

# *Religion in the Modern World*

**The First M.N. Srinivas Memorial Lecture by  
T. N. MADAN**

**NIAS LECTURE L2 – 2001**



**NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES**  
Indian Institute of Science Campus  
Bangalore 560 012 India

©National Institute of Advanced Studies  
2001

**Published by**  
National Institute of Advanced Studies  
Indian Institute of Science Campus  
Bangalore 560 012

Price : Rs. 85/-

**Copies of this lecture can be ordered from:**

The Controller  
National Institute of Advanced Studies  
Indian Institute of Science Campus  
Bangalore 560 012  
Phone : 080-3344351  
Email : [mgp@hansadvani.serc.iisc.emet.in](mailto:mgp@hansadvani.serc.iisc.emet.in)

ISBN 81-87663-15-4

**Typeset & Printed by**  
Verba Network Services  
139, Cozy Apts., 8th Main, 12th Cross  
Malleswaram, Bangalore 560 003  
Tel. : 334 6692

## Foreword

The late Prof M N Srinivas, one of the leading sociologists of the world and the doyen of the profession in India till he passed away on 30 November 1999, had held the J R D Tata Visiting Chair at this Institute from the year 1991 when he joined us. His presence at the Institute was an indication of our commitment to the value of multidisciplinary research – combining scholarship in the natural and social sciences – a commitment that has been part of the vision that led to the founding of the Institute by the late J R D Tata. Prof Srinivas believed fervently in this vision. His world view encompassed all the commentaries that man has made (and continues to make) on his surroundings, ranging from religion at one end to technology at the other; indeed he made us realize that the two of them are not the ends of a spectrum. As a member of the faculty of the Institute and as a colleague, Prof Srinivas brought to us not only his great scholarship in sociology and social anthropology but equally great willingness to consider – warmly, enthusiastically – a wide variety of issues with persons outside his own profession. The fact that he was totally free of the deep cultural pessimism that is characteristic of large sections of the Indian intellectual community helped create on our campus a unique intellectual atmosphere that we hope enables us to examine, with scholarship and integrity, the complex issues that face Indian and global societies.

It was characteristic of Prof Srinivas during his years here that, while he was busy compiling a collection of essays titled *Indian Society through Personal Writings*, and editing a volume on *Caste, its 20th Century Avatar*, he also spent a great deal of time working with a group of scientists, technologists, businessmen and management experts to draw up what we called the *Bangalore Declaration*, made at a major information technology event that NIAS helped to organize in November 1998. Just before he passed away he was involved in another seminar organized jointly with Prof Kenneth Keniston of MIT (and Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee Visiting Professor at NIAS) on *Equity and Diversity in Information Technology*; and he had begun to work for an international symposium on *Religion and Society*.

As a person that all of us valued as much for his scholarship as for his human qualities, I and my colleagues at NIAS felt that it was very important that his values must be recalled in a series of lectures, to be given each year in his memory. We are very fortunate that the first lecture in the series is being given by another most distinguished social anthropologist, Prof Triloki Nath Madan. His theme, *Religion in the Modern World*, is one that was dear to Prof Srinivas as well. I am most grateful to Prof Madan for taking time off to come and visit us at Bangalore to deliver the first M N Srinivas Memorial Lecture.

Roddam Narasimha



Professor Narasimha, Mrs. Srinivas, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I stand before you this evening to honour the memory of Professor M.N. Srinivas. I do so at your invitation, and do not therefore stand alone, but together with you in this act of remembrance and homage.<sup>1</sup>

I met Professor Srinivas twice in 1999, first here at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, when I was privileged to have him chair my lecture to one of your refresher courses, and a few weeks later in Delhi where he came to give the inaugural golden jubilee lecture of the Delhi School of Economics. On both occasions he reiterated in person something that he had earlier written to me in a letter, namely that a legitimate concern about religious

---

<sup>1</sup>This is an extended version of the spoken text of the Lecture delivered on 9th January 2001. While repetitions have been eliminated, some quotations, footnotes and a list of references have been added. A summary of the Lecture is also attached.

fanaticism in India had, in recent times, uncritically led to a generally negative attitude to the place of religion in society. He particularly regretted the fact that the study of religion seemed to have fallen out of favour with students of sociology. In the last conversation I had with him in Delhi he told me that he was planning to hold a seminar, in about a year's time, on the theme of religion and society and that he would like me to participate in it. Sadly he did not live to bring his proposal to fruition. In choosing to speak today on religion in the modern world I am fulfilling in a sort of way my commitment to him to present a paper at his seminar.

\* \* \*

Srinivas's first major book was *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. Published by the Clarendon Press at Oxford in 1952, it was soon recognized in scholarly circles in India and the West as a major contribution. Indeed it has since acquired the status of a modern classic in social anthropological literature. Its principal strength lay in a clearly articulated theoretical framework that derived the understanding of social institutions from their role in the maintenance of solidarity in society. Known as 'functionalism', he had come to appreciate its merits at Oxford, where he wrote a doctoral dissertation under the guidance mainly of the doyen of British social anthropologists, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. It was this work

that was published as the book I just mentioned. In a sensitive autobiographical essay that he wrote many years later, Srinivas confessed that, on reflection, he had realized that functionalism tended to be overly neat, leaving no loose threads to be tied, and narrow, and even dogmatic (see Srinivas 1973).

One of the failings of British functionalism, it is by now well established, was a narrow exegesis of French sociology as it was shaped by Emile Durkheim and his collaborators and pupils in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Durkheim, the author of one of the greatest books ever written by a sociologist, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (first published in 1912), did indeed consider social solidarity an outcome of assemblies of people and the rituals they perform together – somewhat like what is happening here just now! – but his conception of the social significance of religion was much broader. According to him, it was historically and everywhere the source of morality, law, science and much else. And, as he put it, 'If religion gave birth to all that is essential in society, that is so because the idea of society is the soul of religion' (Durkheim 1995, p.421). Durkheim's 'sociologism' has been criticized for its excess and exclusivism, but the deep insights into the nature of religious phenomena that he offered have stood the test of time.

The fact that the processes of secularization had gradually seen such domains as art, law and science move out of the orbit of religion did not basically alter Durkheim's vision of the importance of religion to the human condition in terms of what it does. 'Its true function', he asserted, 'is to make us act and to help us live', not only routinely but, more significantly, in the face of 'the trials of existence' and in enabling us to be 'lifted above the human miseries' (ibid., p.419). 'Furthermore, insofar as religion is action and insofar as it is a means of making men live, science cannot possibly take its place', just as religion is not 'able to tell science what to do'. But in the face of the advance of science, Durkheim observed, 'religion is itself an object for science!' With its scope delimited but not exhausted, 'religion seems destined to transform itself rather than disappear' (ibid., p.432).

This was a profound conclusion to arrive at, particularly for a French scholar. The spirit of the Enlightenment in France, in contrast to the German version, was uncompromisingly secularist. Denis Diderot's ringing call to man to 'Have the courage to free [himself] from the yoke of religion' (see Cassirer 1968, p.135) went beyond the advice of his great German contemporary Immanuel Kant to man to 'Dare to know [and have] the courage to use [his] own understanding', which was, according to him, 'the motto of the Enlightenment' (ibid., p.163). The total war which French Encyclopaedism

began against religious faith in all its forms was reinforced by the Revolution with its strong anti-clericalism. Europe had come a long way since the time Isaac Newton had acknowledged a Supreme Intelligence and René Descartes had attempted to provide a rational proof for the existence of God.

In the anarchic aftermath of the Revolution and later, some perceptive social thinkers, such as Auguste Comte (who conceived of a positive science of society and gave it the name of sociology), while sure that theological and metaphysical varieties of knowledge had had their day, still recognized the need for functional equivalents of religion to hold together society which stays in place not by any natural law but by morals and symbols. Although intellectually obsolete, religion was socially necessary (see Preus 1987, p.109). Comte's thinking was not, however, radical enough. As Durkheim pointed out, Comte's 'attempt to organize a [new] religion using old historical memories' was doomed to failure. 'There are no immortal gospels', he added, 'and there is no reason to believe that humanity is incapable of conceiving new ones in the future' (1995, pp.429-30). But, as already stated, the future scope of religiosity would be limited: religion was already being privatized. Civic morals and secular education respectively would, Durkheim believed, provide new bonds of social solidarity and new models of socialization.

The importance of secular education in the realization of the Enlightenment vision of the perfectibility of social institutions on the basis of reason and reasonableness to constitute the modern world was obvious. Kant even allowed religion in a kind of compromise, but 'within the limits of reason alone'. He stood steadfast against traditional (revealed) religion (see Cassirer 1981, pp.383-97). The efforts to understand and redefine religion in the light of the Enlightenment coexisted with the attempts to explain it away (*à la* David Hume, see Hume 1947).

It was left to Karl Marx in the mid-nineteenth century to give the revolutionary call for the ending of 'false consciousness', and for constructing the socio-economic conditions under which this task could be accomplished. Arguing that 'man makes religion', and using the metaphor of 'a reversed world', in which it may seem that religion makes man, Marx observed that religion was 'the sigh of the oppressed creature' and 'the heart of a heartless world', that it was 'the opium of the people' that kept them in chains. And hence: 'The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. ... Religion is only the illusory sun, which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve around himself' (Marx and Engels 1959, pp.262-3). In place of divine dispensation Marx installed dialectical materialism as the engine to change the course of human history. His

teachings were to be reinforced, in course of time, by the findings of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. Together all three were the gravediggers of religion – or so they believed.

That the reign of religion in society was over seemed compellingly obvious to most acute western thinkers at the end of the nineteenth century, but among them there were some who felt deeply uncomfortable about the implications of this critical turn of the wheel of history. Marx had not been dead a year when Friedrich Nietzsche published his *Gay Science* in 1882, in which he included a disturbing parable about a madman talking about another madman. He talked about a madman who ran into the morning, sunlit market place, with a lantern in his hand, asking where he could find God. The atheists among the crowd there made fun of him, suggesting God may be hiding, or he may have got lost, or perhaps he may have just gone away.

The madman jumped in their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? ... God is dead. God remains dead. What was

holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe the blood off us?... "

Astonished by what he had said, the listeners fell silent, hearing him say as he departed: 'I came too early, my time is not yet' (see Kauffman 1974, pp.96-7). The narrator of the parable, we may safely assume, is Nietzsche himself; and we know that in the last decade of his life he was a madman. What engaged him all his life was not the expectation that the idea of God could be revived – in fact he considered traditional religions generally and Christianity in particular a blight – or the conviction that a new religion should be founded. In the words of Walter Kauffman, Nietzsche's 'greatest and most persistent problem' was how to 'escape nihilism': if one affirms the presence of God, one denies the ultimate significance of the secular world; if one denies the idea of God, everything else is robbed of meaning and value (Kauffman *ibid.*, p.101). Either way one is a nihilist: there is no escape. It is arguable that Nietzsche's problem is indeed the predicament of modern man/woman, echoed in Ivan Karamazov's lament (in Dostoyevsky's great novel), everything is allowed when God is dead.

The influence of Nietzsche's thought on Max Weber (a German sociologist of the same stature as Marx and

Durkheim) may not be exaggerated, but there is no denying the fact that these two German thinkers share a tragic view of the implications of loss of religious faith. Not that Weber considered the concerns of different religions similar or the consequences of religious values the same everywhere. Thus, while he believed that the Christian Puritan's anxiety about his salvation led through a chain of unforeseen causality to the emergence of the spirit of capitalism in Europe, he regarded Indian religions as the source of ethics 'which have abnegated the world, theoretically, practically, and to the greatest extent' (1958, p.323). These are large and controversial theses which I cannot discuss here.

More relevant is Weber's vision of the nature of human existence in modern society, 'a world robbed of gods' (ibid., p.282). He saw no future for religion. While the decline of mystery, magic and ritual, which he described as 'disenchantment of the world', was a good thing in itself, the long-term consequences of progressive rationalization were likely to entail heavy costs. He foresaw modern society overcome by a scientific-technological and manipulative worldview and a consumerist lifestyle, deprived of legitimacy in terms of ultimate values and thus rendered meaningless. As he put it, 'the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and

personal human relations' (ibid., p.155). The only values that a secularized world knows are instrumental, and its conception of perfection is synonymous with efficiency.

Expressing scepticism about science and its techniques being capable of leading modern man to happiness, Weber quoted Leo Tolstoy to the effect that science is 'meaningless' because it does not answer the most important question of 'What shall we do and how shall we live?' Taking the example of 'modern medicine', and generalizing from it, he said in 1916:

Whether life is worth living and when – this question is not asked by medicine. Natural science gives us an answer to the question of what we must do if we wish to master life technically. It leaves quite aside, or assumes for its purposes, whether we should and do wish to master life technically and whether it ultimately makes sense to do so (ibid., p.144).

In my reading of the sociological classics, I know of few formulations regarding modern life that are more insightful and more unsettling than the foregoing. Questions of this kind have continued to be asked throughout the twentieth century. Although some social scientists consider them, and such concerns as 'freedom' and 'dignity' false issues (see Skinner 1972), a secularized consciousness

has sought to evolve a grammar of humanist values to guide everyday life.

One of the best known of such attempts was the *Humanist Manifesto* of the American Humanist Association issued in 1933. Prepared under the guidance of the famous philosopher John Dewey, it proclaimed that 'the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values'. Further, it held, 'Man is at last becoming aware that he is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power of its achievement' (see Hitchcock 1982, p.11). Forty years later, a second *Humanist Manifesto*, signed by distinguished scientists, philosophers and others, reiterated: 'While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves. We affirm that moral values derive from human experience. Ethics is *autonomous* and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction' (ibid., pp.13-14). These manifestos were identified as religious, though non-theistic (the term secular humanism came into vogue only in the 1960s); they were grounded in empiricism, pragmatism and relativism. A truly religious perspective need not be theistic, but it has to have the conception of ultimate values and a transcendent point of reference.

The decade of the 1960s was a kind of watershed in the West in as much as it was marked by a resurgence of interest in the religious legitimation of human life in a recoil, as it were, from the regulative mechanisms of the state. One of the remarkable affirmations of the religious perspective was contained in the inaugural address of John Kennedy as President of the USA in January 1961. He invoked God three times but it is customary for American Presidents to do so on such occasions. What is more noteworthy is that, while he pointed out that power had passed into the hands of a new youthful generation in his country, he also proclaimed: 'The rights of man come from not the generosity of the state but from the hand of God' (see Bellah 1976, p.171). The master metaphor of 'the hand of God' was employed to stress that, while sovereignty rests with the people in a democracy, there is something higher than the verdict of the people, a higher criterion of the legitimacy of the state than the reasons of state that Machiavelli had nailed to the masthead of modern political thought.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Eleven days after this lecture was delivered, George W. Bush was sworn in as the forty-third President of the USA. His inaugural address went well beyond the usual invocations to God and contained elements of the Christian faith, which were a departure from convention. He also mentioned Judaism and Islam, although only indirectly: 'Church and charity, synagogue and mosque lend our communities their humanity, and they will have an honoured place in our plans and in our laws'. This statement repudiates secular humanism which derives a person's humanity from his own self, certainly not from religious sources. Moreover, it espouses a pluralist position similar to that of Indian secularism, *sarvadhama samathāna*.



Kennedy's words were echoed by Martin Luther King Jr. in his own celebrated 'I have a dream address' at the 'March on Washington' in August 1963. He demanded freedom and justice for all Americans - 'black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics' - on the ground that they were 'all God's children' (Lewis 1970, p.229). The religious inspiration of the Civil Rights Movement was no ordinary thing. Incidentally, the metaphor of the dream, of the dream converted into reality, might well have been borrowed by King from Mahatma Gandhi (ibid., p.210). I need hardly remind you that the cardinal principle of Gandhi's politics was that it should be grounded in morality, not expediency.

Politicians were not alone in recognizing the abiding place of religious values in public life, a wide range of scholars also were inclined the same way. The 1960s saw the emergence of a highly complex 'counter-culture' movement in the West spearheaded by the youth. At its centre lay a deep dissatisfaction with the basic assumptions of the Enlightenment and the resultant technocratic view of the world. It had a broad range of expressions including, at the one extreme, self-destructive and antisocial activities and, at the other, a turning towards the mystical and the spiritual. It was in this setting that the Hare Krishna Consciousness (see Gelberg 1983), and Zen too, took root on American university campuses. Those scholars who

applied themselves to a serious study of the phenomena concluded that the quest of the youth was not 'how shall we know?' but 'how shall we live?' It was 'to discover ways to live from day to day that integrate the whole of our nature by way of yielding nobility of conduct, honest fellowship, and joy' (Roszak 1969, p.233). One hears echoes here of Weber's concern about the importance of ultimate values and of Durkheim's observation that historically such values have come from the religious traditions of humanity.

As the 1960s drew to their close efforts were still on to reconcile the religious and secular points of view. Some Christian theologians argued that secularization must be welcomed for it would not have occurred unless God willed it (Cox 1965). At the same time, perceptive sociologists began to wonder whether the 'dissipation' of modern culture, which was 'what secularization [had] often meant, might begin to be reversed', and religion as 'an imaginative statement about the truth of the totality of human experience' reinstated (Bellah 1970, p.244). The return of the sacred to the secular world seemed a genuine possibility.

There were other things happening, too, and other perceptions of the prevailing social reality. Thus, Robert Bellah, the distinguished American sociologist (from whose work I have already quoted) pointed out that shared

historical experience of a people may generate values and principles that enshrine, as it were, a kind of consensus on national identity expressed in a religious idiom. The longing for celebratory togetherness that seems to be universal may be fulfilled through ceremonies (such as the inauguration of the President at which it is customary to invoke the blessings of a non-denominational god on the American people), commemorations (Thanksgiving, Memorial Day) and holidays (the birthdays of national heroes like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr.). The commonality thus conceived is the vision of a perfect society, a yearning for ultimate values, clearly differentiated from the teachings of the churches, but elaborated and institutionalized as what Bellah calls 'civil religion' (1970, p.168-89).<sup>3</sup> Actually he sees little scope for a complete rupture with the religious mode of thinking even among the votaries of secularism. He writes: 'The notion of secularization is far from a simple empirical generalization. It is part of a theory of modern society, a theory that can almost be called a myth because it functions to create an emotionally coherent picture of reality. It is in this sense religious, not scientific at all' (ibid., p.237).

---

<sup>3</sup> An American scholar of comparative religion, Gerald Larson, has suggested that, as in America, 'a Gandhian-Nehruvian Indic civil religion ... exists in India alongside the various particular religious traditions'. It is marked by national celebrations (Independence Day, Republic Day), and birthday holidays commemorating, besides the founders of religions, Mahatma Gandhi (see Larson 1995: 202-3).

What seemed marginal phenomena for quite some time forced their way to the centre of the stage in many parts of the world as the 1970s drew to their close. Not that the processes of secularization were wholly reversed – far from that – but alongside them, and in some respects in opposition to them, there was a resurgence of religion in public life, particularly in the political arena. The year 1979 was marked by a number of major events of such resurgence, the most remarkable of which were, of course, the Iranian and Nicaraguan revolutions. The same year the Pope, head of the world's largest Christian church, travelled to Mexico at a time when a new movement of the 1960s called 'liberation theology', which sought to combine Christianity and Marxism-Leninism, had spread among local Christian communities in a number of Latin American countries. Later that year the Pope also travelled to Poland, lending his support to the Catholic church there in its struggle against the communist state. In India, it was around this time that Sikh fundamentalism made its appearance as a political force, followed in the mid-1980s by a retreat into traditional Islamic civil law by sections of the Muslim community, on the one hand, and an aggressive assertiveness by a number of Hindu organizations, in support of a Hindutva-based national culture, on the other. As José Casanova puts it, apropos of Europe and the Americas:

What was new and unexpected in the 1980s was not the emergence of new "religious movements," "religious experimentation" and "new religious consciousness" - all phenomena which caught the imagination of social scientists and the public in the 1960s and 1970s - but rather the revitalization and assumption of public roles by precisely those religious traditions which both theories of secularization and cyclical theories of religious revival had assumed were becoming ever more marginal and irrelevant in the modern world (1994: 5).

In Iran it was the Shia clerics, led by the fundamentalist Ayatollah Khomeini, who wrested from liberals and Marxists the leadership of the gathering storm against the campaign for rapid modernization that the Shah's regime had sought to impose on society from above. Calling the bloody end of the regime a 'sacred', 'one hundred per cent Islamic' movement, the Ayatollah, as the spiritual guide of the Islamic republic of Iran, claimed inspiration from the example of the early Islamic governance inaugurated by the Prophet Muhammad himself. He proclaimed the end of the era of westernization (which some Iranian intellectuals had characterized as *gharbzadegi*, 'being stricken by the West') and its replacement by 'the culture of the Quran'. The book *Fundamentals of Islamic Thought* (1985), authored by Khomeini's protege Ayatollah Mutahhari, which served

as the manifesto of the revolution, is a strong challenge to modern, secular, scientific discourse and worldview (see also Amuzegar 1991). The Iranian revolution showed no mercy towards those it considered the enemies of the Islamic way of life. It replaced terror by terror and shed blood to avenge the blood of those it considered martyrs. To commemorate the latter, a fountain was erected in a public square in Tehran: lit up at night, the water looked red like blood.

If the symbol of the Iranian revolution was the fountain of 'blood' - surely an awesome sight - the legitimizing ideology of the Sandinista revolution, which overthrew the police state in Nicaragua, and the subsequent reconstruction of society, was 'liberation theology' (see Lancaster 1988). Essentially a form of praxis, it was evolved by theologians who worked together with the poor and with political workers at the grass-roots level, the so-called 'base communities'. The dispossessed were the 'flock' in their care and keeping. The higher rungs of the church were not involved in this interaction and were even opposed to it. Gustavo Gutierrez, who elaborated the notion of liberation theology in the 1970s, wrote of the 'eruption of the poor' into the history of Latin America, not as some kind of a secular revolt of the masses but as 'an expression of the presence of God within the tumult of real human history' (Cox 1984, p.140). The Sandinista leadership originally

looked upon the 'popular church' at the community level in purely pragmatic terms (even as the liberals and Marxists had looked upon Shia clerics in Iran), but eventually the relationship between the guerilla strategies of Sandino, Marxism and Christianity become an organic one, making it difficult to separate politics from religion. Christianity became 'the master plan around which other plans and blueprints were organized' (Lancaster 1988, p.57).

The Polish story of the political role of the Christian church is of another kind. Poland found itself a predominantly Catholic country at the end of the Second World War with a church that had a long standing record of standing up for the people (see Casanova 1994, chap.4). The communist state was an imposition from Moscow, engineered through a planted Workers' Party. Its objective was to abolish religious faith, allegedly a form of false consciousness, and to end the threat to the state from institutionalized religion. The church was engaged in a battle of survival from 1948 to 1956. The people's discontent boiled over in what came to be known as the 'bread and God' uprising of October 1956 ('the Polish October'). Thereafter the church opened out to espouse the human and civil rights of agricultural and other workers. It presented itself not merely as the nourisher of the Christians, but also as the protector of Polish culture and the nation's keeper. In doing so, the church acknowledged the legitimacy of material

wants within a framework of morality, and the values of religious freedom and freedom of conscience (after Vatican II). It even associated itself with the Workers Defence Committee in 1976. All this led the way to the national resistance and Solidarity movements and eventually to the collapse of the dictatorial state. The role of the Roman Catholic church since then has been rather controversial: it has taken an anti-pluralist stand in relation to other Christians (notably Greek Catholics). It is not quite as vocal in support of popular discontent as before, and seems to have become 'an instrument in the aggressive assertion of national identity' (Hann 2000, p.17).

If the 1980s were marked by the emergence of religious fundamentalist movements around the world, grounded in scripturalism, questing for political power, intolerant of dissent, and often violent (see e.g. Martin and Appleby 1991, 1995), the last decade of the century saw the collapse of the communist empire and the eclipse of the most rigorously worked out secularist ideology of society and philosophy of history that have ever existed.

Revolutions, whether accompanied by terror or more benign in nature, are of course big news, and they are not all lies. It is not they alone, however, that have rendered religion visible again in our time. There is much evidence of the tenacity, even vibrancy, of publicly observed private religious

faith, not only in countries that have been known for the religiosity of their peoples – the examples of India and the USA come readily to mind – but even in those that were not so inclined in the past, such as Japan. The return of the sacred in China and Russia only testifies to the coming into the open of what was formerly suppressed. Ironically, the accoutrements of modern society itself – economic well-being of increasing proportions of national populations; quick, comfortable and affordable travel; ready information and easy communication; etc. – facilitates the practice of religion.

I remember hearing a lecture by the late Professor A.L. Basham, distinguished historian, at the Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, in 1973, in which he remarked that the emergence of the cult of Santoshi Ma as a new goddess in the Hindu pantheon bore witness to the vitality of some religious traditions. One hears little about this cult nowadays, but yet another goddess, by no means new, Vaishno Devi, draws pilgrims in their thousands to her cave in Jammu from all parts of India virtually throughout the year. Many of them come to bargain with their goddess for mundane favours, pledging gratitude for gift. The fact that the government, the biggest employer of people in the country, and other corporate employers, offer paid holidays to their personnel has resulted in the combination of religiosity and recreation. Pilgrimages within countries

and across countries are attracting larger number of devotees than ever before. While the multitudes move, millions watch them on their television sets, fulfilled through vicarious participation, or simply entertained by the spectacle. The midnight Christmas mass in St. Peter's Square in Rome is watched by millions of Christians and non-Christians the world over. The same is true of the annual Haj pilgrimage to Mecca in which Muslims from all over the world participate. The Mahakumbha *mela* at Prayag this winter has been named by the media as 'the greatest show on earth'; it too is being read and heard about and watched worldwide. By the time it is over more than twenty five million people will have visited Prayag, including pilgrims hoping to wash off their sins, tourists seeking amusement, merchants making money, and media persons producing sensational news.

Looking at it in whichever way we may religion survives in the world at the beginning of the twenty first century, belying the expectations of those modern rational men and women of a hundred years ago – and in fact of most of the twentieth century – who were convinced that its days were coming to their end. It not only survives as private faith but has also reemerged as public religion (see Casanova 1994). It is a sign of the times that a scholarly work published in the last year of the twentieth century bears the title *Why Gods Persist* (1999). The author, Robert

Hinde, biologist and psychologist, characterizing his approach as 'scientific', 'examines why so many religions continue to persist at a time when the answers they provide to the basic questions of life are unacceptable to many in the modern world', and turns to 'basic human propensities' for answers (p. 206). Needless to emphasize, a reasonable answer to this and similar questions does not have to be – indeed it should not be – in exclusively religious or secular terms. The 'totalizing propensity of reason to absolutize the tension between sacred and profane realms ... into irreconcilable contradictions' (Seligman 2000, p.132) has been the bane of discussions of the place of religion in the modern world.<sup>4</sup> But a 'theo-ethical equilibrium' – 'a kind of integration between a religious outlook and secularly grounded moral or political principles' – is now coming to be considered 'achievable' (Audi 2000, pp.212-3). This is a long way from the earlier certitude (whether stated in Marxian or Weberian terms) about the fateful transformation of religious into secular culture. Indeed, it has been suggested that it is not all that unlikely that future historians 'will look back on the period

---

<sup>4</sup> Jayant Narlikar, the distinguished astrophysicist writes:  
... It is necessary to recognize that religion and science fulfil complementary urges of the human mind. The problems come when there is a trespass of the area of either one by the other. Thus, scientists should avoid passing value judgements on religious thoughts without appreciating their very different contexts. And religious thinkers should not try to look for postfacto justification for their thoughts in the findings of science (2000, p.285).

from roughly 1750 to 2050 as a brief three-hundred-year secular parenthesis in a history of humanity that has always been religious' (Seligman *ibid.*). I do not have the time this evening to examine these arguments in any detail. I have referred to them only to point out that, currently, there is considerable evidence of serious rethinking of the place of religion in modern society.

\* \* \*

It is time to conclude. Let me begin with a clarification. If I have spoken about the persistence of religion in modern society, I have neither meant to suggest that religions have not changed in response to the challenges of secularization, nor wanted to recommend that religious conceptualizations of the limitations of modernity be uncritically accepted. Even less have I wanted to suggest that we all become religious, whatever that means. I do not believe that ethically commanding directives issue from the social sciences generally any more than they do from the natural sciences. I know that the notion of a value-free social science is not defensible in all contexts and situations: for instance we have seen a fruitful coming together of ethics and economics in recent times (see Sen 1994). But I do believe that, while sociologists should study the value preferences of people, and spell out their likely consequences, they may not, as sociologists, recommend any selections. Such choices may truly be

made by one only on the basis of moral or political convictions that are personal even when they are shared.

In an article published in *The Times of India* on 9 July 1993, Professor M.N. Srinivas wrote about the troubled times, marked by runaway gadgetry, frenetic consumption, and conflicts of various kinds, through which India was then (and is now) passing. He observed:

It is in this overall context that the need for a new philosophy and social ethic becomes urgent and imperative. And that philosophy cannot be secular humanism. It has to be firmly rooted in God as creator and protector and the sustainer of human societies. The fraternity of all human beings cutting across divisions of race, ethnicity, caste, class, religion and gender follows logically from the idea of God as creator. The idea of human free will is [present] in all religions, and it provides the basis for individual liberty without which there can be no true democracy.

Many sociologists were taken aback by Srinivas's rejection of secular humanism and by his plea for a God-centred fellowship of human beings. Sociology is after all a child of the European Enlightenment. Several years later (in 1998), he told me that he had learnt from more than one source that his article had evoked sharp criticism from

some of the ablest of his professional colleagues. But he had no complaints, he said, nor had the criticism made him change his opinion. What he had written were his considered views, indeed his convictions, and he regarded it as his duty to make them known.

Just as Professor Srinivas pursued his sociological studies in the most rigorous manner, and tried to state his conclusions without presuppositions or prejudice, he had similarly given expression to his personal convictions without fear or compromise. Nowhere in the article, it should be noted, did he invoke sociological authority for his views, but it may not be denied that many among the reading public knew of his tall stature as the doyen of Indian sociologists. He took the risks of misunderstanding and disapproval, guided by his conscience, *ātma tushti*, alone. I put it to you, Professor Narasimha, Ladies and Gentlemen, that M. N. Srinivas was a person of great intellectual and moral integrity, deserving of high honours.

It is therefore in the fitness of things that the National Institute of Advanced Studies, where Professor Srinivas worked during the last years of his life, should have instituted a Memorial Lecture in his honour. I applaud the Institute's decision. I am deeply indebted to NIAS, and to Professor Narasimha in particular, for having afforded me the rare privilege of delivering the first such lecture. And I

am profoundly grateful to Mrs. Rukmini Srinivas for her gracious presence in our midst this evening.

Thank you.

### References

- Anuzegar, Jehangir. 1991. *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution*. State University of New York, Albany, NY.
- Audi, Robert. 2000. *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*. Cambridge University press, Cambridge.
- Bellah, Robert. 1976. *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*. Harper & Row, New York.
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions and the Modern World*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Cassirer, Ernst. 1968. *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Cassirer, Ernst. 1981. *Kant's Life and Thought*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CN.
- Cox, Harvey. 1965. *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*. Macmillan, New York.
- Cox, Harvey. 1984. *Religion in the Secular City*. Simon and Schuster, New York.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Tr. by Karen E. Fields. Free Press, New York.
- Gelberg, Steven J., ed. 1983. *Hare Krishna*, Hare Krishna Grove Press Inc., New York.
- Hann, Chris. 2000. Problems with the (de) privatization of religion. *Anthropology Today* 16, 6, pp.14-20.
- Hinde, Robert 1999. *Why Gods Persist. A Scientific Approach to Religion*. Routledge, London.
- Hitchcock, James. 1982. *What is Secular Humanism*. Servant Books, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Hume, David. 1957. *Natural History of Religion*. Ed. by H.E. Root. Stanford University Press, Stanford CA.
- Kauffman, Walter. 1974. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Princeton University press, Princeton NJ.
- Lancaster, Roger. 1994. *Thanks to God and the Revolution. Popular Religion and Class Consciousness in the New Nicaragua*. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Larson, Gerald J. 1995. *India's Agony over Religion*. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.
- Lewis, David L. 1970. *Martin Luther King*. Allen Lane, The Penguin Press London.
- Marty, Martin E. and R. Scott Appleby, eds. 1991. *Fundamentalisms Observed* 1995. *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*. Chicago University Press, Chicago.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. 1959. *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*. Ed. by Lewis S. Feuer. Doubleday, New York.
- Mutahhari, Murtaza. 1985. *Fundamentals of Islamic Thought: God, Man and the Universe*. Tr. by R. Campbell. Mizan Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Narlikar, Jayant. 2000. *Science and religion: Approach towards a synthesis. Creeds of Our Times*. Ed. anonymously. Full Circle, Delhi.
- Preus, Samuel R. 1987. *Explaining Religion*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CN.
- Rozzak, Theodore. 1969. *The Making of a Counter Culture*. Doubleday, New York.
- Seligman, Adam B. 2000. *Modernity's Wager: Authority the Self and Transcendence*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Sen, Amartya, 1994. *On Ethics and Economics*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Skinner, B.F. 1972. *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Alfred Knopf, New York.
- Srinivas, M.N. 1952. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Srinivas, M.N. 1973. Itineraries of an Indian social anthropologist. *International Social Science Journal* 25, 1-2, pp.129-48.
- Srinivas, M.N. 1993. *Towards a new philosophy*. The Times of India, New Delhi, ed. page.
- Weber, Max. 1958. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Tr. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.



## **A SUMMARY**

The late Prof. M. N. Srinivas, who was the doyen of Indian sociologists at the time of his death in 1999, had discussed in a major work early in his career the social function of ritual in sustaining society. Subsequently, he explored in a number of shorter writings the historical dimensions of Hinduism, the meaningfulness of the religious life, and his own religious beliefs. In one of his last articles on the subject, he expressed skepticism about the adequacy of 'secular humanism' in helping Indians to cope with the problems of materialism and a conflict-ridden society. He stressed the importance of 'the idea of human free will', which, he believed was 'present in all religions' and provided 'the basis for individual liberty without which there can be no true democracy.' He did not however claim any sociological authority for his views. Towards the end of his life, Srinivas regretted that a legitimate concern about the spread of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism in society had overshadowed the positive aspects of religion as personal faith and as a social force.

A widespread conviction among intellectuals in the West at the beginning of the 20th century was that religion was in the process of being driven out of collective social life and privatized. The world was being rid of mysteries, miracles and magic. Marx had recently

proclaimed that the abolition of religion was necessary for the 'real happiness' of the people. There were others who were equally convinced that the idea of God was dead, but they were not sure that this was an unmingled blessing. If the affirmation of the idea implied that the secular world had no real significance, its denial meant that, in the absence of a source of ultimate values, everything became meaningless. The world of science and rationality was grounded in instrumental values and such criteria of perfection as efficiency. Questions about the meaning of life and the significance of death were regarded as of no or only remote interest. Humanity seemed to be getting closer to mastering life technically, but whether it made sense to do so was not considered.

A middle position was held by some thinkers, who argued that, although religion was destined to disappear, there was something eternal about its social function, namely the maintenance of society through the formation of a moral consensus about its legitimacy. If religion was not going to be available any longer to do this, then secular education or, more broadly, secular humanism would surely fill the vacuum, and help to realize the Enlightenment vision of humanity in charge of itself. The persuasiveness of such ideas became stronger with the passage of time. Around the beginning of the second half of the century, many Christian theologians came forward with the novel

thesis that the historical processes of secularization could not but be the will of God.

Signs of weariness about the secularist world view began to emerge in the 1960s. Rethinking about alternative visions of life among intellectuals went hand in hand with unrest among the youth on university campuses. Movements collectively referred to as 'counter culture' made their appearance: they aimed at recovering the mystical and the spiritual elements of human experience. In his inaugural address (1961), John Kennedy, speaking for a new generation in America, proclaimed that 'the rights of man' came from not 'the generosity of the state' but 'the hand of God'. This was a reassertion of the religious or moral foundations of politics, and reminiscent of what Gandhi had affirmed throughout his public life. The notion that the separation of the State and the Church in the USA had been made possible by the emergence of a 'civil religion' rooted in the collective experience of the American people as a nation gained ground. Signs of a return of the sacred were, however, considered marginal to the mainstream of world history.

The 1970s were marked by significant developments in the so-called peripheries of the world. In Nicaragua Catholic priests formulated a 'theology of liberation', bringing together Christianity and Marxism for promoting the forces of economic and political emancipation. Eventually the

combination of a socially active Church, a redefined Marxism and guerilla tactics became crucial in the making of the successful revolution that saw the end of a tyrannical police dictatorship in 1978. Similarly, in Poland, the Catholic Church first struggled for its survival under a communist regime. It then emerged as a supporter of agricultural and industrial workers and a defender of universal human rights. It took on the role of being the 'keeper' of Polish culture and the nation. It lent support to the Workers Defence Committee (1976) that soon grew into the powerful Solidarity movement which ended yet another dictatorship.

In Iran, however, the return of organised religion as the foe of a westernized society and a 'secular' state, was retrogressive. Here Marxist intellectuals joined hands opportunistically with fundamentalist Shia Clerics who finally spearheaded the 1978 revolution, eliminating their collaborators. Around the same time and throughout the 1980s, religious identities became assertive in India also. Hindu communalism (Hindutva), Sikh fundamentalism (Bhindranwale), and Muslim resistance (Shah Bano, minority rights) vied with each other for public prominence. The portentous aftermath of these confrontations is still very much with us.

Its worldwide ugly manifestations are not all there is to religion. The collapse of the east European communist

empire and the softening of Chinese communism have resulted in an enormous resurgence of religious faith among millions of people. A similar resurgence has occurred in Japan, and desecularization is reported from the Scandinavian countries. Countries culturally as disparate as India and the USA remain largely religious. In short, contrary to what was believed a hundred years ago would happen has not happened: religion has not disappeared from the world.

Ironically, public visibility of religion has been aided in various ways by the facilities of the modern world. More than ever before, religious pilgrimages have become the order of the day. Improved economic conditions, easier and faster travel, combination of religious devotion and secular tourism, media attention, etc. have transformed religious activities into public performances. While multitudes move, millions watch. For the religious minded this may be vicarious participation, for others it is entertainment. Images of the mid-night Christmas mass in St Peter's Square in Rome, or of Haj pilgrims gathered in Mecca, persist in the minds of people. Currently, the Kumbha mela occupies the front pages of newspapers and preempts prime time on the electronic media. Such attention focuses on the bizarre and the sensational. Be that as it may, religion survives today – whether as personal faith, defender of human rights, fanaticism, or sheer spectacle.

T. N. Madan studied sociology and social anthropology at Lucknow and Australian National Universities. He has taught at Lucknow, Karnataka and Delhi Universities and at a number of universities abroad, including Harvard. He has been honoured by the Asiatic Society, the Indian Council of Social Science Research and the University Grants Commission for his contributions. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and has been conferred an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Paris (Nanterre). He has authored or edited over a dozen books. The most recent of these, *Modern Myths and Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* was given the H.R. Chaturvedi award by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, on being judged as the most important book on the interaction of religion and society published in 1996-98. Professor Madan was the editor of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* for 25 years. Currently he is the editor of *Oxford in India Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology*. He is also an editorial adviser to many journals in India and abroad. Besides his academic achievements, Professor Madan has served as Member-Secretary of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and Director of the Institute of Economic Growth. He has been a consultant to UNESCO, WHO, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. After his retirement in 1997, the Institute of Economic Growth named him an Honorary Life Professor.