

## A Multi-Cultural Spiritual Perspective on the Futures of Religion

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I would like to offer an alternative perspective, based on the very ancient and mystical tradition of yoga, to the World Network of Religious Futurists. I have represented this tradition as a monk of Ananda Marga, the “Path of Bliss”, for the last 23 years.

First let me praise the initiative of the authors, Richard S. Kirby and Jay E. Gary. Both of them are clearly inspired by the ecumenical movement joining religious leaders in dialog to foster understanding and world peace. It is also clear that the authors give great importance to personal spiritual practices on the path of self- realization, which I also support.

One month before the historic 1992 Earth Summit that took place in Rio de Janeiro, I was invited to join in the organization of an inter-religious vigil that would take place during that event. Frankly I was skeptical, because praying for the welfare of the earth is, in my opinion, less important than our actions. However in the first meeting at the Institute for Religious Studies (ISER), the organizer, Ruben Fernandez, greatly impressed me because he gave equal respect to each representative of every different tradition, from the Catholic priest to the old woman saint of the Afro-Brazilian Umbanda tradition, from the Lutheran minister to the Hare Krishna devotee. More than 20 different religions, spiritual paths and esoteric groups actually participated that night, each allotted their own hall in the park in which they could practice according to their beliefs. Nearly 10,000 people stayed until the dawn celebration in the amphitheater. There the Dalai Lama and Dom Helder Camara, the former head of the Brazilian Council of Catholic Bishops, shared the stage with leaders of other faiths. At the end the religious leaders were embracing one another and the Brazilians together with ecologists from around the world were

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singing and dancing together to the spiritual music of different traditions. It was an unforgettable vision of the future, of people from every race and land living together in peace and harmony with the planet.

So I support this initiative. But first I will explain my differences with some constructive criticism. Then I will offer a darker possible future of religious conflict, and finally an ideal spiritual future that I feel is needed in the next millenium.

### *Differences*

The authors are clearly writing to a Western Christian readership. They write: "Look at your church building...are the pews sources of healing? ... Do you like your local church community, its organization, and its worship?" The authors use hymns and quotes from the Bible to support their ideas. Though generally appreciated by Christian readers, these perspective causes other readers in the world to feel left out.

Secondly, though the authors discuss the problem, they do not clearly name what in my opinion is the enemy of world peace:

Dogma. P. R. Sarkar, in his classic work, *The Liberation of Intellect: Neo-Humanism*, defines dogma as any intellectual barrier beyond which one may not question. Examples of some religious dogmas that are the cause of tremendous conflicts and violence in our world are the ideas that we are the chosen people of God and others are not, that ours is the only way, that we are going to heaven and everyone else is going to hell, that only our holy book is the word of God. The authors also seem to fall into this trap when they write: "... the identification of God's holy perfect will for his people." Who are God's people? Is not every human being a child of the Supreme?

I remember an incident from my childhood that typifies religious dogma. When I was 11 years old, I attended a catechism class in a conservative church in the southern USA. During the class I raised my hand to ask a question. The pastor said, "Don't ask questions! Have faith! Blind faith!" Both then and now I believe that faith and surrender have value on the spiritual path, but I also believe that we have the right to ask questions, and that we should utilize our own intellect in our search for the truth. Fanaticism and religious violence occur when followers of any religion blindly follow their dogmatic leaders without thinking for themselves.

It has always seemed unreasonable to me that Christian Churches, both Catholic and Protestant, urge their children at puberty to decide whether they want to officially join, before they have developed the rational ability to think

independently as an adult. I accept that there is spiritual treasure at the heart of every world religion, even though there are often dogmas, too. I disagree when the authors write, "We aim to advance within the tradition most suited to our own nature. Usually this will be one we were brought up in." It is certainly in the interests of the major religions that the children of their members also become members. But if "becoming at least competent on an elementary level in our knowledge of world religions" has merit, then why not encourage all young people to do this and then seek the way best suited for them?

Another dogmatic trend that is becoming more common today is materialist appeals in religion. Preachers urge us to ask God in prayer for what we want, and they share the testimonies of those who found a better job, who have become rich, who have been cured of painful ailments. With a materialist outlook, these are wonderful boons, but with a spiritual outlook, they may be just the opposite. Personal problems, loss of personal wealth, the death of loved ones, fall from power, physical suffering, etc. may be the crisis or tragedy that awakens in us a greater devotion for God. The Nobel laureate and great spiritualist from India, Rabindranath Tagore, understood this truth when he wrote: "My prayer to you is not 'Save me from danger,' but 'Bless me so that I can overcome danger.' You need not take away all suffering, but bless me so that I can overcome suffering."

I commend the authors for their courage in directly confronting one of the most serious Christian dogmas, the "Day of final judgement." I recall attending a lecture many years ago by the famous evangelist Hal Lindsey, who has spent his entire career predicting and praying for the imminent second coming of Christ and the destruction of the planet. At the conclusion, the entire audience raised their index finger to indicate "There is only one way to heaven!" This dogma concludes that there is absolutely no reason to do charity or to work for social justice, ecology or world peace, instead they should only try to baptize and save souls before the fateful day arrives. The worst example of this is the cultural destruction in the last three decades of hundreds of remote tribes of Indians in Central and South America by American evangelist missionaries that has often caused severe depression, malnutrition, sickness and suicide. In the past male religious leaders invented dogmas to suppress women, and sadly some of these dogmas still survive today.

Orthodox Hindus, including the Hare Krishna movement, believe that only men can achieve liberation, and that women must be reborn in their next life as men before they can hope for this.

Others believe that women are incapable of serving as priests or performing religious rituals. Some say that women are the original cause of sin. All of these dogmas must be discarded and we should accept that regardless of the

physical and psychological differences between men and women, spiritually they are equals.

Finally, the authors ask, "Will organized religion still be around in the year 3000?" They believe it will, but I propose that there are some very serious problems with the current paradigm of the major world religions.

### *A Dark Vision of Religious Intolerance and Conflict*

Fundamentalism and fanaticism are darkening the psychic climate in some parts of the world. In the Middle East, the hatred and fear of Jews and Muslims is growing. Both groups are of the same racial Semitic stock, yet the growing violence is driving a wedge ever deeper between them. Religious riots and armed conflicts between Hindus and Muslims on the Indian subcontinent are increasing. Fear of religious violence is a constant part of life amongst Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka, amongst Christians and Muslims in Sudan, East Timor and the southern Philippines, between Christians and Protestants in Northern Ireland and between Sunni and Shiite Muslims of Iran and Iraq.

The structural violence of some religious fanatics is equally terrifying. In Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh and other Muslim countries, the oppression of women and the violence that the courts mete out to criminals are barbaric and repulsive.

Why is religious fundamentalism growing? Too many people feel they have no future. Unemployment, heavy debt, insecurity, urbanization and westernization are marginalizing millions. They clearly do not feel a part of the capitalist dream presented by Hollywood with beautiful, rich, happy American actors. Alienated, confused, with little hope for the ever elusive material wealth and romantic fulfillment, people fall into personal despair or turn to religion as a way out.

The majority of religious conflicts are rooted in economic injustice. Countless petty tyrants have followed Hitler's formula for political success: preach to the poor and unemployed that the cause of their suffering is the exploitation done by followers of another religion who are better off. Sometimes these religious leaders whip up a frenzy of communal hatred that results in orgies of ethnic bloodshed. If we cannot eradicate the scourge of poverty, then it is reasonable to predict increasing religious violence as a consequence.

P. R. Sarkar predicted that communism would disappear from the planet due to its inherent psychological flaws, and we have seen this happen already in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. He also predicted that, partly as a result of increasing religious warfare, religious dogmas will soon disappear

in the same way. The horrible bloodshed of the Second World War caused the people of the entire world to reject colonialism, so much so that world opinion forced even the victorious Allied countries to give back political independence to almost all their former colonies in the decade following the war. So it seems likely to me that religious violence of today and the immediate future could turn public opinion against dogmas in the next decade, especially if poverty is eradicated at the same time.

Below is my preferred future of a new, comprehensive spirituality.

### *Another View of What is Needed in the New Millennium*

I believe that only universalism can bring world peace. We are all brothers and sisters in one human family, living together on this earth. We must treat each other with mutual respect and love without the distinctions of race, caste or nation. A universal outlook is needed to overcome the harmful effects of racism, nationalism, sexism, etc. A world government that guarantees the fundamental necessities of life to everyone, that prevents any form of exploitation and that allows freedom of travel should be our goal. The earth is our common patrimony, so we must share it equitably.

I feel a similarly universal outlook is needed in the spiritual dimension. "Dharma" is an ancient Sanskrit term which means following righteousness and doing spiritual practices like daily meditation and self-analysis for personal transformation. Our goal should be to control our natural human instincts and channel them in a positive direction for our physical, mental and spiritual development. The path of Dharma is from imperfection to perfection, to become saint-like, to become God-like.

Dictionaries define God as that Supreme Entity which is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. I accept this traditional interpretation, but am awed by its mighty implications. The question I am sometimes asked on the street, "Which God do you believe in?", always leaves me speechless — how many are there to choose from? If the Supreme is infinite, then He is also inside every being, both animate and inanimate. As the great scientist Galileo replied to the dogmatic princes of Florence, "God is in people's hearts or He is nowhere!"

Spirituality is universal, not sectarian. The authors write: "Its goal is to consummate God-realization within human beings, but that takes place within a social context of religion. " No, it takes place in the body and mind of any sincere human being, within a social context of one human family. Though the authors clearly value spiritual practices, they write: "We look at the 'cash

value' of spiritual technologies" — what a horribly materialistic phrase!

Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was an universalist who described not the future expansion of the Catholic Church for which he worked, but of humanity sharing a common spiritual goal. In the same way Vivekananda, Aurobindo, P. R. Sarkar and so many lesser known spiritual leaders from around the world have told their future vision of a united human family with love for the Supreme.

Wisdom, and not mere intellect, is a very rare, timeless quality that the world desperately needs. A wise person understands the deepest truths of life and thus becomes a fountain of divine love and inspiration. There have been saints in the past who were even illiterate, but who were respected by all for their wise advice and counsel. Wisdom comes through knowledge of the self, through deep reflection and meditation.

The authors advise their readers to work with their local congregation. However congregations, especially if they are composed of the middle class or the rich, are too often very conservative in their outlook. As in politics, they have a tendency to be guided by "the lowest common denominator", which alienates idealistic youth and progressive-minded people. I appreciate more the position of Thomas Merton, who urged spiritualists to take moral stands and point the way towards a new future that is not based on materialism and exploitation.

Neo-ethics based on universal principles of morality should be the base of economic activity and global peace. For example, the ancient yogic principle of "Aparigraha" is an ecological ideal of simple living, not accumulating unnecessary things. On the personal level it encourages the adoption of a humble lifestyle and donating extra wealth to charity. On the social level it is the basis of creating a ceiling on salaries and wealth that is robbing the planet of the resources that God gave to humanity.

The authors ask, "How can a congregation or religious youth be encouraged to tackle social problems?" My answer is that a total revolution in society is needed, not mere reform. The Liberation theology of the Catholic Church, led and inspired by Brazilians Leonardo Boff and Frei Betto amongst others, and the courageous stands taken by some Catholic priests and bishops against the torture and killings done by military dictatorships throughout Latin America are examples of spiritual leaders fighting for social justice.

The Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT) is a new socio-economic paradigm based on spiritual values that offers the world a much brighter future than either capitalism or communism. Founded by P. R. Sarkar, it proposes the maximum utilization and rational distribution of all physical, psychic and spiritual resources, for the dynamic progress and equilibrium for all beings.

The authors state: “Actually, we believe the religious vocation of all believers is threefold: pastoral [caring], priestly [sacramental] and prophetic [discoursing on God’s present Word.]” I would propose self-realization and service to the universe as better, more universal goals that all people may be encouraged to adopt. I certainly agree with the authors’ statement: “Our caring is focused to a fiery point by our faith traditions.” Service work is both purifying and humbling. Bo Lozoff’s wonderful “Prison-Ashram Project” of the Human Kindness Foundation in the US is an incredible example of teaching ancient yoga techniques and sharing correspondence of love with more than 50,000 prisoners around the world. The Chicago School of Theology was so impressed that they awarded the founder an honorary doctorate degree in divinity. (And I was so inspired that for the last three years I’ve been teaching weekly meditation classes in the local prisons in Brazil which I find very gratifying.)

### *The Paradox of a Spiritual Future*

In conclusion, I find myself in a paradoxical role. Spirituality is deeply important to me, but I do not teach religion. I love peace, but am dedicated to fighting against the enemies of peace. I commend this initiative, yet I disagree with its conclusion about the future of organized religion.

It is only by taking the best from the East and the West, and by honoring the spiritual treasure at the heart of every religious tradition that we can make a better future. At the same time we must reject the dogmas and fight against injustice and exploitation wherever they are found. It is our personal meditation and other spiritual practices which will give us the inner strength and inspiration to continue on our journey of self-development, creating a brilliant future for ourselves and a better world for our children.

