

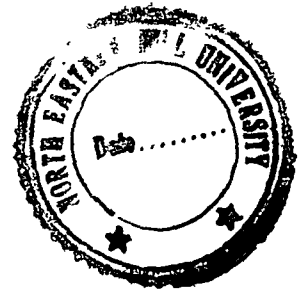
# RELIGION AND THE IDEA OF PRIVACY

DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED

IN PART FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY  
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BY

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**THE NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY**  
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In habit and character Shri E. Richard Tongper is a fit and proper person for the degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY.

*Mrinal Miri*

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Supervisor

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CHAPTER - I

## PREFACE

In this brief note right at the beginning of this essay I wish to say something about the style of writing I have deliberately adopted in the main part of the thesis. While I am seriously concerned with philosophical issues per se, my style of writing will perhaps be recognised as being more polemical than strictly academically philosophical. I do not wish here to go into the merits or justifiability of the polemical style in writing about philosophical issues. I have adopted this style for this dissertation for the simple reason that I believe in the kind of issues that I am interested in, a style of writing that leaves no room for doubt at all not only about one's intellectual but also one's moral and emotional commitment, is more suited than a dispassionate analytic academic style of philosophical writing. I do hope the thesis will be read with this in mind. But I also do try to give some indication of the fact that I am also not averse to the latter style in my Introduction (where I make my philosophical position clear) as well as in the Conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

## I

In the History of thought, there have been two broad, and mutually exclusive, ways of dealing with religious phenomena. These are: (i) the way of the reductionist, and (ii) the way of a person who takes at least some central area of religion as irreducible. The social scientist generally is the reductionist, while the religious person and occasionally the philosopher are the non-reductionists.

The reductionist's view generally is that religious phenomena are to be understood, made intelligible, explained only by reference to phenomena which are obviously non-religious. Thus, take for instance, the psycho-analytic treatment of religious beliefs. The position here is broadly that religious beliefs, or for that matter, religious rituals are the product of certain psychological, therefore, purely subjective, compulsions of the individual human being. Considered independently of these compulsions these beliefs and rituals must appear totally unintelligible and irrational. And if viewed in the light of these compulsions,

they do appear to make some kind of a sense, but then their life is inextricably linked with the life of these compulsions: Once through proper psycho-analysis these compulsions are removed, there cannot be any reason on earth for the continuance of religious beliefs and rituals:

The sociologist's reduction of religion may be of the following kind: Like the psycho-analyst, he might say that religious phenomena, when considered on their own, appear to be an aberration of human intelligence and rationality. The only possible way in which these phenomena can be squared with man's general intelligence is to think of them as having a merely functional role, that is, a role which helps in the functioning of human society in a particular fashion.

It might be said that given the psycho-analyst's or the sociologist's account of religion as outlined above, all that would follow from the correctness of either account is that we have here a correct genetic account of religious phenomena; and this does necessarily rule out the possibility of rendering religious phenomena intelligible on their own, as it were. This perhaps is correct. But it is difficult to envisage a

situation where a person is totally convinced say, of the correctness of the Freudian understanding of religion, and yet believes that there might be more to religious beliefs, as religious beliefs, than what the explanation suggests. A purely genetic account does usually have the tendency either to trivialise the phenomenon whose account it is or to 'elevate' it to a 'super-structural' position. In either case the phenomenon in question is logically utterly dispensable.

## II

As opposed to the reductionist's account of religion there is the view that religious phenomena are meaningful, intelligible in their own right irrespective of whatever psychological or sociological genesis that they might be thought to have. Thus, we have attempts, for instance, at providing purely logical, non-reductionist proofs of the existence of God. Think in this connection of philosophers in the Western tradition like, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes and Locke and so on. Of course the idea here is that once God's existence and knowability has been proved, almost everything else in religion would have a clear independent justification. This particular non-reductionist tradi-

tion does not normally make a distinction between different kinds of rationality or intelligibility. It believes in a unitary framework in which religion is endowed with the same kind of rationality as any other mode of rational human activity.

There is another, more recent variety of non-reductionist thinking about religion; and this derives primarily from some of the things that Wittgenstein said in some of his later works. This is the view that religion or religious language embodies what Wittgenstein called a form of life. By this it is usually meant that there are criteria of understanding, intelligibility, rationality, of correctness and propriety which are internal to or constitutive of religious life itself. To understand religion is to explore the areas of applicability of these criteria. Any attempt to apply criteria of understanding to religious life which are not thus internal to religion itself is logically bound to distort the latter. Many things that Wittgenstein says in his remarkable little work called 'Remarks on Frazaer's Golden Bough' lend themselves to interpretations which support this, what I might be allowed to call exclusivist view of religion.

When he explains to us, for example, that the king must be killed in his prime because, according to the notions of the savages, his soul would not be kept fresh otherwise, we can only say: where that practice and this view go together, the practice does not spring from the view, but both of them are there.<sup>1</sup>

Frazer's account of the magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory; it makes these notions appear as mistakes.

Was Augustine mistaken, then, when he called on God on every page of the confessions?

Well - one might say - if he was not mistaken then the Buddhist holyman, or some other, whose religion expresses quite different notions, surely was. But no one of them was making a mistake except where he was putting forward a theory.<sup>2</sup>

We can only describe and say, human life is like that.<sup>3</sup>

Burning an effigy. Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is obviously not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at some satisfaction and it achieves it. Or rather, it does not aim at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied.

One could also kiss the name of the loved one, and here the representation by the name would be clear.

The same savage who, apparently in order to kill his enemy sticks his knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts his arrow with skill and not in effigy.<sup>4</sup>

What makes the character of ritual action is not any view or opinion, either right or wrong, although an opinion - a belief - itself can be ritualistic, or belong to a rite.<sup>5</sup>

The exclusivist's account is illuminating in many ways and restores to religion some of its fundamental essential non-reducible, character. There are however crucial difficulties with this view. For example, is every religion an autonomous form of life with its own exclusive criteria of intelligibility correctness and propriety? What happens then to the concept of religion itself? Is it one unitary concept or just a team of several concepts? But perhaps the greatest difficulty with this view is that, its insistence on criteria of intelligibility as necessarily specific to religion prevents it from taking the cognitive, the assertive, the belief aspect of religion seriously. Ironically, there is also here an attempt, undoubtedly much subtler than that of the psychologist and the sociologist, at reducing one kind of phenomenon into another. The best example perhaps of this paradoxical development is D.Z. Philips' views on the subject (think for instance of his treatment of the idea of immortality of the soul, in his book: Death and Immortality).

## III

But perhaps the greatest contribution of the generally Wittgensteinian way of looking at things, is its definitive criticism of the Cartesian inner-outer dichotomy. In modern times there has been a persistently vigorous attempt at relegating religion to the sphere of the merely private or the inner. And this attempt is confined not just to those who take a generally reductionist view of religion; even people who take religion non-reductively seriously have occasionally succumbed to this idea of relegation. To think of religion as a matter merely of private may mean any of the following and some other things besides: that religion is a matter of essentially subjective conviction; that religious rituals find their meaning only in the private frame of mind of the performer of these rituals; that meditation and prayer belong exclusively to the inner life of the mind or the soul. I think the wonderful array of arguments that Wittgenstein marshals in the Philosophical Investigations in support of the view that, as he puts it, 'the inner stands in need of the outer' apply equally to the 'inner' of religion. The 'inner' of religion stands as much in need of the 'outer' as any mental phenomena that Wittgenstein talks about in the Philosophical Investigation.

## IV

To state my own position tentatively and somewhat dogmatically; (i) I am opposed to all reductionist account of religion. However, illuminating such accounts may be in their own way, they must inevitably take a non-serious view of religious phenomena themselves; and I believe that religious phenomena must be taken seriously in their own right, (ii) while the 'autonomy' account of religion gives religion back, as it were, its fundamental and serious character, its greatest difficulty to my mind is its inability to give the cognitive aspect of religion its rightful place, (iii) cognition is central to religion; but to say this is not to reduce religion either to science (which in any case would be absurd) or to treat it merely as a matter of subjective conviction or illumination. Subjective conviction must be amendable to objective criteria, but here objectivity might have to be understood more or less specifically in the context of the religious form of life.

NOTES

1. L. Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough,  
pp. 1e - 2e.
2. Ibid., p. 1e.
3. Ibid., p. 3e.
4. Ibid., p. 4e.
5. Ibid., p. 7e.

CHAPTER - II

RELIGION, PRIVACY AND SPIRITUALITY

The concept of religion may suffer from two kinds of misconceptions: (i) that it is something to do only with the realm of souls, gods, and spirits, and (ii) that its area of operation is limited **only** to man's internal, inner or private life. But these conceptions create a dichotomy between man's religious life and his day to day activities and involvements in society. Thus religion or religious life is treated **as** something 'sacred' which is completely divorced from society or social life which is treated as 'worldly' or 'profane'. Such an idea of religion gives us a picture that man has a dual existence, or that he has to live in two different and totally opposite realms of existence - the realm of the sacred and that of the secular or profane.

I

Our concern here is to show that life is 'one integral whole', it cannot be divided into watertight compartments. Religion or religious life cannot be treated as **divorced** from society or social existence. Religion is life oriented, it is not something that dampens enthusiasm or kills originality and creativity,

or seeks to keep the individual under the iron control of rituals and traditions. Religion is something that makes an individual free to follow the path of experience and achieve the authenticity of intuitive realization in this existence

Though spirituality or religiousity is something that man achieves 'within' spirituality that is closed up only 'within' and operates only in the 'inner life' without manifesting itself 'outside' into the social realities, such a notion of religion is a distorted one.

The element of truth in the inner world theory is that one's religion is not something that one makes a public show of or flaunts for this implies vanity and vanity is irreligious. But this of course has nothing to do with the divorce between man's religion and his social life. As a matter of general belief the dichotomy that has frequently been made between man's inner (mental) and outer life suffers from grave logical difficulties.<sup>1</sup>

Socially, religion is concerned with man's life in relation to his fellowmen, urging him to act according to certain laws and social duties. It prescribes the practice of certain virtues as the foundation of personal as well as social work. It is the practice

of these virtues by individuals that creates in them a sense of duty and obligation towards one another and give rise to fellow-feeling, love, help, charity, and service to society.

Religion is a human phenomena representing the transcendental concern of man and constantly interacting with the social aspects of life. We should get rid of the false notion that concern for the social dimension of a religious life comes false doctrine or lack of spirituality or spiritual conviction and commitment. Contrary-wise, it is the concern for the integrity of religion that motivates us to stress its social dimension.

I do not believe that spiritual law works on a field of its own, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, social and political fields.2 )

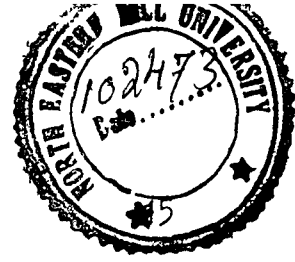
## II

Philosophically, the idea of privacy owes its origin to Descartes. The mind exists independently of the body, there is no logical correlation between the mind and the body. The relation of the two is only empirical and contingent according to Descartes. He

could doubt the existence of his body but not his mind - 'I think therefore I am'. The mental states can be known directly, without any inferential processes. So mind is a substance categorically different from the body. The mind consists of the state of consciousness, mental occurrences, mental processes etc. And man is identical with his mind to which or to any of its states he has a direct access.

This Cartesian dichotomy between the mind and the body had a great harmful bearing on the understanding of the concept of religion; of religious life; of spirituality and other connected terms. ✓

The whole idea of the distinction, and the separation between the sacred or religious on the one hand and the secular, profane or worldly on the other has its philosophical origin in the Cartesian 'inner' and 'outer' or mind and body dichotomy. The sacred operates in the private inner life, while the secular which is considered to take place in the public outer life, is understood as opposed to the sacred. This thinking leads to the understanding that there is no logical relationship between the inner and the outer life, between religious life and social life. This dichotomy



gives distorted view of life, which is to be understood as one integral whole, where religious, social, economic, political and cultural aspects are to be understood as inter-related rather than divided.

Whether personally or community-wise, man is characterised by his activity in the economic, cultural and social field, as well as by his faith and religious expressions. Prior to modern secularization, cultural and social life was totally and strongly impregnated by religion. In the complex sphere of life, there was no field eluding the influence of religion. Man's participation in the economic, cultural, social and political life unequivocally reflected the influence of religion. For the individual, social interaction implied fellowship in religion and religious expressions. As a member of a culture marked by religion everyone found himself to be both a citizen and a religious man.

A life saturated by religion enabled the individual to harmonise his own goals with the interest of the society.<sup>3</sup>

For me the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and of humanity...<sup>4</sup>

The situation today is very different; even from the religious standpoint, the social climate has changed considerably. Many of our contemporaries seem to have lost all sense of religion, living as they are without any interest or participation in worship and in the life of faith. Some boldly declare that they have no need of religious faith or any kind of religiosity, whereas for others, participation in religious rituals stands devoid of meaning and value. Such a situation compels us to re-examine the significance of this obscured religious sense with greater discernment and it bids us to trace the problems to its roots.

### III

The more critical thinkers will examine the religious posture of our culture to assess its maturity, or alternatively, the inquiry could bear on whether there ever was maturity of the religious sense in the earlier stages of human history and if so, what were its indicators? Could it be that our culture and the modern world have rendered man incapable of arriving at that level of human maturity needed to approach the problem of religion, or rather, is the present crisis a func-

tion of man's maturation forcing him to be critical when confronted by specific forms of the sacred? Is contemporary man only incapable of sensing the need of the sacred-religious in modalities similar to those which informed and expressed it in the past? Were the concretization of the sacred more a response to earlier cultures than to the contemporary situation? Could it be that the new culture presents a wholesome challenge to reach out for a more mature expression of faith?

One cannot penetrate realistically the great expressions of man, be they cultural, social, economic or religious while prescindng from the complete totality of the person in the community. A human fact can never be isolated and considered as separate from the others. A human experience finds verifications in the manifold inter-dependencies and through the relative strength of inter-action. We cannot be misguided, then, if we constantly behold an interpenetration and interdependence of religious phenomenon with life, the family and the cultural, political, economic and social structures. A careful reflection on the facts and their meanings prevents us from concluding simpliciter in favour of socio-economic-cultural reductionism of

religion. Pure religion is an abstraction which can no more be verified in reality than pure economics or pure politics. Every human phenomenon bears an investment of the complexity of the person in human community. It is of utmost importance, then, to study with great care the religious phenomenon itself in its relationship to the main expressions of man's life, otherwise, man himself may lose his identity and unconsciously be reduced to a mere super-structure of the existing culture.

The religious man cannot ignore this conflict and self-awareness. Faith is confronted by several alternatives - either to insert itself as a leaven in the social, cultural and economic life with a strong integrative capacity and discernable example of wholeness or accept to disappear by allowing itself to be moulded passively by forces which spell renunciation to integrity and integration. Disintegration signifies decay and represents the real profanity. In fact, when the social and cultural realities are found in the state of disintegration, lacking the enlightened discernment, they become 'profane' that is alienated from their highest finality, from their true meaning and

value, they stand inimical to man's dignity and total vocation. Religion cannot exist in a vacuum, it must insert itself and be enmeshed concretely in the life of our times. When this reciprocal enrichment fails to be negotiated, the consequences cannot be other than disastrous for both religion and the social-cultural reality.

In the very variety and complexity of human experience, there lies deep down within us an unconscious craving for greater consciousness and better harmony and complementarity. We will strive to make more conscious about this dimension of man that integrates the apparently contrary aspects separating the one from the other.<sup>5</sup>

The primary concern of a religious person lies in the search for the living and dynamic synthesis of faith which will permit him to function fully and freely as a religious man and as a citizen of the "secular" world. These coincident roles are essential for a truly religious person, in fact, this ought necessarily to be reflected and provide a thrust for the totality of life. The split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age. Such a religious-and-life

split has a number of social ecclesiastical and personal roots. There was a notable lack of awareness and attention on the part of the hierarchy and theologians relative to the indispensable inter-penetration of religion and the totality of life, both social and individual. For too long the hierarchy was convinced that preserving the purity and integrity of the faith signified separating the two, keeping the religious elite aloof from the earthly city or totally cut off from it. Not enough attention was given to the urgency of continuously translating the proclamation of faith and the life of faith into a living language and forms befitting the diversity of cultures and the variety of social classes.

#### IV

What does spirituality really mean? What does the world recall to our minds? Such things, I suppose, as prayer and contemplation, fasting, asceticism, worship, renunciation of the world and detachment from things, life in monastic solitude and careful preparation of the soul to leave this world and to go to the 'other world'. Reading the Bible or the Upanishads is considered spiritual, but not reading a novel. Some would concede that quite unspiritual actions could be

spiritualized (extrinsically), through good intentions, by doing them for the love of God. But the concession itself seems to emphasise the division of world and life into spiritual, sacred and religious on the one hand, and unspiritual, secular and profane on the other. Service of the sick is admitted into the realm of the spiritual, but, to all appearances, reluctantly and, as it were, in the second class since those in the service are exhorted to find time for regular spiritual exercise, and are expected to repent for neglecting spiritual duties in their absorption with the caring for the suffering people. A similar spiritual status seems to be accorded almsgiving and to relief work in time of famine and drought or in favour of the wholly helpless as Francis Xavier, Francis of Assisi did, and Mother Teresa is still doing. Work and struggle to change political and socio-economic structures which would break men and women by millions and throw them into the arms of relief workers, hardly qualify as spiritual in most religious traditions. One would be counted crazy if one were to suggest a real relationship between spiritual life and political action. Sometimes religious leadership is alarmed to see socio-

political emphasis developed within religious associations and their commitment to religious values. It fears that such emphasis would obscure the spiritual ideal of religious life.

I cannot conceive politics as divorced from religion. Indeed religion should pervade everyone of our actions.<sup>6</sup>

✓ Socio-political life need not be alien to God or to spirituality. The fact is that it is in a burning socio-political situation, in the struggle of man to win back his dignity and freedom, in his rebellion and revolt, that the voice of God should be heard and his will for the world discerned. There should be no separation between obedience to God and political involvement, prayer and piety and social concern. Spirituality is never something apart from the economic realities and the political decisions by which men lived. Not seldom the religious men of the past got into trouble for disturbing 'the status quo', for denouncing powerful exploiters. But these things they did out of a personal experience and conviction that God had taken them, spoken to them and sent them. Their spiritual ideal of religious life had to do with the plight and destiny of the people.

For a truly religious person, his mission is interior to his spirituality. He is committed in order to be sent with a message of hope to the poor, the deprived, the down trodden, the imprisoned, the blind and the handicapped. He has no spiritual ideal that is unrelated to these people, this voiceless majority, and, therefore, to the political, social, cultural and economic structures and religious strategies devised to hoodwink them, intimidate them, break them and keep them down in order to use them to build up profit and power for the few. A truly religious person has his words and deeds eminently spiritual, including the denunciation of 'holy' people who make a show of piety and get rich. He understands religion and spirituality in terms of life and the promotion of life not in terms of death or life's depletion. And he holds that truth and freedom and friendship and forgiveness together make the fullest and finest form of life for which man in all other forms should be lived out or laid down. In upholding these values and possibilities of the human, we may come into conflict with the traditions, taboos and structures - socio-religious and political - of our community. Our spirituality should not cause us

to shy away from effective struggles to break down and eliminate structures, which, brutally or subtly hold people in captivity!

The function of the religious man is to disturb, his duty is to wake up the sleepers to shake the pillars of orthodoxy. He is at once the product and preceptor of his time. When we listen to him we are troubled and made **unsure** of our accepted habits. He draws our attention to the distance between our professions and our practices.<sup>7</sup>

We should be able to challenge the religious understanding today from being a system of control and negation of life to become a non-system or service and tenderness, to create on earth new patterns of living insisting at all levels, that spirituality has social dimensions and political connotations.

Today, we should break free of the silken ropes and golden fetters of our long servitude, and to share once more with the religious men of old, a concern for the quality of human existence and the shape of the human community on the earth. Once more, then, the spiritual should come to mean human life lived with God. The spiritual is what is opened to God, to his best wishes for humanity, to move and grow out of our

present joys and sorrows into the future and the greatness indicated for us.

To be spiritual is to let God's love touch and enrich us. To be spiritual is to participate in his reality. Participation can range from bare sharing in existence through a gamut of structural complexity, and growing concentration, through consciousness in ever increasing density to self consciousness and the specifically human. It can expand further from self-consciousness to self-giving, to love, to friendship, to sacrificial living, to forgiving and to tenderness. It can develop into fantasy and technological, artistic and relational creativity. It can be endlessly enriched by the offer of God's friendship and the surprises of his love.

True religious life must express itself in love and aim at the unity of mankind. Bead necklaces, rosaries, tripple paint on forehead, or putting on ashes, pilgrimages, baths in holy rivers, meditation, or image worship do not purify a man as service of fellow creatures does. 8

We therefore, reject all dichotomy and all fragmentation of life. No individualistic atomization of the human can be admitted, for spiritual life is essentially community life. Nor do we accept the division

of man and his world into sacred and secular, religious and profane. It is the human we consider in its cosmic and community relationship, and the question of spirituality is the question of its openness to God and to the future to which he is summoning it.

Man is a pointer towards a mystery at once great and beautiful, a mystery which also makes humanity possible and shines through every human race. And God is the mystery indicated by the human. He reveals himself as a pressure upon our hearts, as upon the hearts of more great men (saints/Gurus) in the past, to struggle, to achieve humanity in its wholeness. As we are in India today spirituality consist in this struggle, in concern for men and women, for the quality of human life and relationships, and for the needs and possibilities of people, needs which can range from food and clothing to loving and giving, to contemplation and adoration, possibilities which can grow to inventiveness and creativity.

India is rich in material resources and in human potential. But the resources are concentrated in and controlled by few who thus wield enormous power. As a

consequence the human potential has in large measure remained unmined; undeveloped, suppressed and denied opportunities. It has deteriorated. Oppression and humiliation has confused the soul of the masses; obscured their self identity, taught them to despise themselves, to kiss their chains, to accept hunger, squalor, ignorance, voicelessness and serfdom as their divinely appointed lot.

It will not be enough even if you in a flush of enthusiasm go to a harijan and touch him and embrace him, and then forget all about him. It will not do even if you go to the harijan quarters every day and make it a point to touch a number of harijans as a token of your conviction. What is required of you is that you should regulate your day to day conduct in such a manner that you make it absolutely evident to the harijans whom you come across that a better day has dawn for them all.<sup>9</sup>

The journey will be long and arduous, but religion can be a spiritual reality only within this context by responding to it positively, by promoting the liberation of the people, by helping to build a new world of free men and friends, and taking care to keep the process as authentic and human as possible.

Today's, therefore will be a spirituality of involvement in the world of men, in their concerns and

hopes, their gropings and tears, and not a spirituality of flight from the world, mistrust of man, or retirement into cloisters. A 'cloister' for us today cannot be fenced off geographical area, but the truth about men whom God loves and the value-set born of that truth.

We have to live and act within this enclosure, and never leave for impersonal systems of economics or technology, nor for the sub-human blandishments of prestige, power or comfort. Contemplation today is attentiveness to God's direction as it comes to us in the event of life, it is the administration of his face as it appears in the weary and the worn-out faces of the Indian masses. Contemplation is possible where God is present and active in forgiving and redeeming love in the cities and the streets, in the factories and slums, in the far flung villages, wherever men live, and love and suffer and hope. True contemplation is not bound by geography, nor restricted to privileged persons. It is for all of us, and it is the reality of spirit and truth. It is possible where people are, in labour unions, political platforms, community-building endeavours, social analysis, in concern for one another, for the quality of human life.

✓ A religious person is one who should live and love for and with the masses. The masses are his concern; they are the meaning of his spiritual effort; however, much they may be pushed aside; deprived of the fruit of their labour and silenced. If we are to be true to our religious commitment, then our place is with the teeming, unlettered, neglected millions of men and women of our land; our place is with them to recognize them as men and women, to honour them as persons, to bring them a sense of their own destiny, to enable them to feel valid and to hope, to share the straightness of their souls and the clarity of their lives, to join them in building up inner visions, inner strength and self-confidence, and trust in their action to accept their future as offered by God and to strive together to make the dream come true.

I recognize no God except the God that is to be found in the hearts of the dumb millions. They do not recognize His presence I do. And I worship the God that is Truth or Truth which is God through the service of these millions.<sup>10</sup>

Religion which takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them is no religion.<sup>11</sup>

A true religious person has to be religious always and everywhere and he cannot put up with injustice anywhere. Thus his entire conception of religion has to be an integrated one.<sup>12</sup>

Spirituality today should be human and historical. It will be a style of living, feeling, and questing which is bound up with the ordinary existence of men and women everywhere. Spirituality is sensitive to the concerns and striving of the people. It will grow with history and respond to changes that occur in our land, and facilitate change in the direction of the free and the fraternal. Eschewing all conservatism and cocksureness, religion should live in a humble attitude of openness, questing, listening and learning, seeking to understand, to humanise the swell and sweep and twists of history.

✓ It is religion that should help understand to treat every person, regardless of race, colour, culture, class, sex or age as having an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited. The message of religion is a message against all type of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should if we are truly religious not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.

Religion is not the concern of the believing pious soul who shuts himself up and keeps himself within the bounds of sacramental sphere. Religion has its place in 'this world.' Religious life impels us to have a concern for social injustice, participation in social political action even at the risk of great inconvenience and suffering. The wide economic disparity between the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate in any community makes a mockery of the idea and reality of the spirit of religion. It is morally and spirituality incumbent upon every religious person to be disturbed at this situation and to see that his own commitment and spirituality leads to costly discipline of personal living and social action.

## V

But, let me offer some contemplations specifically on the concept of spirituality as such, apart from its possible dimensions or manifestations in contemporary society.

Spirituality in its essence is the direct experience in one's own consciousness and one's whole being, of oneness of all existence. Awareness of such oneness

in one's own consciousness without any feeling of separateness with anything in the universe is the hallmark of the experience of spirituality. For some people, such awareness may be said to have two stages, not necessarily one after the other - the earlier stage could be an intuitive flash-like perception of oneness, which is attended with a momentary sense of fulfilment and ecstatic joy. The second stage is one in which such experience of oneness begins to serve as the steady and constant background for one's thought and action.

✓ The experience of oneness, of harmony, of the transcendence of all duality are all spiritual experiences. Identification with God as the 'causus causa' of the creation around us, and with his (God) limitless love, is always the goal of every spiritual devotee. God here is obviously a synonym for the supreme spiritual power pervading and immanent in all existence past, present and future. For time immemorial spiritual men have laid down and practiced disciplines for achieving this spiritual goal, namely, 'self-realization' or 'God-realization'.

History shows that the sufferings experienced by the religious prophets, leaders and reformers always exerted tremendous influence on the minds of the pious and

righteous people. Thus none can deny the fact that religion acts as an instrument of social change in individuals and through individuals, the society.<sup>13</sup>

When the spark in us is released it becomes a fire which cleanses the earth. It can be released only if we end our narrow egoism, greed, anger, hatred... which keep the individual locked up inside his mortal self.<sup>14</sup>

Spirituality deals with the consciousness of human values of love, friendliness, compassion, harmony, happiness and joy. Spirituality is based on varied experiences in the human consciousness itself. It is the direct apprehension of reality by one's totality of being in one's own consciousness, without the need of any epistemological proof. Such spiritual experiences have been responsible for great revolutionary changes in the lives of persons. Spirituality or spiritual experiences are to be recognised as authentic experiences of sane human beings and not merely to be brushed aside. Though spirituality in a sense cannot be demonstrated in a test tube in a science laboratory, but that cannot be a reason for dismissing it, there is a long line of saints and seers who testified to such experience and moulded their lives accordingly.

If any action of mine claimed to be spiritual is proved to be impractical, it must be pronounced to be a failure: I do believe that the most spiritual act is the most practical in the true sense of the term.<sup>15</sup>

✓ With the advancement of science and technology, we are normally under the impression that spirituality is something foreign or outside the realm of the human mind or human capacity. This is because of the mannerism which has developed in speaking about spirituality in terms of God, divinity, spirit, etc. Spirituality is in fact a higher or even the highest dimension of the human consciousness itself. Once a person transcends ego-consciousness and that goes with body-life-mind complex and identifies himself with the pure, undivided energy of consciousness, he can be said to have stepped into the realm of spirituality. There is no doubt that **today man** is the crown of creation, so almost along with nature and manipulating the laws of nature itself through science and technology, man has created a parallel world for himself, that is because man has developed the potentialities of his own consciousness to penetrate into the laws of nature and use them for his own purpose. He is self-conscious, he can be a witness unto himself and to what is going on in his own consciousness. He has also

developed conscience which is, as it were, a judgement seat which can say what is good, just, right, beneficial or otherwise. But he has not developed a will strong enough to follow the dictates of his own conscience. Thus, we see that man in spite of his scientific discoveries does not seem to be at home with nature. He seems to be in constant conflict with it. Modern man has to understand that religious beliefs are not mere contradictory assumptions, spirituality or spiritual-realisation or spiritual life are no longer a hallucination or a figment of imagination, but a fact of higher levels of consciousness.

It is my view that attempts at showing that religious beliefs are self-contradictory arise almost invariably from an inadequate as well as a distorted understanding of religious concepts.<sup>16</sup>

To think that religious discourse as such can be irrational is to think of it as part of some other universe of discourse, and this is a mistake in logic.<sup>17</sup>

Religious language may have a kind of autonomy which makes it immune to charges of unintelligibility in terms of criteria appropriate to the language of science.<sup>18</sup>

Spirituality is the fountain-head of all religions, and religions in their turn are the source of morality and ethics which have mainly to do with the relation of human beings among themselves, with other sentient creatures and also with the world around. Gandhi believed that religion was a great creative force in human life, he was so keen to develop the ethical basis of religion. Religion to him symbolised the attainment of moral perfection through the instrumentality of absolute truth. Thus in the Gandhian sense religion is that which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself (himself).

Gandhi's religion may be characterised as ethical spiritualism. To him any religion without a moral foundation ceases to be a religion. In his understanding, moral laws govern actions of all men. Religion and morality are the two faces of the same coin, wherein neither of them can be separated from each other. In his own words he says,

religion is to morality what water is to the seed sown in the soil.<sup>19</sup>

In effect, Gandhi found the essence of religion in morality and ethics. For him God is truth and love, God is ethics and morality. For Gandhi,

morality, ethics and religion are convertible terms. A moral life without reference to religion is like a house built upon sand, and religion divorced from morality is like a 'sounding brass' good only for making noise and breaking heads.<sup>20</sup>

Gandhi recognized that prayer was the very core of man's life, since it was the most significant part of religion. Prayer was a part of inward communication with God leading to the cleansing and purification of the soul by removing the dens of ignorance and darkness which enveloped it. Prayer was the effective means to bring to the surface the divine element in every human being. Obviously, Gandhi wanted to purify the individual so that his capacity for meaningful and creative social and political action could lead to upliftment of human society. Probably he believed that a spiritual or a religious individual could overcome the average instinct in man and substitute in its place human capacity for good and noble deeds. In such a process the moral and spiritual will of an individual would dominate over the 'baser' instincts in him.

NOTES

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&  
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2. M. K. Gandhi Young India, 25 September, 1924.
3. V.T. Patil "Gandhi and his ideas on Religion  
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4. M.K. Gandhi Young India, 3 April 1924.
5. Thomas Aykara "Religion as Integration of life",  
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6. M. K. Gandhi Harijan, 10 February 1942.
7. S. Radhakrishnan The Spirit of Religion, p. 60.
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9. M.K. Gandhi Harijan, 20 June 1936.
10. M. K. Gandhi
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14. S. Radhakrishnan The Spirit of Religion, p. 37.
15. M. K. Gandhi Harijan, 1 July 1939.
16. Mrinal Miri "Plurality of Religions, Science and Secularism" Secularization in Multi-Religious Societies Indo-Soviet Perspective (Ed. by S.C. Dube & V.N. Basilov), p. 60.
17. Ibid., p. 60.
18. Ibid., p. 57.
19. M.K. Gandhi
20. M.K. Gandhi Harijan, 3 September 1936.

CHAPTER - III

GANDHI AND FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Let me try and substantiate, some of the things I have said about the idea of spirituality by reference to two, what I consider to be clear, examples of the spiritual life. I think in this matter, as well as in the matter of understanding moral concepts, a consideration of examples or, better, paradigms is of paramount philosophical importance. My two examples are Gandhi and St. Francis of Assisi.

## I

The idea of spirituality which generally comes to our minds is that of men and women who have been pre-occupied in their lives with the cultivation of their 'inner' life, with the experience of communion with God, or with deep puritanial piety. The picture is that of a soul withdrawn from the world, disciplining itself as it is sometimes said, against, 'the snares of the flesh.'

But spirituality is marked not only by the pre-occupation with inner spiritual cultivation of the soul, but also by an outgoing love and charity which transcends all barriers of geography and culture. This notion of spirituality is based on the proper knowledge

and understanding of one's own self which ultimately leads to the correct knowledge and understanding of 'others'.

To see the universal and all-pervading spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi made this point very clear when he gave his own definition of who is a spiritual man or a saint. He said,

A saint is one who cares for others. He has renounced all selfishness. But he is full of sleepless and selfless activity. A saint (Sanyasi), therefore, to be true to his creed of renunciation, must care for Swaraj (self-rule) not for its sake but for the sake of others.<sup>2</sup>

Gandhi further said,

Mere knowledge of right and wrong will not make us fit for salvation. According to common notions, a learned man will pass as a pandit (scholar). He need not perform any service, or take to Bhakti (prayer). This Bhakta leaves the rosary only for eating, drinking and the like, never for grinding the corn of nursing patients.<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi rejects this approach toward knowledge and prayer and quotes the following from the Bhagavadgita with approval,

No one has attained the goal without action.<sup>4</sup>

What distinguishes Gandhi from the pacifists and many other apostles of non-violence is that unlike them, he was a rebel against injustices, who conceived of a well organised social and political action and practiced it. He never confined himself to merely making protests. He was also not satisfied with the individual actions. Even his fasts were not solo performances. Each of them was conducted with a full understanding of the social and political impact it could make. In South Africa his first field of public activity was that he himself established organisations. On his return to India he made use of the existing institutions - the Indian National Congress. He always maintained that he was interested in political action. The meaning he gave to the term 'politics' was much wider than what is given to it in common parlance. He maintained that his political and social actions were inspired by his faith in religion.

I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.<sup>5</sup>

My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion.<sup>6</sup>

Gandhi was primarily interested in fighting against injustices in different fields. The publicity that was given to the display of his gentleness, saintly qualities, and his statements of non-violence, often eclipse his role as a rebel. He himself saw no contradiction between the role of a spiritual man or a saint on the one hand, and that of the political rebel on the other.

The adherence to spiritual life was interpreted by many as an escape from life and non-resistance, if not submission to evil. Many also kept spirituality and practical day to day life in water-tight compartments. But people like Gandhi, Francis of Assisi and others, have shown by the way they lived that spirituality achieves its true and full meaning only when it successfully breaks such artificial barriers.

You must watch my life, how I lived, eat, sleep, talk, behave in general. The sum total of all those in me in my religion.<sup>7</sup>

I am led to my religion through truth and non-violence, i.e. love, in the broadest sense. The bearing of his religion on social life is or has to be seen in one's daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life. Realization of truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in, and identification with, this limitless ocean of life.<sup>8</sup> )

## II

Francis of Assisi was certainly another great example of a person who like Gandhi proved to the world of the inter-relatedness of spirituality and morality.

The 13th Century was a time of troubadours, and Francis had their best characteristics. He was happy, he sang, he loved nature; he spoke to the birds and the animals as though they were his friends. The 13th Century was also a time when the Christian religion was taken very much for granted, and Francis felt the need to return to the original spirit of Christ. This meant living in poverty, and it also meant loving other people. Francis saw the need for a more practical guide to his kind of Christian life. He insisted that the new rule stress the poverty he felt was so important.<sup>9</sup>

Francis who was born in 1182 was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant of Assisi. Francis was also the leader

of the well-to-do young men of Assisi, outstanding for his gaiety and charm, his fine clothes, his extravagance and also accomplishments. After some years a spiritual change began to take place in him, this was about the year 1209, when he was twenty seven years old. Within two years he had the Pope's sanction for the new order, known as the 'Order of Friars' as founded by him.

During the past hundred years, in particular, admiration of St. Francis has been wide spread and spontaneous among Christians of all communities and among others too: he has, indeed, often been acclaimed for reasons that would have startled him and moved him to protest, and he has been made the hero of a spurious romanticism.<sup>10</sup>

Francis' generosity; his simple and unaffected faith, his passionate devotion to God and man. His love of nature and his deep humility have made him one of the most cherished saints in modern times.<sup>11</sup>

His fraternal charity, total poverty, and dynamic leadership drew thousands of followers and have made him one of the most venerated religious figures.<sup>12</sup>

When this change took place in his life, Francis started doing things utterly out of keeping with his fashionable way of life. He changed clothes with the beggar and gave him all the money he had with him. He turned back from the wars and gave a companion all his

expensive equipment. When a leper begged from him, the fastidious young man embraced him and kissed him. He took a bale of cloths from his father's warehouse and sold it to find money to repair a little church.

He took Christ's words, "Follow me", as a personal call and not only gave away his own money, but also his father's goods.<sup>13</sup>

Above all, his deep sense of brotherhood under God embraced his fellow men for he considered himself no friend of Christ if he did not cherish those for whom Christ died.<sup>14</sup>

At the last escapade his father's indulgence changed to indignation. He had him charged with theft. When the Bishop ordered Francis to return the money, he went into the next room, stripped off his clothes, made them into a bundle, and emerged into the Court naked. Laying the bundle at his father's feet he declared that he would henceforth owe him nothing. He went out from the Court into the snow, wrapped in an old cloak thrown over him by the Bishop's gardener, singing with joy.

Probably no one in history has ever set himself so seriously as did Francis to imitate the life of Christ, and to carry out so literally Christ's work in Christ's own way. This is the key to the character and spirit of St. Francis. To neglect this point is to show an unbalance portrait of the saint as a lover of nature,

a social worker, an itinerant preacher, a lover of poverty: Certainly the love of poverty is part of his spirit. However it is not mere external poverty he sought, but the total denial of self.<sup>15</sup>

But he was something more and other than an inspired individualist: he was a man of tremendous spiritual insight and power, whose consuming love for Jesus Christ and redeemed creation found expression in all he said and did.<sup>16</sup>

That was the decisive step. Henceforth he lived by begging and by doing menial work that came his way, soon others joined him. They lived in the same precarious way, at first not even having a place to stay or a roof over their heads. They gave their time to the care of the poor the sick and the lepers, and preached the love of God. Yet the thing that distinguished them most was their gaiety which earned them the nick name of 'God's Jester's of Humorists.

The lives of these men and women (Francis and friends) had a freshness and pure simplicity which was rarely if ever can be matched in Christian History.<sup>17</sup>

The mass of his followers remained wandering preachers, travelling far and wide, and delivering their message in plain words that ordinary men could understand.<sup>18</sup>

Francis himself was distinguished for his love of birds and animals and all creatures. In this, as in his other self-forgetting love for the poor and needy, he appeals in particular to men and women of our day.

Francis had sympathy with the whole of creation. He loved flowers and animals; he preached to the birds, he called the donkey his little brother, and he tamed a savage wolf came to him with an injured foot.<sup>19</sup>

He considered all nature as the mirror of God and as so many steps to God. He called all creatures his brothers and sisters and in his 'Canticle of Creatures' (less properly called the 'Praises of Creatures', 'Canticle of the Sun', etc) he referred to 'Brother Sun' and 'Sister Moon', the wind and water and even sister death.<sup>20</sup>

There is a compelling appeal in his 'Canticle of the Sun' and in what we are told about him by the little Flowers of St. Francis (Penguin Edn) and the 'Mirror of Perfection'; in his simplicity, directness, and singlemindedness; and in the lyrical qualities of his life.<sup>21</sup>

Among the devotional treasure we owe to him are the 'Lovely Canticle of Brother Sun and some widely used prayers. One of these says,

Lord make me an instrument of your peace  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon; where there  
is discord, peace; where there is doubt,  
faith; where there is despair, hope; where  
there is darkness light; where there is  
sadness, joy; O Divine Master may I seek  
not so much to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand; to be  
loved as to love; for it is in giving that  
we receive; it is in pardoning that we are  
pardoned; it is in dying that we are born  
to eternal life...22

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3. M.K. Gandhi As Quoted in Gandhi Marg, No. 71,  
p. 784.
4. K.P. Karunakaran As Quoted in Gandhi Marg, No. 71,  
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5. M. K. Gandhi An Autobiography, p. 615.
6. M. K. Gandhi Harijan, March, 1934.
7. M. K. Gandhi Harijan, 22 September, 1946.
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14. G.F. Bernadone Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 9,  
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15. Ibid.
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21. Donald Attwater The Avenel Dictionary of Saints,  
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22. R.W. Bryan Great Christians, p. 121.

CHAPTER - IV

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this brief last chapter, I wish to offer, in the light of the observations I have made in the previous chapters some reflections on what I might be allowed to call the spiritual ecology of my immediate environment namely, the North-eastern part of our country. This is an exercise in achieving some degree of intellectual including philosophical self-awareness about my own situation.

As it is perhaps well known most of the North-eastern Hills of our country are inhabitants by more or less small communities which are - thanks to Constitution - frequently refer to as tribes. A remarkable phenomenon in the recent history of these tribes is the adoption, by most of them, of the great Christians religion. I am not, for the present purpose, interested in the various political, historical and economic reasons behind this great happening. I would however like to speculate briefly about the possibility that this was at least in part a response to some profoundly felt spiritual need.

The phrase 'identity-crisis' is bandied about far too frequently for it to be of much analytical value. But in the context of the situation in the North-east this phrase, I think, is still useful. This century or, more accurately, the later half of the century has seen an extra ordinary erosion of what might be called the form of life of the tribes. All kinds of things have led to this erosion, but I am more interested in the fact of the erosion itself.

One important shortcoming in proper understanding of Khasi Pnar religion in particular, and tribal religions in general, is the social scientists' preoccupation with the sacred/secular dichotomy. Those who accept this dichotomy have a great problem in understanding the all-pervasiveness of the religious cosmology i.e. a comprehensive framework which assigns meanings to different spheres of existence. Accordingly, the Khasi Jaintia cosmology (as other religious cosmologies) leaves nothing out, it assigns a significance to everything or every class of things in the universe.<sup>1</sup>

A tribal culture, perhaps more evidently than any other form of culture, is a coherent, total framework in which individual members of the culture confine ultimate answers to question of the kind: Who am I? What is my relationship to others in society? What can I meaning-

fully aspire to be? How am I related to the world of other animate beings, trees and inanimate beings? What ought I to do in relation to the 'super-natural' (though 'super-natural' is perhaps not the right word to use here)? Of course it isn't as though the framework in terms of which these questions are asked and answered is available to every member of the community in a lucid, totally unambiguous fashion. This is in fact never the case, whether we are talking about tribal culture or any other kind of culture. The framework is inevitably cauched in symbols pregnant with different dimension of meaning. It is therefore always a matter of interpretation and in such matters there is really no such things as absolute finality or clarity. But nonetheless given the framework, questions of identity would not normally generate a crisis but with the erosion of this framework, for whatever reason, a crisis has been generated. This simply means that the tribesman in the depth of his being does not as it were feel one with himself. The traditional identities have lost their profounder spiritual meanings leaving behind as it were an area of inward hollowness. It is not surprising of course in a situation like this our tribal people have adopted a framework with proven stability and which offers boundless possibilities of the spiritual life.

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water: How can you buy them from us? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.<sup>2</sup>

And what is there to life if man cannot hear the lovely cry of the whip-poor-will or the argument of the frogs around a pond at night? The Red Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind itself cleaned by the midnight rain, or scented with a pine. The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breath, the beasts, the trees, the man.<sup>3</sup>

However, as in most such cases of the adoption of a different framework of ultimate meanings, there is the danger that there is greater emphasis on the externals of the framework than on the exploration of the 'inner' world of spiritual meaning. This may happen for a variety of reasons; but one of them certainly is a sense of spiritual insecurity a sense of the loss of the at-homeness of a framework. I think it is this, more than anything else, that is responsible for a feeling of dissatisfaction about the quality of the practice of the new framework among our people. The heart as it were

is missing. Occasionally this is also responsible for a feeling of exclusiveness which is really alien to the religion itself.

Traditional studies of tribal cultures of India, as well as abroad appear most dissatisfying because scholars in general have uniformly used religious belief as an isolated topic for comparison instead of using a more holistic functional integrated framework. It is precisely because of this inability of tribal religions to sharply prescribe to the social scientists' dichotomy that they appear to have been branded as primitive religious.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps all one can say in a situation like this is 'let us wait and see; let the spiritual history of the tribal people unfold itself'. But one can also perhaps say the following: no doubt the spiritual history will unfold itself; but before the unfolding there must also be a gathering - a gathering of the possibilities of a tradition. And such a gathering takes place in the life of a great spiritual being - a Gandhi or a Francis of Assisi. Perhaps we are still waiting for such a gathering possibilities in our tribal societies today.

NOTES

1. Sujata Miri "Holism in Khasi Religion",  
The Tribes of North East India,  
p. 345.
2. Taken from the Reply of the Chief  
of the Suwamish tribes of Indians  
to Franklin Pierce, President of  
USA in 1855, as published in the  
Appendix of the Indian Philosophi-  
cal Quarterly, Vol. X, No. 4,  
p. 446.
3. Ibid.
4. Sujata Miri "Holism in Khasi Religion",  
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