously dominated and discriminated against, the religious experience of women today may slowly evolve into a religiosity of its own which will also be subaltern in character. It is out of the scope of this article to enter into details of this issue.

Important is to note that there are innumerable subaltern groups all over the world whose religious identity manifest other characteristics than the religious system of the powerful and the dominant.⁵ In Korea, for example, shamanism would be a religion of the subalterns - the *minjung*.

² The crucial issue here is how folk is understood. Folk can be defined in a general way as not having any relationship to the condition of being marginalized or subjugated. It is in this general sense that folklorists like Alan Dundes define "folk". (Cfr Alan Dundes, *Essays in folklore. Theory and Method*, Cre-A, Chennai, 1990). It would refer to any particular group without connoting marginality. Consequently, folk-religion assumes a significance along the same lines. If, however, folk is defined as referring to a *subordinated* folk, then folk-religion could be co-extensive with subaltern religion. But this, in general, does not seem to be the case.

³ Therefore to speak of subaltern religion is not simply to speak about popular religion. The qualification of *subaltern* changes the perspective. Hence, speaking of subaltern religion in Indian context, I am not referring to the abundant material available on Popular Hinduism, like the ones by L.A.Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy. Popular Hinduism in Central India*, Columbia University Press, New York-London, 1975; C.J.Fuller, *The Camphor flame. Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, Viking, Delhi, 1992.

⁴ The Naadar community of the former State of Travancore in South India was an oppressed people whose socio-political condition of subalternity gave rise to a religious movement called "Ayyavayhi". It had a significant social role to play in the process of emancipation of this subaltern group. On this movement, an interdisciplinary Ph.D. dissertation is in preparation under my guidance in the University of Madras.

⁵ This is why the real religious experience of the subalterns will elude the "objective" studies in the manner of "Orientalism", (cfr Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge, London, 1978), however meticulous they may be in the description of the phenomena. The spirit of this religious experience is lost when the *subjects* of this religiosity - the subalterns in their struggles and conflicts with the dominant groups - are left out.

Shamanism in Korea is the least respected religion, even despised. Its practitioners are the most despised and oppressed. Korean shamanism is a religion for the Korean minjung. The Korean minjung turn to the Korean mudang religion out of their social deprivation, poverty, ignorance, suffering and misfortune, imposed upon them by their social fate. In this religious practice, Korean minjung can bring their han, their troubles, their tears, and their frustration. The Korean mudang religion is an expression of the powerlessness of the Korean minjung.⁶

Three Strands

In the subaltern religiosity as practiced in India we could distinguish three strands: a) the world of spirits b) the emergence of gods and goddesses from the context of life c) the superimposition of the religiosity of the dominant castes and classes. These three streams mix and mingle to form the world of the religious experience of the marginalized. In the following we shall briefly focus our attention on each of these three elements.

a) The world of Spirits in the Materiality of Life

The subaltern religious experience is wrapped in the world of spirits with whom the people are in communication. These spirits are present in the most ordinary things of daily life - on trees, in groves,⁷ in the pot of water at home, in the cremation grounds, and so on. How could one understand the religious experience of the tribals, for example, without the spirits associated with their forests by which they live and are surrounded? What the subalterns of India have inherited is the Dravidian religious ethos.⁸ In fact, as evidenced by ancient Tamil literature, spiritism was the religion of the Tamils.

⁶ David Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, CCA, Hong Kong, 1991, p.102; cfr also Edmond Tong, "Shamanism and Minjung Theology", in Jacques Van Nieuwenhove - Berma Klein Goldewijk (eds), *Popular Religion, Liberation and Contextual Theology*, Kampen, 1991, pp.165 - 174; Felix Wilfred, "Popular Religion and Asian Contextual Theologizing" *Ibid.* pp. 146 - 157.

⁷ It has been noted that the belief in the spirits associated with trees has had practical effect in the protection of the forest environment in some parts of the world. People did not permit felling of trees, because that would be to disturb the spirits with serious consequences.

⁸ Cfr W.T.Elmore, *Dravidian gods in Modern Hinduism* (1913), Reprint by Asian Educational Series, Delhi, 1984; cfr also Henry Whitehead, *The Village gods of South India* (1921), Reprint by Sumit Publications, Delhi, 1976; for an insightful work on the basis of field-study in southern Tamilnadu, cfr Tulasi Ramasamy, *Nellai Maavatta Naattupura Theivangal* [The village gods of Nellai District], International Institute of Tamil Studies, Chennai, 1985; A.K. Perumal, *Tol Perum Samayakkurukal* [Elements of Ancient Religion], Chennai, 1990 C. Sanmugasundaram, *Chudalaimadan Vayhipadu. Samooka Manidaviyal Aaivu* [Worship of Chudalaimadan. Sociological and Anthropological Investigation], New Century Book House, Chennai, 1993.

These spirits could be of different kinds, and the most important ones are the spirits of ancestors, who later become gods and goddesses of the family, or clan. This is something important to note, since, in the religiosity of the subalterns there is a continuum between life before death and life after death. The presence and participation of these spirits in the life of the subalterns has as its focus the material life of every day. The communication on this basis is such that "dead people come to re-live in our surroundings in the form of ghosts if they have not been fed well while they were alive".⁹ In other words, the world of spirits is not a totally different realm, but simply an extension of our world with all its material conditions.

A very palpable manifestation of the presence of the spirit is when someone is taken hold of by it. The coming of the spirit into a person completely changes his or her behaviour pattern, and one enters into trance. Such kind of phenomena we find also in the shamanistic experience as for example among the minjung of Korea. We find it all over India too. It is connected with the practice of healing,¹⁰ which again shows the material texture of the religiosity of the subalterns.

The subalterns like the dalits are the ones who are involved with the hardships of agricultural labour and in producing of life-giving food. Little wonder, then, that the spirits connected with life and its protection happen to be *goddesses*. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the deities of the subalterns are goddesses. These spirits - the goddesses - protect them and their cattle from diseases and grant prosperity. The goddesses also are the ones who protect the village and the hamlets of the subalterns from the intrusion and assault of the powerful upper castes and classes. We may recall here, for example, the goddess *Ellaiamma* which literally means, goddess of the frontier. These goddesses of the subalterns are generally unmarried and are symbol of vibrant power, unlike the goddesses of the dominant tradition who are married and are submissive to their husband-gods. Further, it is mostly the spirits of these goddesses who take possession of people through whom to make known their will.

b) Gods and Goddesses from Conflictual Social Context

It is interesting to note that most of the gods and goddesses of the subalterns emerge from concrete social contexts. As a matter of fact, the

⁹ Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu. A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Samya, Calcutta, 1996, p.7.

¹⁰ Cfr Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors. A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992.

story of many of these deities are connected with some or other historical events and persons.¹¹ In other words, the subaltern gods do not descend from above but ascend, as it were, from under the feet of the society. I mean to say that the deities are often historical persons who were in conflict with the unjust system of the casteist and feudal society and its laws and injunctions. They are persons who transgressed, for example caste norm, or fought against injustice, or defended their community against the onslaught of the upper castes and dominant classes.

After their violent death, these personalities who challenged the socio-political order become spirits of extraordinary power. In Tamilnadu there are a number of such subaltern deities like Kathavarayan, Kauthalamaadan, Muthupatten, Madurai Veeran (known also as Karuppusami), Chinna Naadan, Chinnathampi, and so on. The Tamil expression refers to them as "*Kolayil Uthitha Theivangal*" (Gods born out of murder).

This kind of origin of the subaltern gods is true also of other parts of the world. For example, the Korean thinker Chung Hyun Kyung notes:

I realized Korean history was full of wars, invasions, and the cruel exploitation of my people by foreign powers and domestic power elites. So many people have died unjustly throughout our history. Where have all these people gone? Where are they now; heaven or hell? According to Korean beliefs, these people's spirits could not rest in eternal peace. All of these people had to become restless wandering ghosts!¹²

There is a terrific aspect to these gods and goddesses who avenge their unjust death, or of their dear ones. We have the story of Kannaki in Tamilnadu, an ordinary woman, who was a victim of a senseless king who unjustly ordered to murder her innocent husband on suspicion. The fire of justice emanating from her engulfs the whole city of Madurai, and she herself turns into a goddess. As A.K. Ramanujan observes, "the excess of rage, the power of an ordinary woman to explode into a goddess when she is given a sufficient charge of anger, seems to me to be the underlying pattern.

¹¹ As the Sangam literature bears witness, the Tamils had the practice of erecting a vertical commemorative stone in honour of the heroes, and these heroes were later invested with divinity. Cfr A.K. Perumal, *Op.cit.*

¹² Chung Hyun Kyung, "HAN-PU-RI Doing Theology from Korean Women's Perspective", in R.S.Sugirtharajah (ed.), *frontiers in Asian Christian Theology*, Orbis Books, New York, p.55.

It is as much a theory of emotion as a theology; together they make a special recognizable genre, the folk myth of the village goddess."¹³

Another important point to be noted is that the subaltern gods and goddesses are very much *local* in origin, and there are local stories behind every one of them. That is why the subalterns can vibrate with them. Let us take, for example, the story of the goddess Podilamma, associated with the locality of Podili:

Some Sudra farmers lived in a hamlet... One day they were treading out the grain with the oxen. ..Their sister was to bring them the midday meal. On the way in a lonely place she met a man. She put down her basket and was late in arriving with the food. When she arrived, her brothers caught her and threw her beneath the feet of the oxen..The girl evidently killed disappeared under the feet of the cattle among the sheaves. Later when they removed the straw to winnow the grain they did not find the body, but found a stone. A man standing near became possessed with the spirit of the girl and she spoke through him. She said that she had been unjustly killed, and that they must worship her or great evils would follow.¹⁴

c)A superimposed Religiosity

The third component in subaltern religiosity is made up of elements originating from the religious tradition of the dominant groups, castes and classes. This superimposed religiosity gets intertwined with the other two elements of the subaltern religious experience. In other words, the subalterns absorb the religious elements of the castes and classes dominating them. Most obvious example is the penetration of Brahminical religious tradition into the dalit and tribal religiosity. We may think, for example, of the superimposition of the theory of karma among the lower sections of the

¹³ A.K. Ramanujan, "Two Realms of Kannada Folklore", in H.Blackburn - A.K.Ramanujan (eds), *Another Harmony. New Essays on the folklore of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, p.64.

¹⁴ W.T.Elmore, *Op.cit.* p.69.

society,¹⁵ in such a way that it begins to appear in the subaltern consciousness as part and parcel of their own religious faith.¹⁶

Viewing strictly from a phenomenological point of view, we could notice elements of Iberian catholicism (inherited since sixteenth century from the dominant Portuguese) in the religious experience of the fisherfolk of the Western coast of Kerala and Coramandel coast in Tamilnadu. Their manifest religion is one, but in fact they practice a kind of latent subaltern religion as revealed in their numerous rites connected with their occupation of fishing and other events of daily life.¹⁷

Now the superimposition of the religious elements of the dominant group contributes to a very specific characteristic of subaltern religion: it is the "contradictory consciousness".¹⁸ What does that mean? It means that the nature of subaltern religion is such that, in addition to the primaevial religious elements in keeping with the subaltern social condition, way of life, etc. (which form the first two strands), it contains as well the religious elements deriving from the dominant groups. This latter superimposed layer in the consciousness of the subalterns reflect a different way of life, values, myths and world-views.

Precisely the presence of both these poles in the same person or group creates the "contradictory" situation. In every day life it is in this

¹⁵ What A.K. Ramanujan says about the difference in this regard between folktales and classical Hindu epics, is applicable to subaltern religion in relation to dominant religion: "Notions of karma (actions in one's past lives determining the present) rarely play any part in these tales as they do in Indian epics like the *Mahabharata*. In fact, the tales rarely concern themselves with more than one life - except to make fun of it..." *folktales from India*, Viking, Delhi, 1993, p.xxvii.

¹⁶ At this juncture, it is important to remember that what is called Hinduism today is the confluence of many Indic religious streams, some of which had tribal origins. Vasudha Dalmia - H. von Stietencron (eds), *Representing Hinduism. The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, Sage Publications, Delhi, 1995; Guenther D.Sontheimer - Hermann Kulke (eds), *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Manohar, Delhi, 1991. Cfr also Guenther-Dietz Sontheimer, *Pastoral Deities in Western India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1993; Kunal Chakrabarti, "Recent Approaches to the History of Religion in Ancient India", in Romila Thapar (ed.), *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1995, pp.176 -236. For a different approach, cfr Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism. The Anthropology of a Civilisation*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997; Arvind Sharma, *Hinduism for Our Times*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997.

¹⁷ Cfr P.T.Mathew, *Religious Phenomena Among the Mukkuvar of Vihinjam. An Empirical Study*, University of Madras, Chennai, 1997 (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation written under my guidance).

¹⁸ Cfr Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1986; cfr also Jose D. Maliekal, *Socio-Political Thought of Daya Krishna: A Subaltern Critique*. University of Madras, Chennai, 1997. (Unpublished M.Phil. dissertation written under my guidance).

contradictory character the subaltern religion is lived. The mixing of these strands in various forms and measures contributes to the formation of specific modes of subaltern religiosity. All this turns the subaltern religion into something very *ambiguous*. But precisely such an ambiguity seems to make it very creative - a creative ambiguity.

With reference to the Indic world, there have been attempts to explain in different ways the relationship between the dominant and peripheral religious traditions. According to McKim Marriott, for example, there is parochialization of the dominant tradition and universalization of local tradition.¹⁹ Such an approach, in my view, does not pay attention to the condition of *subordination* in which the subalterns are. Further, it is an attempt to explain away in a reconciliatory mode rather than to view realistically the contradictory nature of the presence of the superimposed religious world in the subaltern consciousness. Finally, it does not account for the ambiguous nature of the subaltern religious experience resulting from such a contradiction of two different types of religiosity deriving from two different worlds of experience.

Emancipatory Role of Subaltern Religion

The subalterns who are oppressed and marginalized have always sought in their religious experience and symbols an important means to counter the domination they suffer. In fact, revolutionary and subversive elements are built into their tradition. At particular historical junctures the energies are released and set in motion for the liberation of the subalterns from the dominant religious tradition and its ideological legitimation of power and control. The subaltern religion goes even further to challenge the cultural, social, political and economic structures. One of the important reasons for this resistant and revolutionary role of subaltern religion is the power of its symbols. But here again it is a resistance which is coloured by the ambiguity of the contradictory consciousness. As Gautam Bhadra puts it,

It is well-known that defiance is not the only characteristic of the behaviour of subaltern classes. Submissiveness to authority in one context is as frequent as defiance in another. It is these two elements that together constitute the subaltern mentality... Thus collaboration and resistance, the two elements in the mentality of subalternity,

¹⁹ Cfr McKim Marriott, "Little Communities in Indigenous Civilization", in *Village India* Chicago - London, 1972, pp. 171 - 221.

merge and coalesce to make up a complex and contradictory consciousness.²⁰

Resistance is not possible unless the subalterns become aware of their common identity. For them, the affirmation of a separate religious identity is itself the most effective challenge to the dominant religiosity. Such a resistance and identity-assertion comes to the fore in times of crisis. A very illustrative case is offered by the perception of religious identity by the dalits today. Given the superimposition of the religiosity of the Sanskritic and Brahminical tradition and its mixture with the *primaeva* religious ethos, it is quite possible to describe and perceive the dalit religious experience *in continuity* with the dominant religious tradition. The other possibility is to highlight the specificity of the dalit religious experience and define its identity *in discontinuity* with the dominant tradition. In such instances, the socio-political circumstances will be decisive for an interpretation in one way or the other. One such situation is what we are living through in India today. It is a situation in which the dalits and the tribals are asserting their religious identity as a caesura from the Hindu religious tradition, specially in its ideological umbrella of an all-encompassing *Hindutva*. It is enlightening to read the way Kancha Ilaiah has, out of his own dalit experience, narrates *the difference* from the Hindu tradition.

I, but all of us, the Dalitbahujans of India, have never heard the word 'Hindu' - not as a word, nor as the name of a culture, nor as the name of a religion in our early childhood days. We heard about *Turukoollu* (Muslims), we heard about *Kirastanapoollu* (Christians), we heard about *Baapanoollu* (Brahmins) and *Koomatoollu* (Baniyas) spoken of as people who were different from us. Among these four categories, the most different were the *Baapanoollu* and the *Koomatoollu*. There are at least some aspects of life common to us and the *Turukoollu* and *Kirastanapoollu*. We all eat meat, we all touch each other...The only people with whom we had no relations, whatsoever, were the *Baapanoollu* and the *Koomatoollu*. But today we are suddenly being told that we have a common religious and cultural relationship with the *Baapanoollu* and the *Koomatoollu*.²¹

The author goes on to show how the dalit gods and goddesses are different from those of the dominant Hindu castes; so too the dalit death is different from that of others.

²⁰ Gautam Bhadra, "The Mentality of Subalternity: Kantanama or Rajdharm", in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, vol. VI, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, pp. 54 & 91.

²¹ Kancha Ilaiah, *Op.cit.* p.xi.

It is difficult to draw any comparison in this matter, but in some respects there could be similarities. Viewing strictly from the phenomenological point of view, we cannot but be struck by the historical example of the emergence of early Christianity in the context of Judaism. There were many traits in Christianity which made it appear a subaltern religion. Jesus himself came from a peripheral region of Palestine, which was very much despised by the dominant Jewish religious and cultural establishment. The disciples were accused of not caring for purity.²² After his death, his disciples, most of whom were people from the periphery and involved in occupations despised by the mainline society, faced the crucial question of interpreting the religious heritage of their guru. The new religious experience unleashed by Jesus was such that it could not be interpreted as simply a new variation of the Jewish tradition; it called for a new framework and the constitution of a separate identity as Christians. The religious message was addressed to "the uneducated, the poor, the sinners, and the social outcasts".²³ These were the despised ones and considered as the "rubble" of the society. It is interesting to note that an early Christian record - the Acts of the Apostles - highlights the fact that it was in Antioch, in West Asia, that the disciples of Jesus were called for the first time "Christians".²⁴ Between Jesus' death and coming into existence of a new and different nomenclature to designate the group there was the crisis of interpreting the identity of this "subaltern" group. The new and different identity was cemented by new symbols and religious rituals.

Sources and Their Interpretations

The emancipatory role of subaltern religion furnishes us also a proper perspective to view its various manifestations and interpret them. One of the first things in this connection is to study how subalternity views the religious sources of dominant traditions.

The mood of resistance and identity-constitution, which we noted as important elements in subaltern religious tradition, is further seen in the way of interpreting the religious sources - whether they be the sacred texts of the dominant tradition, or its laws and regulations, or its symbols and myths. These are also the means through which the dominant tradition makes its presence felt among the subalterns, and creates the contradictory consciousness in them. That is why it is important to look into the way these

²² The Gospel of Mathew 15:2.

²³ Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*. Collins-Fontana, London, 1976, p.26; cfr also Gerd Theissen, *The first followers of Jesus*, SCM, London, 1978.

²⁴ Acts of the Apostles 11:26

sources are viewed by the subalterns in critical situation and in the mood of resistance and identity-building.

The subaltern critique of elitist religious sources is very much bound up with the fact of their direct involvement in the process of production through hard physical labour. By their physical exertion they contribute to the maintenance of life. The same life needs to be protected when it is threatened. All this explains why they are sceptical and suspicious of religious sources which do not vibrate with their daily lives, instead seems to contain ideological legitimation of their subaltern condition and bondage. Another element of critique derives from their sense of immediacy and urgency in the relationship to gods and goddesses. The lack of fulfillment of their basic material needs for a dignified life makes the subaltern religion very sensitive to the present.²⁵

This is different from the dominant religious tradition in which the past resources - sacred texts, laws, myths, etc. - hold sway over the present and conditions it. This kind of theological determinism in terms of the past - whether it be claims of divine interventions like avatars or theories like karma - when coupled with the social determinism of caste-hierarchy constricts the life of the subalterns and forecloses creative novelty in terms of hope for a different and more humane society. The past here far from being a help to the emancipation of the subalterns becomes a new chain to strengthen their bondage. Similar dangers can be found also in other dominant religious traditions vis a vis the subalterns.

What has been said explains also the critical posture, specially in times of resistance, vis a vis the dominant religious tradition. The animus for resistance is often provided by an emotionally-charged perception of the irrelevance of an imposed past, far removed from the concrete exigencies of survival. For the subalterns, such a past blocks the irruption of the divine into the present reality of their struggles. When this past is swathed in certain myths, the hold over the present becomes complete. Vis a vis the past resources of the dominant tradition, we could notice a wide spectrum of orientations which range from an attempt at re-interpretation, reversal of meaning, to outright rejection.

²⁵ On the influence of this subaltern tradition, for example, in the practice of Christianity in Southern Tamilnadu, cfr my article shortly to be published from Paris in the special issue of the French sociological journal (to commemorate Vasco da Gama's arrival in India): *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions*.

Critique takes also the form of a serious challenge to the idea of the *sacred* maintained and promoted by the dominant tradition. It is often a sacred identified with *purity*. In a society in which purity-pollution becomes the central principle of social organization,²⁶ a religiosity centered on sacredness in an effort to exclude the "impure" becomes a strong ideological device for the oppression of the subalterns like the dalits. We do not find purity associated with sacredness in the subaltern religious experience, precisely because it is in the name of impurity and consequent "untouchability" the dalits, for example, have been subjected to inhuman treatment. Even more, sacredness does not assume the value it has in the dominant religious traditions. Just like the religious experience of the subalterns cannot be one that is alienated from the material exigencies of life, so too it cannot be one in which the sacred of the ruling castes and classes are elevated as the norm over against the "impurity" of the subalterns. This religious sacredness of the dominant castes and classes is simply an ideological construct to keep the subalterns under bondage and to maintain a position of power, control and privilege.

The resistance to the sacred of the dominant castes and classes can be seen in the fact that the subalterns do not evince interest in creation of places of worship like temples. Their gods and goddesses are not secluded, but are found in open spaces, under the trees, at the entrance of the village, around the fields where the dalits and tribals spend their hard labour of the day, etc. Further, unlike the dominant religious tradition in which so much importance is given to representation of divinity in icons and statuettes (with precise rules and regulations for its making), in the subaltern religiosity we find *aniconic* representation of the world of gods and spirits.

Non-Mediated Religious Experience

The critical approach to the sacred built into the subaltern religiosity also explains why it has little place for persons and institutions mediating the sacred to the larger masses. This mediation in the dominant religious ethos concerns specially the ritual realm through which the sacred is channelled. All those things connected with the ritual acquire a sacred character, including the ones who perform the ritual. Further, given the fact that it is the present and not the past which is the point of reference for the religious experience of the subalterns, they do not require mediators and religious experts to interpret texts and traditions. Very often the divine is experienced

²⁶ Cfr Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and Its Implications*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988.

in as much as it takes hold of a particular person as a medium for the moment as in the case of possession and trance.

Further, it is not the tradition and sacred texts, but the *community* of the subalterns which acquires importance in religious experience as can be seen in their festivals and rites of sacrifice. The whole community is engaged in determining all matters pertaining to festivals which also offer the occasion to set right the strained relationships in the village-community. The ritual function itself is not monopolized by anyone; there is often sharing also in this. This seems to be the case also of the oppressed minjung of Korea.

The mudang *kut* and the village dance are the dance of gods.

Through them the unity of the community and the unity of god are established. Drinking and eating are the central part of the festivals, drinking and eating with the gods and eating of the blessings... This is the freest occasion of the hard working minjung of Korea - they can forget about their tough lot as tenant farmers and liberate themselves from the repressive Confucian social system and greedy landlords. This is the time for solidarity... among the village minjung, and for temporary liberation from daily toil and from the secular and mundane world.²⁷

Decentralized Religiosity

What has been said leads us to understand why subaltern religious experience is very pluriform and decentralized. Every centralization is connected with domination, and hence the subalterns challenge the centralizing and homogenizing trends in religious sphere.

We have numerous examples of the subversive and revolutionary potential of the decentralized subaltern religion rising up against oppressive centralization. In the Chinese religious tradition, for example, the religious practice was so much centralized that the only official who could invoke the "Heaven" and perform religious rites was the emperor in whom all powers were concentrated.²⁸ Therefore, all other religious practices had to be somehow sidelined, if not suppressed. But, as a matter of fact, in the areas of rural China, there flourished subaltern religions. These were viewed by the centralizing imperial power as a great threat. This perception was not

²⁷ David Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, CCA, Hong Kong, 1991, p. 98.

²⁸ Cfr J.M. Kitagawa, "Some Reflections on Chinese Religion", in *Ching jeng*, 29 (1986), n.2-3, pp. 145-157; cfr also C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, University of California Press, Berkeley - Los Angeles - London, 1961.

mistaken. For, it is the people from the periphery, from the rural areas imbued with their particular subaltern religious experiences who caused revolutionary movements in the Chinese society, which as C.K. Yang notes, was connected with economic deprivation, famine, etc.²⁹ In Korea the shamanistic religion - the mudang - was found to be very dangerous by the centralizing Confucian government of Yi dynasty which also persecuted it. Interestingly, in modern times, under the Japanese colonial regime too, the Korean subaltern religion was persecuted. Illustrative is also the case of the contemporary movement of Hindutva whose weakness is precisely what it may consider to be its strength, namely the creation of a homogenized Hinduism. It disregards the subaltern religious experiences through which the marginalized dalits and tribals define their self-identity.

In the case of Sikhism, the pluralism by which it was all along characterized and which was very close to the subalterns was lost under the influence of Tat Khalsa. The Sikh-identity got centralized and a uniform pattern was imposed. As Harjot Oberoi notes,

In the absence of a centralized church and an attendant religious hierarchy, heterogeneity in religious beliefs, plurality of rituals, and diversity of lifestyles were freely acknowledged. ..It presented its adherents with a wide variety of choices to determine what they did with their rites, festivals, body management, language and social organization. The Tat Khalsa disowned this pluralist tradition and enunciated an orderly, pure singular form of Sikhism. ..The faithful were compelled to direct their religious sentiments exclusively towards Sikh sacred resources...³⁰

It is obvious then, that from the subaltern point of view, any attempt to create forced unity, worse, uniformity in religious sphere is an attempt to suppress their self-identity and freedom which is very much connected with their decentralized way of life and love for plurality. This pluralism, as I noted earlier, is not un-related, since the subalterns exhibit resemblance to each other in their religious experience, share as they do the common condition of subordination.

²⁹ Cfr C.K. Yang, *Op.cit.* p.225.

³⁰ Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, pp. 420 & 421..

Ritual Performance

There is no gainsaying the central importance rituals occupy in the religious traditions. Several theories have been put forward to explain the place of ritual, its origin, meaning, etc. The subalterns too have their own world of rituals, but different in many ways from those of the dominant religious traditions. Given the strong oral character of the subaltern tradition, the ritual performance assumes its own specific characteristics, and above all has a different function from that of the dominant religious tradition. I do not intend to go into any description of subaltern rituals. Let me highlight just one or two aspects of the rituals which would also show the difference.

Unlike the elitist religious experience, in rituals, the focus is not on any sacredness. There is no break or opposition between sacred and profane; what we find is a non-dichotomized continuum of life. The focus is rather on the performance of the ritual act itself - which is communitarian - with minimal role for any ritual specialist. Ritual is a performance of the whole community or group actively participating. Most ritual acts are connected with dance and rhythmic movement of the body. It has the character of a celebration of life rather than worshipping some sacredness away from real life and its experiences. This holistic approach explains why the rituals of the subalterns are characterized not only by seriousness, but also by the element of play. It is in fact a mixture of both.

The rituals of the subalterns connected with dance, movement of the body and play are an experience of liberation. To the subalterns who in their servile condition subject their bodies to hard work and sweat out in the fields of their masters, rituals offer the moment of emancipation. It is the moment when they take possession of their bodies, and that sublime and "sacred" act expresses itself in vibrant dance, shouts and singing with the accompaniment of drums. Keeping with this whole ritual mood is the bloody sacrifice offered to gods and goddesses with much pathos, which is different from the vegetable offerings and pujas performed in a silent corner of home or temple.

Anthropologists are accustomed to speak of *reversal rituals*. According to them, there are periodical rituals in which those at the lower rung of the society enact the role of those domineering over them. Through such role-reversal at the symbolic realm, the stability and equilibrium of the society and its structures are maintained. It is a mechanism, so to say, to let the steam go. Those at the lower level find in reversal ritual an opportunity to vent their pent-up emotions and feelings.

Victor Turner notes how in such ritual performances "the structurally inferior aspire symbolic structural superiority".³¹ But it appears to me that such an anthropological framework does not really explain the contemporary situation of the subalterns, specially in India. These rituals do not remain simply in the symbolic realm. They are not merely structure-maintaining devices, or mere symbolically projected utopia, but also an important means which offer new energies in their *actual* struggles against the continued oppression of the dominant castes and classes. For, in the symbolic ritual realm are fomented the emotional energies for their fight against subordination, discrimination and injustice. In other words, the energies released in the ritual flow into the socio-political and cultural sphere and take on the form of protest and resistance.³² This seems to be confirmed by experience. With reference to the Theyyam rituals of the "untouchable" pulayas of Kerala, J.J.Pallath observes, "our field experience shows that the ritual of status reversal is a two-edged sword. While it reaffirms the social structure, it also generates a symbolic energy by creating a critical consciousness to protest against the very social system".³³

The Language

The roughness of the subaltern language is simply the mirror of the toughness and struggle of the people in daily life. It is a language which may offend the ears of those who have identified truth with the ability to express correctly, in refined language with flawless logical consistency. This latter type of language, no wonder is often attuned to a trans-worldly realm looking away from the world of misery and oppression. In the subaltern language there is little of that gulf that separates terrestrial realities from the religious ones. The various moods of life like love, mirth, compassion, heroism, anger, fear, repugnance, wonder, peace are also the moods and the languages in the relationship of the subaltern to their gods and vice versa.³⁴

³¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, Cornell University Press, New York, p. 203; cfr also A.P.Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Routledge, London, 1985, pp.63 ff..

³² Of course, Victor Turner, as the subtitle of his work shows is not unaware of the "anti-structure" element. But the point is that it seems to remain only in a symbolic realm of ritual.

³³ J.J.Pallath, *Theyyam. An analytical Study of the folk Culture, Wisdom and Personality*, Indian Social Institute, Delhi, 1995, p.20; cfr also Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, *The Sacred in Popular Hinduism. An Empirical Study in Chirakkal, North Malabar*, The Christian Literature Society, Chennai, 1983.

³⁴ Cfr J.J. Pallath, *Op.cit.* p.169. I am told that the deity known as "Kodungalloor Amman" is visited by the subaltern devotees, and during the pilgrimage vulgar and filthy words of the worst kind are used against the deity, but thereby no disrespect is meant!

Speaking of language, it is important to note that, unlike the dominant religious traditions which have as their chief point of reference the written word, the subaltern religious experience is bound up with oral narrations. This latter form corresponds to the way of life of the subalterns. The pathos of their life and struggles is best reflected in the narrative form. Formulating in precise words the religious tenets and codifying norms for ethical conduct is something quite far removed from their way of life and their concerns. From the point of view of history of religion, we could see in the core-event behind Judaism much of the traits of the subaltern religion. The group of bonded labourers who were exploited by the Pharaoh in Egypt narrate their suffering to their God and share their woes with one another. It is by narrating their experience of the past that their religious world comes alive. In fact, the central Jewish ritual of Passover meal was intimately connected with the narration of how their forefathers were oppressed and how they were led to freedom.

The narrative language has polyvalent function: it is a locus for pouring out emotions, it is a means of healing and a device to project individual and collective hope for the future. Among the dalits and the tribals, it is understandable why their religious experience is connected with narrations of myths. Such a thing is not a kind of lower form of religiosity as may be judged from the elitist religious perspective; in a way, they form the core of the subaltern religious experience. These narratives often reconstruct the origins of the group in a very different way than what they have been told by their rulers and oppressors. It is often a case of a very noble past from which they had fallen to the present state of oppression due to some accidental happening. This is a recurrent pattern in the narratives of the subalterns about their origins, and their present state of humiliation.

It is important to note that the mythical and narrative language with which the subalterns become aware of their true identity - different from the imposed identity - is the one with which their gods and goddesses come alive to them. Much like their own identity, their gods and goddesses have their specific identity different from the lower identity ascribed to them by the dominant religious tradition. Further, it is the narrative which shapes the world-view of the subalterns as a group, as a community. As we can see all these functions cannot be fulfilled by a religious pattern that has as its point of reference some reified text cast in the conceptual language of a belief system. In contemporary times the narrative and mythical can take on the form of individual or collective biography. We may refer here to the *minjung*

of Korea in whose biographical narrative the repression to which they were subjected acquire a religious character.

Subaltern religion and the Ethics of Solidarity

Obviously there is an intimate relationship between religion and ethics. The world-view and religious beliefs condition the ethical approach to life. What kind of ethics do we find associated with the subaltern religious experience? There is little interest among the subalterns about a universalistic and normative ethical orientations, or anything like a "world-ethic". The foundation for their ethical conduct is not any norm, but a life of solidarity.³⁵

As in their religious experience and expressions, so too in the ethical realm there is a strong communitarian approach among the subalterns. Failure to be in solidarity with the community in its struggles and hopes is something very reprehensible. The gods and goddesses of the upper castes and classes are so designed that they are attuned to the exploitative mechanism of the dominant groups. On the other hand, gods and goddesses of the subalterns are more in line with promotion of life in such a way as to company the people in their engagement with life in community. Such an approach to the divine realm, strengthens an ethics of solidarity. One may raise the question, where do the subalterns derive their motivation for ethical practice. In trying to respond we may think of a situation of a small baby at the brink of an open well. Which human being will not stretch his/her hands to save the baby? The ethics of the subalterns is an ethic that has its fountain in the deep humanity within women and men. The situation of being subordinated and oppressed, far from eclipsing this humanity makes it glow and outshine the complicated ethical injunctions and codification of the dominant religious traditions. Solidarity is ultimately the expression of this inner sensitivity and it expresses itself in sharing, generosity, readiness to sacrifice for others and for the interest of the community. The communitarian character of their religious experience reinforces and cements this ethics of solidarity which is transmitted as a culture from generation to generation.

³⁵ Cfr My paper "Tradition, Toleranz und Diskurs im Indischen Kontext", presented at an interdisciplinary symposium in the University of Bonn on the theme "*Formen religiöser Verbindlichkeit*", during November 19. - 21, 1997 (shortly to be published).

CONCLUSION

Anthropologists, ethnographers and folklorists may find abundant material for their study in the phenomena of subaltern religion. But one would miss out the essential and lose the proper perspective if one forgets the *subjects* of this religious experience: they are the people - wherever they may be - who experience subordination. Subaltern religion is difficult to define. Nevertheless, we cannot but note, a kind of "family-resemblance" among the subaltern religious experiences in different contexts: It derives from the shared condition of being subjugated and all the consequences resulting from it.

There is, of course, much ambiguity in subaltern religion. But one cannot undermine its potential as an important social force. As for India, the significance of this religious phenomenon can be gauged only when set over against the current socio-political scenario in the country. There is the India of the rich, the powerful and the competing middle class on the one side, and the India of the subalterns in rural areas and the margins of cities, on the other. With globalization and liberalization of economic policies, the gulf between the two Indias is increasingly widening. But at the same time, as never before in the history of the country, there is the rising up of the subalterns, claiming for dignity and for their legitimate rights. In this complex situation, the religious experience of the subalterns seems to offer them greater self-confidence, identity, force for resistance, and a sense of solidarity. Through a new awakening and conscious reflection of their religious experience, the subalterns seem to say that they are different.

The significance of subaltern experiences can be seen also in its possible contribution to new social consciousness. In fact the social consciousness and commitment to social justice witnessed during the decades of 60's to 80's were eclipsed in the 90's by the invasion of liberalization and globalization in the country. Every segment of public life - including education - wants to be simply acolytes at the altar of globalization and liberalization. The re-awakening of social consciousness can come about only by activating the social forces at the bottom. One of the sources appears to be the religiosity of the subalterns as it does not represent a closure - as often the dominant religious traditions are - but an opening towards a transformed future. Hence, any citizen who is concerned about the transformation of Indian society, cannot overlook the subaltern religious phenomena. It calls for closer understanding and further reflection.