

Deep Spirituality Will Decide Humanity's Future

Thomas Menampampil

Archbishop Emeritus of Guwahati, India

Abstract: In the modern age, religion and spirituality stood scrutinised and criticized. We agree that all criticisms and negative evaluations have a thought-provoking value. We agree too that people can make of their spiritual convictions an idle and unproductive force in their lives, if they choose to do so. On the contrary, if they so decide, they can make of it the *strongest motivating force* in the world. A spiritual outlook can generate a deep sense of responsibility for addressing the current problems of the world, like the increase of violence and corruption, economic imbalance, aggravation of poverty, ecological disaster, damage to cultures, erosion of ethical values, poor governance, biased media, harassment of minorities, gender bias, and others.

In an increasingly consumeristic world, we notice a steady erosion of cultures and values. A sense of responsibility must be invoked. Spiritually oriented citizens can help in a convincing manner. Constructing inter-cultural relationships too has become extremely important in this era of intense migrations, which have brought people of diverse cultures and religions together. The rise of radical fundamentalism was largely a response to the exaggerations of radical secularism. We ought to *explore the psycho-social reasons* for the emergence of this terrible phenomenon in modern times, observe the emotional content of what is being said and done, attempt bringing down their anger by making an effort to remove some of the causes, and engage them in a dialogue once the emotions are down. An entire world can change with it.

Representatives of *every section of the global society* must make such things possible: intellectuals, media men, politicians, business leaders, religious personnel, students, associations, all must help. Spiritually motivated persons have the persuasive power to bring such people together.

Keywords: Spirituality, Values, Challenges, Responsibility, Humanity

Criticism of Religion

“Criticism, even when severe, can be looked upon as a thought-provoker. When everything is said and done and the dust has settled over the storm, what is right will show itself right again.” (Anonymous)

In the modern age, religion stood scrutinised. It was subjected *diverse types of interpretations*, welcomed or rejected by different parties as they felt convinced. To the extent it was linked with dogma, it met with less acceptability in an era in which all dogmas were questioned. To the extent it was associated with respect for authority, it was less attractive to those who were eager to throw off any form of authority. As it appeared much like an ancient tradition, it was gradually abandoned by sections of people who were eager for a break with the past. Interpretations too multiplied as to what religion really is. Thus, *religion* was interpreted *as alienation*, a natural instinct for softening painful realities, plain escapism, a useful emotion, a search for solace and inwardness and therefore at best be tolerated. Ludwig Feuerbach taught that God was a human projection, a glorified reflection of human beings. For Marx religion was the *opium of the people*, for Sigmund Freud a psychological *illusion*. In our own times, persons like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins linked religion with *superstition* and *fanaticism* and looked on it with contempt.¹ Such scholars refused to recognise the value of its spiritual content and experiences as they could not be verified in the laboratory. Masterminds of today's economy would consider basing social strategies on an intangible dimension of human life like religious faith unrealistic, an enfeebling proposal, an obstacle to economic growth.

The Value of a Spiritual Outlook

“He who sees Him in all, and all in Him, hates none. He who feels for others as he feels for himself, loves all.” (Isha Upanishad)

We agree that all these interpretations and criticisms have a thought-provoking value. It is true that people can make of their spiritual convictions an idle and unproductive force in their lives, if they choose to do so. But, on the contrary, if they so decide, they can make of it the *strongest motivating force* in the world. The inner

¹ Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 28-31.

sturdiness that spirit-driven people build up supplies the needed energies for an outer commitment. Profound spiritual convictions transform the inner world first, and the outer world next.

If these inner energies are used to harm others in the name of a philosophy, ideology, or religion, the results can be disastrous as recent experiences have shown in some parts of the world. But if they are made to serve the *welfare of humanity* with absolute sincerity of purpose and dedication, there is bound to be an enriching of shared human culture and inter-linking of the human family. Intellectuals moved by genuine spirituality have always fostered solidarity and cohesion among human groups and manifested *enormous energy* in the service of society. They can also strengthen economic production and sharpen political insights.

Spiritual energy, rightly channelled, manifests itself in extraordinary dynamism, in committed service, amazing creativity, stunning innovation, and prodigious team-effort towards the common good, which makes of spirituality and sound philosophical convictions eminently practical. Such a search for depth is urgently needed today, which would give *sturdiness to the sense of responsibility* weakening in individuals to address the most pressing problems of the day.

Revival of Interest in Spiritual Values in Our Times

*“Conquer hatred by non-hatred. Overcome evil by good, stinginess by liberality; and falsehood by truth.”
(Dhammapada 17,3)*

Young people today seem to be greatly attracted to experiences of *silent inner search* to find a bit of relief amidst the restlessness prevalent in a market-and-ideology-driven society. Books of Confucius, Lao Tzu, Sun Tzu, Teilhard de Chardin, and eastern classics are found in airports and wayside bookshops. History shows that periods of suppression of religion are followed by periods of *explosive religious fervour* in reaction, at times going to exaggeration, unless guided by wise religious mentors.

Sun Tzu,² the Chinese strategist and philosopher, was speaking of something deeper than mere military strategy, when he said, “Deep knowledge is to be aware of disturbance before disturbance, to be aware of danger before danger, to be aware of destruction before destruction, to be aware of calamity before calamity... By deep knowledge of principle, one can change

² Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Thomas Cleary (New Delhi: Rupa, 1999), 544-496 BC.

disturbance into order, change danger into safety, change destruction into survival, change calamity into fortune. By strong action on the Way, one can bring the body to the realm of longevity, bring the mind to the sphere of mystery, bring the world to great peace, and bring tasks to great fulfilment.”³ There have been spiritual traditions that changed *anger, hatred, greed* into *constructive energy* “by being aware”.

One gradually comes to realize that there is an undeniable relationship between the quality of the *spiritual view of life* that supplies energies and the *quality of an outer commitment* that achieves social good.

Spirituality that Generates a Deep Sense of Responsibility

“Go and spread righteousness everywhere.”
(Guru Govind Singh)

A sense of responsibility for the common good which a spiritual outlook can generate and consequent commitment to social betterment is a form of spirituality that would make meaning in our times. This inner urge would help deeper personalities to make their lives meaningful by *addressing the current problems* of the world, like the increase of violence and corruption, economic imbalance, aggravation of poverty, ecological disaster, damage to cultures, erosion of ethical values, poor governance, biased media, harassment of minorities, gender bias, and others.

People are hungering for a new sense of meaning and direction in a chaotic world of clashing ideologies. Spirituality must help. Here is where we need to develop a new type of intellectual leadership and spiritual inspiration, not one of demagoguery and denunciation, not of power hunger and manipulation, but of *inviting intelligent reflection*, diligent search, and joint exploration towards *evolving a consensus* on common issues...and of assisting the process in the best way possible.

Prophets of Violence, Messengers of Peace

“People throughout the world may look different or have a different religion, education or position, but they are all the same. They are the people to be loved. They are all hungry for love.” (Mother Teresa)

³ Ibid., 3.

We live in a world today where a new generation of *prophets of hatred and violence* has arisen who foster anger against people of other communities in the name of culture, religion, ethnicity, minority status, gender, and colour. They are happy to have a defined enemy just to be clear about their own identity.⁴ All slogans are about 'rights'. Duties are forgotten. Every claim of rights seems to be valid until its exaggerations make its limitations evident. Meantime peace keeps eluding the human race. A helpful dialogue fails to start.

Not all people who have opted for violence are unteachable. There is a French saying, to understand is to forgive. Cynicism or hasty condemnations will not help. If a society feels a deep sense of injustice or is aware of gross inequality, there is bound to be a reaction. And when a group of poverty stricken people are brought together, organized and made to feel they are fighting for a good cause, their *united stand seems to empower them* and help them to discover a new emotional identity.⁵ Many painful happenings in West Asia have to be seen from this perspective. Unfortunately in that region, religion has been made to serve a wrong cause or adopt a wrong style.

Such situations create contexts for the emergence of prophets of violence on two competing sides. After a while it is not clear who is the aggressor and who is the defender. And the *earlier victim himself may go to excesses* inflicting injury on the aggressor and other groups, reaching to the point of ethnic cleansing.⁶ Thus, we cannot always believe that the strong are always wrong and that weak always right, that victims of injustice cannot turn unjust themselves.

Vested interests can take ideological and regional fanaticisms to totally irresponsible limits. Building on emotions, especially on the smothered anger or unexpressed resentment of deprived groups, justice-fighters can lead matters to such a head that there seems to be no other solution to a problem than violence. The frequent recurrence of violence these days in different parts of the world may be attributed to leaders who make exaggerated claims for their people and *exploit their collective anger*. To incite people by building on their grievances and rouse their anger in times of their helplessness, and leave them to themselves when the consequences

⁴ Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), 1-2.

⁵ Eric Lott, *Religious Faith, Human Identity* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2005), 20-1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

of their reckless activities catch up with them, is the height of irresponsibility.

To bring hope to the disadvantaged and point them a way forward, that is the challenge before every conscientious person. This is the special mission of religiously motivated people. Spirituality helps “to understand the person who caused pain, and have compassion” Buddhist Monk Nhat Hanh.⁷ All need to re-educate themselves in a pedagogy of peace and adopt a path of persuasion.

Past Offences Must be Placed Behind

“Forgive always the ills that others do; but to forget them, this is nobler still.” (Tirukkural)

One of the greatest hurdles to peace is the *memory of historic injuries* a community, society, nation or a civilization has received: e.g. colonial exploitation, unequal treaties in China, exploitation of natural resources by the great powers in West Asia and North Africa; consequent prejudices, perception of vested interests on either side.

However, it is good to be humble about these matters. Historically, *we have all hurt each other* as ethnic groups, nations, or civilizations, whether it be for reasons of religious prejudices, living space, natural resources, gold in the old days, oil or opportunity in our times. It is part of practical spirituality to work in order to heal the memories of diverse types of historic wounds at the ethnic, cultural, national and even civilizational levels; and also to deal with emotions built around today's asymmetries and imbalances in power. But it is not easy. It is a gigantesque task. And yet it is a challenge before practical spirituality and philosophical maturity.

Collective anger can be terrible. That is why the *work of anger-reduction has become central* to the creation of social harmony. If collective emotions are not healed, violence recurs again. Every citizen ought to make his/her small contribution to this sort of healing and the rebuilding of relationships. Negative memories of the past can harden. But they can also be healed. What is most important is to cultivate sensitivity in sensitive matters. Ernest Renan used to say that nations must learn to forget the past, forgive each other, and move forward.

⁷ Hanh Nhat, *Thich, Being Peace* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987), 93.

Diverse Interest-Groups Must Come Together for Peace

“How wonderful it is, how pleasant, for people to live together in harmony!” (Psalms 133:1)

Representatives of *every section of the global society* must make it possible: intellectuals, media men, politicians, business leaders, religious personnel, students, associations, all must help. Historical reflection can open our minds to a deeper understanding of the present situation. Arnold Toynbee in his voluminous *Study of History* argues that the collective violence of a society (nation, civilizational block) in one direction is a response to an earlier violence in the opposite direction. Similarly, any excessive social pressure in one direction invites a social reaction in the other direction. We must spend some time on self-examination whether we are promoting our own collective interest at the expense of others which invites a reaction. Exaggeration leads to exaggeration. Again, insensitivities in one direction draws insensitivities in the other. We must put more energy into promoting religious, cultural and ethical sensitivities among people.

Emmanuel Kant’s assessment over a century ago was that societies had become so interdependent economically and in other ways, that violence (war) would be damaging to the aggressor himself. Normal Angell brought the idea forward insisting, “The day for progress by force has passed; it will be progress by ideas or not at all.”⁸ “Progress by Ideas” is what Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winner, would call “Public Reasoning.” And yet, it was after that that two World Wars took humanity by surprise, revealing *certain tendencies radically rooted in human nature*. Here is where spirituality can help in a way that political and economic thinkers and strategists cannot.

Having worked in the area of reconciliation between communities in conflict for about a quarter of a century, I know the meaning of ‘collective anger.’ It is terrible. The *work of anger-reduction has become central* to our social service almost everywhere in our times. If collective emotions are not healed, violence recurs again. Every citizen, every religious believer ought to make his/her small contribution to this sort of healing and the rebuilding of relationships.

A creative and religiously inspired approach is greatly required. First of all, we need to explore the *psycho-social reasons* for the emergence of this terrible phenomenon of violence in modern

⁸ Ian Morris, *War - What Is It Good For* (London: Profile Books, 2014), 235.

times, observe the emotional content of what is being said and done, remove causes within possibility, and engage people in a dialogue once the emotions are down. We need today persons who can *demolish walls of prejudice* and build bridges of dialogue.⁹

Religiously Motivated People in Defence of Vanishing Values

“First establish yourself in the good; thereafter you should counsel others. The wise man who acts thus will be above reproach.” (Dammaṇḍa 12,2)

In an increasingly consumeristic world, what we notice today is a steady erosion of cultures and values. Consequently, it has emerged as a core concern for spiritually motivated persons, to *defend cultural and ethical value systems* in communities that are under threat and restore those that have been lost. It has become extremely important to come to the rescue of vanishing values like concern for others, mutuality, altruism, forgiveness, peace, family and community relationships, honesty, probity in public life, protection of the environment, promotion of good governance, freedom of religion, and ethics in the media.

It is said that all *religious traditions are under threat today*; but so are all frozen forms of comprehensive philosophical explanations of reality and social processes, which are often called metanarratives. A deep sense of spirituality always withstood storms, since it has roots in the deepest psyche of human persons. Secular (political, economic, social) concerns, of course, need to be addressed and their voices heard. They are of great importance to human life. Every form of social self-assertion and criticism, even when radical, serves as a thought-provoker. But when everything is said and done and the dust has settled over the storm, what is right will show itself right again; what is true true, and what is beautiful beautiful. Sound philosophy makes a return. *Religion comes back renewed*. Spirituality manifests its strength.

Interpret Current Events and Movements Correctly

“There is a constant danger, in the cacophony of voices, that a politician may lose his moral bearings and find himself entirely steered by the winds of public opinion.” (Barack Obama)

⁹ Hans Kung, *Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), xxiv.

Interpreting events and processes is extremely important before launching any meaningful action. Politically partisan people tend to *embellish facts* and interpret events according to their own political interests and one-sided views. Emotionally led groups blindly follow leaders that hold out attractive populist programmes and promises before them. Irresponsible journalists seek to serve the interests of one group or the other according to their own political or commercial allegiance.

Ideologically biased media tend to give a *lopsided presentation* of a situation or an incident. We know from experience how a wrong interpretation of a case of violence can aggravate anger and anxiety, and lead to further violence. Today's social media tend to aggravate things even further. 'Fake news' can deceive people, spread hatred, rouse emotions, and plant prejudices. Those who *spread rumours* irresponsibly in times of tension become the cause of major tragedies. But this sort of things keeps happening all the time. A sense of responsibility must be invoked. Spiritually oriented citizens can help in a convincing manner.

Bridging Cultural Distances

“Let us have concord with our own people, and concord with people who are strangers to us... May we unite in our minds, unite in our purposes, and not fight against the divine spirit within us.” (Atharva Veda 7.52.1-2)

Constructing inter-cultural relationships has become extremely important in this era of *intense migrations*, which have brought people of diverse cultures and religions together. They will have to learn the art of living in social harmony. People who have come as refugees deserve kindness. What worries us today is that it is not responsible leaders who invite reflection in healthy debates that decide issues, but *xenophobes* who initiate polarisation and extremism, use ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism and wish to deny weaker communities their rights. Debates turn into confrontation.

Much depends on the adaptation of the migrants, says Paul Collier of Oxford.¹⁰ To the people of the host country, they appear a threat. What is required both ways are a “*creative openness to others,*” going beyond instinctive reactions. A dialogue of life is vital; it is a need for mere survival. It can open doors to warm

¹⁰ Paul Collier, *Exodus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 43.

relationships and mutual sharing that can enrich both parties. But this is not easy if the cultural distance between the two communities is significant. However, the mightiest challenge will be in the field of *emotional integration* between communities of great cultural distance in a country. Experts in cultural dialogue can facilitate the process. Social thinkers and educationalists can pave the way. Deep spirituality shows its unique skill in helping people to transcend cultural barriers.

Dictators Turn to Old Models for Inspiration

“When a ruler’s personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders.” (Analects 12,5)

Today more and more populist *leaders look to the Fascist rulers* of last century for inspiration. Fascists wanted to polarize society, imprison entire populations in an attitude of hatred against another community. For this purpose, they created tales, spread rumours, circulated falsehoods, and built up emotions. What they wanted to do was to ‘manufacture a mood’ in others and control their minds.

“Mussolini is always right”, cried the journalist Leo Longanesi.¹¹ Antonio Gramsci says that Fascism kept everyone “happy by means of moralizing sermons, emotional stimuli, messianic myths of an awaited golden era.” Personal magnetism was a great help.¹² Hitler too adopted many Fascist ways like entertainment, rallies, exciting events, parades, marches, speeches, newsreels, and banners.¹³ His right hand man, Joseph Goebbels, used to say, politics is about *“manufacturing a mood;”* it is propaganda, media.¹⁴

Even within American democracy, Edward Bernays the nephew of Freud, believed that social life should be organized by *“engineering consent” through propaganda.*¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, a Holocaust survivor, establishes beyond doubt how for all mass leaders “contempt of facts is a necessity.”¹⁶ In such situations, it is the duty of every citizen to remain alert and help others to discern.

¹¹ Zac Gershberg and Sean Illing, *The Paradox of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 140.

¹² *Ibid.*, 141.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

Even Digital Warriors Can be Confronted

“He who has killed multitudes of men should weep for them with the bitterest grief.” (Tao Te Ching 31)

In the context of such challenges, it is interesting to note how Maria Ressa, a recent Nobel Prize winner, confronted President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, whose war against drug had killed 27,000 young people.¹⁷ Mainline media quailed before Duterte’s digital warriors. But Maria brought together a *digital team to address this injustice with courage*. She relied on the collective intelligence and personal devotedness of her alert team.¹⁸ She fought fiercely against the so-called ‘patriotic-trolling’ that spread hatred.¹⁹ She spoke up for the youth who were being killed, pleaded for the Rule of Law in the virtual world,²⁰ media ethics,²¹ healthy norms for the defence of truth,²² and long-term education to responsibility.²³

People forget that internet developed as result of technologies that US government sponsored. But today its power is in the hands of two or three gigantic corporations.²⁴ Maria argued that they should not be allowed to abuse that power. Accountability should be demanded from technology.²⁵ Sensationalism should not be allowed to win over objectivity.²⁶ Maria held that democracy should be a balance between the Rule of Law and protests, wisdom of the crowd and mob rule.²⁷ This is a ‘*battle of the minds*’ and must be won, she insisted.²⁸ A ‘*battle of the minds*’ is another form of communication, sharing of ideas, dialogue in action. Though seven criminal cases had been filed against Maria Ressa, she won the Nobel Prize for 2021.

Hannah Arendt’s message too is similarly a call for responsibility; she claims that it is the passive attitude of citizens

¹⁷ Maria Ressa, *How to Stand up to a Dictator* (London: Penguin (Random House), 2022), 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

²² *Ibid.*, 74.

²³ *Ibid.*, 262.

²⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents* (London: Profile Books, 2022), 39.

²⁵ Ressa, *How to Stand up to a Dictator*, 253.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

that is responsible for all evil in society.²⁹ If Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit turn to spreading “misinformation,” we cannot remain silent.³⁰ We need to become “gate keepers” defending helpful norms and becoming guardians of ethical values.³¹ We must *make our voices heard*. For, democracy can survive only if citizens remain well-informed and alert, and the public responsible.³² Education must include not only effective use of the tools of communication, but also discernment about their responsible use.³³ The *ideal atmosphere for “public reasoning”* that John Rawls visualizes cannot be taken for granted; it *must be created*.³⁴ The right climate for ‘ideal speech’ that Habermas urges does not prevail today; it must be made to emerge in each context.³⁵ Spiritually inspired people are best skilled in this art.

Fundamentalism Rose as a Response to Radical Secularism

“*May the Lord of speech give sweetness to your words.*”
(*Yajur Veda 30,1*)

The rise of radical fundamentalism was largely a response to the exaggerations of radical secularism. It was brought to global attention with the tragedy of September 11, 2001 which made many zealous secularists rethink their stubborn conviction that the age of religion was over. People the world over were awakened, all of a sudden, to an *understanding of what religion meant* to a significant section of humanity: the sceptical section came face to face with the believing section. Jurgen Habermas, an eloquent spokesperson for secular thinking admitted, “The secular society acquires a new understanding of religious convictions...”

Nemoianu noted, “Habermas was not the only intellectual in whom one can recognize some signs of ‘turning.’ Several prominent European figures sent out similar signals.” Nemoianu mentions persons like Norberto Bobbio, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. If this changed understanding could have been acquired without that tragedy, ours would have been a happier world. Yes, *Religion is not dead*. It is alive. Genuine spirituality still *moves millions*. It is good to recognise that a secular worldview has

²⁹ Gershberg and Illing, *The Paradox of Democracy*, 173.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

³² *Ibid.*, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 254.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

its own limitations. Habermas frankly admits that one may need the aid of religion to provide motivation for the observance of healthy social norms. He concedes that the secular society can learn a lot from religion, especially with regard to the concepts of good and evil.

Fundamentalism Spreads Wider

“A man who exalts his own sect and despises another, hurts his own sect.” (Emperor Asoka’s Rock Edict XII)

If an exaggerated self-affirmation of faith (fundamentalism) has made many people think about the resilience of religion, it has also given rise to an aversion to religion in the way it has manifested itself in our times, often combined with *violent nationalism*, ethnic loyalty and *radical exclusivism*. Of late fundamentalism has assumed a wider meaning: a fanatic loyalty to one’s own community or traditions; refusal to listen to other points of view including proposals of modernity and science; hostility to other communities to the point of violence; attitudes that are exclusive, authoritarian and repressive.³⁶

Fundamentalism, in this wider sense, is fast emerging as a *universal problem*: Hindutva groups against Muslims and Christians; Muslim radicals against minorities where Islam is dominant; Confucians manifesting a majoritarian attitude towards the non-Han Chinese; aggressive religious minorities expressing fidelity to their beliefs in violent reactions.

A Sympathetic Understanding of Self-Assertive Hindus

“My religion is kindness.” (The Dalai Lama)

There are two ways of discussing issues related to fundamentalism in any form. One approach would be to trace extremist groups to their historical origins, study the statements of their most radical leaders, list the horrors that they have inflicted on others, and denounce them from a distance or sit back in helplessness! What I suggest is another approach. I would propose that we explore the psycho-social reasons for the emergence of this terrible phenomenon in modern times, *observe the emotional content* of what is being said and done, attempt bringing down their anger by making an effort to remove some of the causes, and *engage them in a dialogue* once

³⁶ Hans Kung, *Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 641.

the emotions are down. Once again the dialogue of life needs to be emphasised.

First of all, it is only right that we pay attention to the *collective psyche of an aggrieved community*. A Hindu-sympathizer Koenraad Elst says that for nearly a millennium Hindu society has been exploited by the political, ideological, and psychological domination of Muslim and European powers.³⁷ Further, they were *culturally humbled*. Under British rule, educated Indians were growing embarrassed about their identity and culture, and were eager to westernize themselves. Mahatma Gandhi himself confesses to have earnestly tried to develop a British figure.

Such self-alienation has led many Hindus to develop what may be called an 'inferiority complex'.³⁸ Many Hindu leaders feel that their *mind still remains colonized*, suffers from a colonial psychology. They are all too eager to live by the standards set by others, and they feel that they are always falling short.³⁹ Despite all these humiliations, we cannot fail to notice the strength and sturdiness of the Hindu civilization. The amazing fact remains that *Hinduism* not only survived but even *flourished under lengthy foreign rule*, while the great civilizations of Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Persia and vast areas of Byzantine empire were just absorbed into Islam. This establishes beyond doubt the sturdiness of Hinduism. Spirituality shows its strength.

A Sympathetic Understanding of Self-Assertive Muslims

"Oh men, direct your energies to promote the good of all mankind. Let your relations with all be characterized by love, peace and harmony. Let your hearts beat in unison with human hearts." (Rig Veda 8,49,4)

As Hindus remember their humiliation at Muslim and British hands, Muslims of the Middle East have memories of colonial exploitation and the experience of western interference with their oil resources. Several see recent *Islamic aggressiveness influenced by painful events* like the tragedies in Palestine of 1948, the humiliating war of 1967, Intifada trend of 1987, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, western invasion of Iraq 2003.

The alienation of Middle East Islamic leadership was gradual. The western-educated secular-minded leaders that won

³⁷ Koenraad Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2001), 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

independence for their nations wanted to introduce liberal reforms into their tradition-bound Muslim society. They met with resistance especially from ardent believers. Then they *shifted to conservative religion-inspired goals*, or were replaced by staunch believers who were convinced that the political humiliation of Islam was due to their failure to live up to genuine Islamic laws. That is how a call for return to ‘pure Islam’ developed into a political strategy. The fear today is that an orthodoxy, allergic to sound sense and modern values, can block the development of open-thinking, self-criticism, social reform, and genuine human development in their society, if there is no intellectual freedom.

Modern-minded *Muslim elite* look back at an earlier era in Islamic history, of scientific research, religious freedom and dialogue of civilizations, under Muslim rulers. The enlightened leadership of that period brought into existence centres of learning like the one at Cordoba with a library of 400,000 volumes. We may say that a thinker like Al-Ghazali’s had anticipated Descartes by six centuries. With so many centuries apart, both were known for insatiable *intellectual curiosity, critical spirit*, power of synthesis, and personal simplicity of life; both wanted to reconcile faith and philosophy.⁴⁰ It was using Averroes’ commentary that Thomas Aquinas introduced Aristotle to the West. We cannot ignore the Muslim contribution to Europe through *Arab scholars* in Spain and to human civilization.

It is therefore *unfair to make stereotypes of all Muslims* as extremist, violent, oppressive of minorities and women, and feudalistic. Anti-Muslim politicians often find scapegoats for their failures or try to create a common enemy through the media e.g. war against terrorism, to keep people of various opinions and interests together.⁴¹ After all, it is easy to write a ‘criminal history’ of any particular nation, community, or religious group. The failure of a few should not be attributed to all. Prejudices may be spread also by Muslims themselves who have become rootless and westernized, and who handle the media.⁴² Comparing the best in one’s own tradition with the worst in another is unfair. Further, every tradition is best understood from within.

⁴⁰ Kung, *Islam*, 357.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁴² Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 517.

We Need Spiritually Motivated People Who Can Demolish the Walls of Prejudice

“Go you now monks, for the benefit of many, for the welfare of mankind, out of compassion for the world.” (*The Buddha*)

On the other hand, if adherents of a tradition were always to idealize everything in their faith forgetting inadequacies, failures, and incoherences, they may neither be truthful nor fair to themselves. While we are interested in the ideal Islam, we also need to know the real Islam as it is today. What are required are not uncritical admirers, but *truthful friends of Islam*.

However, we need urgently spiritually inspired people who can demolish walls of prejudice, *build bridges of dialogue*.⁴³ As we invite intelligent and open-minded Muslims for dialogue, we may ask other groups too whether we could work out together a ‘harmony of interests.’⁴⁴ What is most important to cultivate is *sensitivity in sensitive matters*. In this respect, neither some of Rushdie’s writings nor the Danish cartoons on Mohammed have been a positive contribution. Ridiculing the Q’uran or the Prophet, or trivializing Hindu symbolisms, can be extremely humiliating. Respect for others must include respect for what another community holds sacred.

After all, sincere Muslims are calling for spiritual, moral and religious values.⁴⁵ What we have to do is to *bring a bit of balance into everything*. That is the answer to the radical supporters of both secularization and fundamentalism. The right kind of believer gives unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God; gives to every sphere of human activity what is its due and central attention to what is central to humanity. “Many dialogue-prone Christians are genuine admirers of Hinduism.”⁴⁶ Conversation between people who differ has become an urgent need. “What our age needs above all are *bridge-builders* who, despite all difficulties, clashes and confrontations, have a shared worldview, ethical values and attitudes.” Neither Godless materialism nor fundamentalism seems to be able to convince the world today. People are waiting for new voices. They look for inspiring models in history: e. g., persons like patriarch Timotheos I who held dialogue

⁴³ Kung, *Islam*, xxiv.

⁴⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 690.

⁴⁵ Kung, *Islam*, 540.

⁴⁶ Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 283.

with Al-Mahdi.⁴⁷ May religiously-inspired promoters of creative dialogue arise among us.

Let us admit this too: despite all the criticisms of Islamic fundamentalists, it has made this powerful contribution in our times: it has *shown that religion is still relevant*, it is a living force, and has a hold on people and society. It enlightens humanity. Hindu zealots too give us the same message.

The wisdom of the ancients of different cultures must come together and enter into a mutually-edifying conversation with the insights of the younger generations of the present era. Cosmic evolution is bringing various cultures and religions closer. We should take collective responsibility for the re-discovery of the worth of spirituality in human processes and the purposefulness of the *re-introduction of religion into human affairs*.

We are Mutually Dependent

“All people are a single nation.” (Quran II)

We are mutually dependent in many other areas of life too. Today we recognize that our economies are interlocked, that ‘trade wars’ are suicidal. Insightful people argue that *even our conflicts* prove that *we need each other*. All we have to do is to change the nature of our relationships: from confrontational to collaborative, from mutually opposing to mutually stimulating.

In the cultural world, we *keep borrowing from each other* continuously. In the world of philosophy, we profit from each other’s intuitions. In the area of science, those who learn from others most, benefit the most.

The fact is that Nature has distributed abilities, talents, skills, and insights in such a way, that what is meant for one is given to another... to be discovered, appreciated, tapped, and generously shared. Everything ultimately turns to everyone’s benefit. When we begin to recognize this truth both in theory and practice, we will have an *inclusive outlook*; and we will have *Peace*. We need to emphasize this, because we notice certain exclusive attitudes today that make us anxious.

We Can Learn from Each Other’s Wisdom

“To be one with the world is wisdom.” (Tirukkural)

⁴⁷ Kung, *Islam*, 253.

In today's *globalized world* there are so many trends that seem to point to our universal togetherness. The new Economy is inter-linking people who had never known each other, innovations in communications are bringing peoples and communities together, international solidarity offers indefinite possibilities of self-expression; good ideas generated anywhere have opportunities to reach out to every other part of the world; and good values preserved in any civilizational tradition can offer inspiration to persons and societies in any other place on the planet.

There is every possibility today for *cultures, civilizations, and faiths to dialogue* with each other, to listen to each others' insights, and learn from each others' wisdom. For this, we need to go deeper into our religion.

Dialogue with the 'Thinking Element' in society

"Just as is a beautiful flower of varied hues and giving out sweet fragrance, just so is a man who is full of sweetness and who practices it." (Dhammapada 4,9)

In this context, I would like to emphasize the strategic importance of one category of people, dialoguing with whom you are dialoguing with the whole society. I am referring to *those who influence public thinking* in every community and take the rising generations towards new horizons. In this list I would put thinkers, writers, poets, artists, educators and speakers of exceptional ability who give a *self-understanding and self-pride to their society* and provide a *living philosophy* for the social movements of the day. If we wish to exert influence in society, we need to keep close to such persons, learn from the positive contribution they make, and initiate a dialogue with them, suggesting correctives in society where they are required.

Those with vested interests like opportunistic politicians, self-serving media men and wily business magnates belong to another category. Often our relationships are with these. But those who make people think, give a new direction to an entire population. They call for recognition. Intelligence must be invoked, the *resources of collective thinking must be tapped*. Spiritual leaders are best equipped to do that service to society.

Eliciting Thought, Inviting Reflection

"O Lord, grant me such qualities of head and heart as would endear me to the enlightened and learned among us, to the

ruling class and to all that have eyes to see.” (Atharva Veda 19,62)

Eliciting thought, inviting reflection, taking initiative in leading the analysis forward, being prepared to revise one’s understanding of a situation as it keeps changing, watching out for opportunities for goal-oriented action, *bringing ethical and moral considerations to live issues*, tapping cultural and human resources for the deepening of thought and the launching of purposeful action, drawing all beneficent forces in the community closer to each other, linking up scattered energies, helping people to put together scarce resources, leading persons and movements to realistic solutions....all this with a human touch and a human heart....this is our central task as committed citizens and sincere religious believers when we are engaged in public issues, especially in these troubled times.

Perceptive leaders induce people to reflect on live issues under the light of the principles derived from their convictions based on their culture, religion, civilization, healthy ideology and reliable value-system. They do not become mere demagogic orators, unethical vote-winners, maverick political mobilizers or manipulators of their community. They never pressurize, they persuade.

Time has come for believers of all traditions to join hands together in developing a “*Spirituality of Responsibility*” by playing a prophetic role in a society of fast eroding cultures and values and the rejection of ethical principles. In these times of contradictory voices inspired by diverse philosophical, ideological, psychological, sociological, and religious convictions, this form of assistance to society has become our most important contribution.

May Humanity’s Spiritual Urges and Insights Find Answers to All Human Problems

“Be united; speak in harmony; let your minds apprehend alike; common be your prayer; common be the end of your assembly; common be your resolutions; common be your deliberations; unified by your hearts; common be your intentions; perfect be your unity.” (Rig Veda 10,191,24)

Towards that end, we should help to create a culture that respects the thinking power in human beings and seeks to *resolve issues in a dignified way*. We should rescue decision-influencing debates from street orators, chaotic crowds, and ‘fake news’ producers in social media, and bring them to thinking cells, *conference rooms*, university halls and *legislative chambers*. In other words, we should

open several *healthy fora for dialogue* and intelligent conversation. John Rawls and Amartya Sen attached great importance to what they called “public reasoning.” Conscientious citizens should help fellow-citizens to move away from the use of muscle-power and gun-power to the *exercise of mind-power*. Dialogue of life must begin.

It is time, therefore, for the religious believers of the world to come together and encourage each other in their deeper *spiritual convictions* and the philosophical principles they cherish. After all, religion is nothing but an upward surge of the human heart to reach out to the Ultimate *in collaboration with others*. They must make a common effort to preserve and strengthen their faith in a ‘life-and-love-promoting God’ and foster those *ethical values* that will sustain the human spirit. They will have to keep supporting an on-going *struggle against the forces of irreligion* and irresponsibility which are trying to draw humanity away from their spiritual heritages and traditions. This battle of ideas must be won.

References

Bruce, Steve. *Secularization*. London: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Collier, Paul. *Exodus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Collins, Pat. *Basic Evangelization*. Dublin: The Columba Press, 2010.

Eco, Umberto. *Inventing the Enemy*. London: Vintage Books, 2013.

Edwards, David L. *Christianity: The First Two Thousand Years*. New York: Orbis Books, 1997.

Elst, Koenraad. *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2001.

Fukuyama, Francis. *Liberalism and its Discontents*. London: Profile Books, 2022.

Gershberg, Zac & Sean Illing. *The Paradox of Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022.

Hitchens, Christopher. *God is not Great*. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007.

Kung, Hans. *Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007.

Lott, Eric. *Religious Faith, Human Identity*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2005.

Morris, Ian. *War - What Is It Good For*. London: Profile Books, 2014.

Nhat, Hanh. *Thich, Being Peace*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987.

Ressa, Maria. *How to Stand up to a Dictator*. London: Penguin (Random House), 2022.

Sun Tzu. *The Art of War*. Translated by Thomas Cleary. New Delhi: Rupa, 1999.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Thomas Menampampil
Archbishop Emeritus
P.B. No. 100, Ambari
Guwahati-781 001, Assam, India
<menamabp@gmail.com>