

Religion in Our Global Society

Eileen Conn

I went to India towards the end of 2000 and returned the following April. Shortly afterwards, I wrote:

“What are my abiding memories of that huge country? *The suffering of the poor; the sacrifice of the forest people for conservation; the tragic territorial clash between people and elephants and other wildlife; the ever present street dogs, cows and goats; the placid overworked bullocks; the stress of the temple elephants; the chaotic and noisy traffic; the bone shaking buses, cars and rickshaws; the street waste; the metal plates and cups; the absence of cutlery; the bathroom floors forever wet; the very hard beds; women eating separately; women dressed from neck to ankle in the heat; the huge, huge leaves on bushes and trees; the wonderful fruit; the constant sun; the kindness to strangers and visitors; the ubiquitous domestic master-servant culture; the blatant corruption in politics; the lack of concern about the squalor of public spaces; the teeming human life everywhere; the commitment and humanity of the social reformers; the thronging temples, mosques and churches; the absorbing English language newspapers; my sadness at the negative effects Britain had on Indian development; and many more ...*

My journey had taken me thousands of miles around India from Assam in the far north east, down the east coast from Calcutta (now called Kolkata) into Tamil Nadu in the south east, across country to Bangalore and Mysore, into the state of Kerala in the far south west, and then back north to Delhi. My quest was to experience being human in a place very different from what is familiar, and to deepen my understanding of the workings of human society. I certainly was able to do that as I met many people in a variety of situations and was able to experience at first hand some aspects of that rich and varied culture. Although my quest was not a religious one, a theme which emerged right from the beginning became stronger as my

journey wound around India – religion in its huge variety is ubiquitous there. This article gives just a flavour of this.



Religious Kaleidoscope

I left London on a grey November day, and after a plane hop from Delhi, I landed in Guwahati, the capital of Assam. Guwahati reminded me a bit of the Wild West, a city being visibly made day by day in a somewhat haphazard way. I had been drawn there to visit a friend I had met in London. He is a Buddhist of the Chakma clan from the Chitragong Hills now in Bangladesh. As non-Muslims in that country since Indian Independence they have suffered mightily, and now there are thousands who are refugees in north east India. The north east of India is sandwiched between China to the north and Bangladesh to the south. There are hundreds of thousands of refugees and other immigrants from Bangladesh many of them Muslims. Indeed in Assam while Hindus are in the majority, Muslims are 40% and rising. There are proportionately more Christians in this part of India than anywhere else, and three of the small states have a majority as Christians. Here it is easy to see, in the

raw, how religion can BE identity, both individual and collective.

The Chakmas who have fled from Muslim Bangladesh see their ancient Buddhist connection (thought to be from Buddha's own time 2,500 years ago) as an essential part of their identity, important in coping with the loss of their homeland. The Hindus feel threatened in their own territory by the ever increasing numbers of Muslims, especially as the wars at Independence with mass slaughters were about establishing distinct Hindu and Muslim states. The Christians, as the smallest of the three, felt the need to split off from the once larger Assam so that they could have their own majority in smaller states. They are the legacy of the missionaries of the British Empire. They have unfortunately inherited the proselytising spirit, and openly want to convert many others of all religions to Christianity. This is a turbulent arena socially, politically, and religiously, accompanied by much violence.

Although Christianity is an import and the newest of religions in this part of India, it is an old religion at the other end of the country in Kerala, south west India. Here the history goes back to about 50AD when it is believed St Thomas, one of the Apostles, landed there and eventually made his way across the country to the eastern side to what is now Chennai (formerly Madras). There seems to have been an established church by the third century which joined the Syrian Orthodox Church, and was thriving as a minority religion when the Portugese arrived with their Roman Catholic missionary fervour in the fifteenth century. By then the Hindu caste system had successfully integrated the Syrian Christians in the upper castes. Those who were converted by the Portugese were generally low caste or out-caste (Dalits) and often saw conversion as a way of escaping the misery of the

caste system. These Catholic Christians were set apart from the Syrian Christians, and these distinctions are still present today.

Christianity is as indigenous in this part of India as it is in Europe where it took root later, also as a foreign import. Similarly, Islam and Judaism also found their way to Kerala from early days, as it was a trading route from what we call the Middle East (and Indians call West Asia). Islam also came again much later with invaders as Christianity did. Hinduism is much older than all of them, and some of its religious structures and ways of life have proved very resilient. Because it is not an exclusive religion it seems almost infinitely flexible in adopting new deities whether they are religious figures from other religions or modern gurus and celebrities. There seems to be a tendency in Indian culture to confer religious-style status on well known people who have a following. Maybe there are some similarities to the semi-worship of stars from film and sport in secular societies.

I noticed in a Roman Catholic church in Chennai, a busy large city, how the recognisably Christian building had a very Hindu temple feel to it. The Christian pictures, statues and icons were decorated and prayed to in similar ways to the images in the Hindu temples. The Catholic form of Christianity seemed to meld with the Indian Hindu way of religious ritual and attitudes in a way impossible for many Protestant forms with their intolerance of icons and images. This feeling was reinforced when I stayed for a few days at Shantivanam, a Christian-Hindu ashram. Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk, well known for his inspiring books on the universal message in all religions¹, had lived here for many years, and it is therefore on the trail for westerners searching for a more balanced way of life and philosophy.

I did not make such direct connections with Islam, though Muslims were clearly present in the villages and in segregated parts as were the Christians and Dalits. Islam, at 11%, is the largest minority religion, though like the other minorities unequally spread around the country.

One of the striking things about public religious places in India is that they throng with people, with tourists very much in the minority. Quite the reverse of religious sites in Europe today. This seems related, in the popular Indian expression of religion, to the widespread belief in external deities with the power to intervene in a human life after intercessions. I kept wondering if this is what it had been like throughout Europe in the middle ages.

Christianity was then an integral part of daily existence, as religion is now in India, but there were those who lamented the loss of its true spirit. India of course is well known for its long tradition of deep spiritual teachings, thousands of years old, and which have drawn many from the West. But these teachings seem to coexist with a society and culture which seem to be impervious to their understandings.

Reincarnation and Social reform

One of the religious beliefs which is still widely held is reincarnation, the cycle of rebirth and karma, and the eventual working through of this karma over many lives to gain release from the cycle, and to union with the One. This belief is intimately linked to the ancient caste system which has led to a rigidity in the social structure, and a fatalism which traps hundreds of millions of people in lives of destitution and servitude. But I met many people who were devoted to social reform. In Chennai an alliance, between a senior policeman who was a Christian, with local active citizens of Hindu backgrounds, had created a State-wide Friends of the Police movement committed to transforming the relationships between the police and the people across all castes. In Auroville, a city in embryo founded with a spiritual vision and with some 1500 people from many different nations, some were pioneering new ways of working with the local villages to help transform their internal caste relationships and to develop successful new sustainable ways of living with the natural environment. In Mysore, social reformers from different religious backgrounds were working together passionately to help the Dalits (untouchables) and the Adivasis (tribal people) to acquire basic dignity and human rights. They were part of an organised network across the south of India which covers over two million people². I met some of the people in the villages and was very moved by the reality on the ground of their situations and also of the amazing work to change things.



These modern day reformers are in a tradition which is very old. Buddha himself, 2500 years ago, was a reformer against the rigidities of beliefs in karma and castes. Jainism which developed in the same period, and Sikhism which arose 400 years ago, were also indigenous outbreaks against the rigidities of the system. There have been other Hindu reform movements across India over the centuries, and over a hundred years ago people like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Narayana started important spiritual movements with revolutionary messages for the social structure and way of living. In the 20th century Ghandi and Aurobindo followed in this tradition. Less well known internationally, but very famous in India, was Dr Ambedkar who led 200,000 people to convert to Buddhism on one day in 1956 as the way to escape from their untouchable status³. This New Buddhist movement now has millions of adherents, and conversion to a non-Hindu religion remains a traditional attempt at social change.

What is noticeable however is that the Indian cultural attitudes to religion and caste often make their mark again where people have converted. This is most apparent in the villages where the majority of people still live, and where many are not literate and therefore still rely on oral cultures. The towns and cities are growing however and here the urban pressures and the growing education and material welfare are forcing a rapid pace of change which took place in the West over several centuries. This comes at the same time as the explosion in Indian population since Independence – India now has almost a quarter of the world's people, in a territory similar in size to that of greater Europe. Add to the mix the impact of economic globalisation, and India is faced with much more dramatic and tough challenges than any Western country. It is perhaps not surprising that there has been a growth of Hindu religious fundamentalism and nationalism in the last few decades, as a defensive reaction to the social turbulence.



Nature of Religion

If I had visited India in an earlier part of my life, when I was in retreat from the exclusive fundamentalist Christian doctrine I had been taught as a child, I would have been very disconcerted to find such a huge country so apparently in thrall to religious beliefs. But now I see religion as a social, cultural way of making meanings for being and living in this life, rather than as a conveyor of literal truth about the realities of the universe, especially life after death. There is considerable theological scholarship illuminating the cultural origins and symbolic meanings of biblical texts, generating a lively dialogue about these matters in Christianity⁴. Of the other two monotheistic religions, some forms of Judaism seem to have an acceptance of similar modes of enquiry, though perhaps Islam does not yet have such a tradition. Hinduism and Buddhism, which share common roots, do not have exclusive belief systems. Enquiry and dialogue about the origins of beliefs within and between religions is more possible now than it has been hitherto.

We each need to have some way of making sense of our lives and deaths, and religion has been the main means to do that. But religion is many faceted. One is the social exterior, exoteric visible form – popular religion as most of us know it in its

beliefs, scriptures, mythologies, practises, priesthoods and integration into the culture. Another is the interior, esoteric non-visible form – sometimes called the transcendent, mystical experience, which seems very similar across different cultures. Very often the visible cultural forms grow from and around the interior experiences of an individual with special insights, eventually obscuring those insights. And so religions in their cultural forms seem to be in conflict while their underlying messages are universal.

I was very interested to discover that Hinduism distinguishes, and gives equal value to, two different forms of transcendence. These are bhakti, and jnani. Bhakti is the devotional form, recognisable by its emphasis on theism, love, devotion, prayer and surrender, which are common in religions across the world. Jnani, in contrast, is non-theist, non-devotional, a spirituality which is more cerebral, and more focussed on enquiry, meditation and will. It is thought that the two orientations are roughly equally spread in the population, and that in the West, because Christianity has been predominantly a bhakti tradition, the consequent suppression of the jnani instinct led to the rise of western science, divorced from religion⁵. Yet the cerebral awe, delight and joy in experiencing the unfolding scientific discoveries about the universe, which

underlie my own return to religion, are just as much a religious experience as those more traditional bhakti ones.

While I was reflecting on the role of religion in India, I was intrigued to pick up, in a bookshop in Bangalore (piled high to the ceilings with modern-thinking books on every conceivable subject), a Ken Wilber book in which he sets out an integral approach which brings together the interior and exterior aspects of both individual and collective life⁶. He links this with the ideas of spiral dynamics which provide a framework for the different stages of the development of social systems⁷. India itself, with nearly a quarter of all human social systems, is a very large microcosm of all these stages. With so many stages rubbing alongside each other at the same time, it is not surprising that there is so much turbulence. While I was in India, and often feeling the strangeness of it for me as a European, I was conscious that everything I encountered which felt strange and sometimes unwelcome was also present somewhere in my own society back home, but in different degrees. The integral and spiral dynamics approaches have been helpful in making some sense of the interactions between all these differences.

Our Global Society

The terrible events on 11 September 2001 in the US produced a new common experience for all those billions of people who were together watching them unfold on screens all over the world. Whatever view is taken of their meaning and the action required to deal with them, they show that we have not just a global economy but also a global society. We have to find a way to understand the internal dynamics of each part of our global society as well as how all the parts interact. We are all in it together. Insights from the new emerging fields of complexity sciences⁸ are also relevant as they help us to understand how complex systems adapt and evolve over time. My own studies look at the human species itself as a complex living system,

born some 100 to 150 thousand years ago. The chaos, turbulence, and disruptions are a natural course of events in a growing living system. Our challenge is to understand what is happening and why, and how to transcend those of our individual and collective reactions which are instinctively negative and aggressively defensive.

Now because of the September events, and the connection to fundamentalist beliefs, religion has come to the top of the agenda. In many societies across the globe popular religion is still an essential basis for life, but is struggling with the impact of economic globalisation and the over-rapid exposure to other ways of looking at the world. In secular societies, religion for many is an outdated way of life, though millions search for ways to make their lives have meaning, and economic beliefs have almost a fundamentalist religious fervour. Wherever ways of life are threatened in religious or secular societies, there can be a retreat into fundamentalism. Since there will continue to be huge social, economic and environmental changes across our global society for the foreseeable future, we need to keep religion at the top of the agenda as something which needs much better and empathetic understanding. All the world religions need to find ways to acknowledge the changes and evolve to meet the needs for meanings in the new global society. Sharing in interfaith enquiry and dialogue will be an essential part of this.

NOTES

1. See for example Bede Griffiths. *A New Vision of Reality – western science, eastern mysticism and christian faith*. Fount, HarperCollins. 1992. Also Web: <http://www.bede.griffiths.com/>
2. This is managed by NESAs (*New Entity for Social Action*), an NGO (non-governmental organisation) in Bangalore. See Web: <http://www.nesauniverse.com/>
3. Web: <http://www.ambedkar.org/>
4. The Jesus Seminar is a public forum for dialogue about such scholarship. Web: <http://religion.rutgers.edu/jsseminar/>

5. I came across this idea through the work of Mike King, who is a reader in computer art and animation at London Guildhall University. His article *God, Science and Jnani: a New Framework*, published in Network News December 1999, won a Templeton Award. See Web: <http://www.jnani.org>

6. Ken Wilber. *The Marriage of Sense and Soul – integrating science and religion*. Broadway Books, Random House. 1999. He calls this integral approach the four quadrants of development, which together form a map integrating most dimensions of life, especially spiritual, cultural, political and scientific. His most recent book, *A Theory of Everything – an integral vision for business, politics, science and spirituality*. Gateway, Gill & Macmillan. 2001, develops the quadrant approach and incorporates the ideas of spiral dynamics. Web: <http://www.worldofkenwilber.com/>

7. Don Beck and Christopher Cowan. *Spiral dynamics – mastering values, leadership, and change*. Blackwell. 1996. All the development stages present in one society may also be present in another in differing ratios, which I certainly felt in relation to Europe and India. No society has yet reached a balanced integrated stage. As Don Beck says, “*Ancient ethnic sores are belching fire while trans-national companies linked by satellites conduct their business oblivious to the feudal past below.*” Web: go to Wilber site and click on Spiral Dynamics.

8. Complexity sciences cover all academic disciplines. Useful introductory books to some of the concepts are: Fritjof Capra. *The Web of Life – a new synthesis of mind and matter*. Harper-Collins. 1996. Stuart Kauffman. *At Home in the Universe – the search for the laws of complexity*. Penguin. 1995.

Eileen Conn lives in London and is a member of the Anglican St James's Church in Piccadilly, and the creation spirituality group there. She is a former senior Whitehall civil servant, and now explores the nature of humanity as an evolving complex living system. She co-edited the book Visions of Creation (1995).