

Creative Contemplative Dimension in Religious / Priestly Formation from an Indian Perspective

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The author is the Director of the NBCLC (P.B. 8426, Bangalore 560084) and describes here the nature of contemplative life according to the different types of religion developed in history. He then reflects on the present formation of priests and religious and finds that the mystical or contemplative dimension is underestimated. He thinks it develops in a culture of noise rather than silence, low levels of maturity and sense of self-formation, and general mediocrity. Formators lack pastoral experience. He pleads for a renewed effort to put Christ and his Spirit at the centre of formation and makes suggestions for an improved programme, stressing the need of an 'ashram' spirituality, an interreligious and egalitarian context, and a stress on creativity according to each one's gifts.

I. Creative Contemplation

The term contemplation is used by different authors in different senses. Mystical Theology uses the term contemplation in the strictest sense, to designate the infused prayers of Quiet and Union. God infuses divine *knowledge* into our intellect and divine *love* into our will in such a way that we are enabled in a limited manner to *know and love God* as God knows and loves Godself. St Teresa calls it heaven on earth. **Union** with God, obviously, is not restricted to formal prayer, it also takes place in activity. Prayer is fixing our inward gaze on God who cares and loves his creatures. We are actively passive, in the sense that we fully collaborate with the working of God in our soul. It is through contemplative prayer experience that we learn to see God everywhere, and love God in all creatures, and be with God always without any moment of separation. This is what we call praying always. When we pray in such a way we do not restrict prayer to set hours of the day; rather they move and live **in** prayer. St John of the Cross says that one act of pure love achieves more than all the exterior works of the whole world. Scientists today might agree: contemplation is a life-force that is more powerful than nuclear energy. It is an energy of faith and love. I would like to turn to creative contemplation as the basic means of obtaining divine energy, as contemplation is the best energy source leading to activity. From it emerges the highest human energy, as it wells up from love at the core of our being. It is this energy that creates, transforms and builds the

earth. "It creates a response, an interior movement, a motion of love that necessarily expresses itself in an altered state of consciousness. So deep is the call and so interior is my response that a new level of awareness is opened up and I enter into a changed environment."¹

II. The Basis of Creative Contemplation: Nature Religions

(a) Nature Religions and Prophetic Religions

There are two wombs of religions: Palestine and India. Palestine gave birth to religions that are characterised by prophetic dynamism, while the Indian religions have a contemplative and mystical world-view. Indian religions emphasize the silence of the heart, union with the Divine Spirit (*Atman*), harmony with nature, etc. They seek a merging in God, the source of our being. The Semitic religions seek an encounter with God as the Totally Other. Nature religions tend to favour the first approach. God is perceived as a mystery underlying the whole of reality as we know it. We, humans, try to unite ourselves to God partly by purifying our own imperfect notions, partly by partaking in sacred images, by climbing God's mountain or bathing in his sacred river; or simply by honouring the symbol that mediates God's presence. In its highest forms this approach leads to mysticism. Prophetic religions, on the other hand, present God as a Person who reveals a message and declares his commands. By making his word and his divine will known, he makes us either accept or reject his lordship. God's revelation comes through human mediators and addresses itself to concrete human realities. God is experienced as the unexpected, the 'totally other', the one to whom the believer submits in an act of obedience and surrender.

Our first experience as a child is the embrace of our mother, an experience of deep sense of oneness. As we lie in her womb or suck her breasts we receive warmth, security and satisfaction. Psychologists call this our oral phase and characterise the experience as a participation in the oceanic oneness of the universe. It gives us the basic trust we need for life, trust in ourselves and in others. Even when the mother is gradually withdrawn, we retain the original experience so that we can face confidently the reality of living. The same experience forms the psychological foundation on which and through which we respond to the mystery of God. Going back to this experience helps us to enter into contemplation, divine intimacy, the union.

¹W. JOHNSON, *Silent Music*. William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1974, 117.

When we come in contact with our father we have another basic experience. Through the face, voice and word of father we learn our identity as a separate person. It is a step to becoming adults. We discover also the otherness of other persons. We learn to see ourselves as distinct. We also acquire our super-ego, our conscience, which will guide us throughout life. Here, too, there are consequences for our religious awareness. The experience of the "father" releases in us the possibility to respond to the prophetic pattern of religion.²

(b) Jesus' experience of God as Father and Mother

This integral experience of the child in relation to its father and mother may help us to grasp the mystery of Jesus' relation with the Divine. Jesus experienced God as Father-and-Mother: a 'thou' in an interpersonal mode and as the true T (Self) in an intrapersonal way. In the words, "the Father is greater than I," "the Father sent me," an I-Thou relation with the Father is evident (Jn 5:36; 6:39; 14:31; 14:28). When on the other hand Jesus says, "I am in my Father and the Father is in me," "I come from within the Father," "I draw life from the Father" (14:10; 17:21; 16:28; 8:42; 6:57) an intrapersonal I-Self relation with the mother unfolds. In the latter frame Jesus experienced the Divine as the womb, the ground of being and source of life, "come and drink from me" (7:38) - who can say this other than a mother to the child? Here the emphasis is on unity, on Oneness. The human is one with the Divine. There is no reality second to **the** divine (*advaita*).³

(c) The Experience of the Divine in the Indian Tradition

The Indian sages experience the divine, the cosmic and the human realities not primarily as objects of analysis but as subject of experience. The perceiving subject enters into the perceived object and becomes one with it. Ultimately there is nothing that can be determined as the other, as a second reality, as something alien. *Ekam sat*, reality is one. Those who perceive it speak of it in different ways. The Indian psyche is very sensitive to the underlying unity of reality. Hence in inter-personal relations the unifying divine presence is the inherent bond of love. The Indian form of greeting, *namaste*, means the Divine in me greets the Divine in you. With things of nature too, the Indian psyche resonates so much that one sees the entire reality as pervaded by the Divine *{Isa*

²i. WIJNOARDS, *Prayer and Contemplation*. Class Notes. Bangalore: NBCLC 1992.

³S.PAINADATH, "An Indian Reading of the Gospel of St John," *Word & Worship* 36 (2003) 152-3.

Up. 1.1.). India respects the rich plurality of religions because it recognizes the underlying unity of spirituality. Brahman is considered as the great womb ... all beings take birth in him ... and finally all return to him.⁴

III. The Present State of Formation in India: Strengths and Weaknesses

Traditional methodology has not been effective. Basically there is no sustaining energy coming from creative contemplation. Let us examine some of the trends and undercurrents that threaten to undermine our formation process.

(a) Noise Culture and Loss of Central Focus

Today we are bombarded by a noise culture making it difficult to maintain a meaningful silence. Only on the stillness of the water can our faces be reflected. Similarly, in the stillness of our hearts the Lord speaks to us. Blessed Mother Teresa said: "God speaks in the silence of the heart - and we listen." As a result of the noise and activity-oriented culture, there is no place for interiority and contemplation, and consequently the divine intimacy and union are forgotten, the centre of focus is lost. When we shift the centre of a circle the circumference is also disturbed, and if we constantly change the centre the shape of the circle will also constantly change. There will be no stability. But if we change the circumference without shifting the centre, the centre will be able to bring the circle to its original shape and stability can be restored without much difficulty.⁵

(b) A Lower Human Maturity of our Formees

The human maturity of our religious personnel, especially those in formation, seems to be lower than that of contemporaries in the secular world. The human identity which should have come first, is relegated to the third place, after the priestly and Christian identity. We are too conscious of our priestly identity and presume that under this layer everything is alright. But it is not. That human identity is not allowed to grow since we are socially and religiously accepted as mature persons just because we are professed or ordained. But those days are over. "Our priests do not command respect and do not come across as persons of hard work, honesty, integrity, justice and fairness. A large number of our Catholics today do not believe that their priests are honest men."⁶

⁴Ibid., 155.

⁵P. PUTHANANGADY, *Refocussing our Vision*. Class Notes. Bangalore NBCLC, 2006, 3.

⁶I. PADINJAREKUTTU, "What ails Priestly Formation Today?" *VJTR* (205) 912-4.

(c) Lack of Sufficient Self-Formation

Formation depends 70% on the candidate, 20% on the formators and 10% on the formation programme. Self-formation means that a person is willing to take personal responsibility to bring about a radical change in life. Religious life is worth its name only when the religious exercise personal responsibility. (Its opposite is the 'blame game' or the game of 'hide and seek'.) *Pastores Dabo Vobis* states: "All formation.. is ultimately a self-formation. No one can replace us in the responsible freedom that we have as individual persons" (#69).

(d) Culture of Mediocrity

There is a growing tendency today among formees to take academic life lightly, and this leads to a culture of mediocrity. The performance of some of our young confreres after their final vows and ordination is very poor. They are incapable of finding new methods to face the challenges. Naturally they keep themselves away from the people and other problems. Therefore, it is necessary to regularly organize ongoing formation programmes, both for our priests and brothers in the field.

(e) Formators

The formators need to combine in themselves the roles of a facilitator, animator and *guru*. Many are not equipped for this task. Often they are trained abroad, and when they return they do not take sufficient trouble to be rooted in the culture of the place, to be acquainted with its religious traditions and religious pluralism, and to be equipped with a working knowledge of the local language. Without pastoral experience they tend to be academic. They do not present themselves as men who have experienced God in Christ, and are able to share their experience with others and be witnesses of the Paschal Mystery. They are not able to strike a balance between spiritual and individual leadership. Some of them consider themselves to be mere lecturers and not formators or missionaries. They are not ready to sacrifice the personal agenda for the sake of the common good.⁷

IV. Suggestions

Merely introducing contemplative exercises in our formation will not suffice. We need a *creative* contemplation. We are living in a pluralistic society, as well as in ever changing circumstances of the world. How

⁷*"Priestly Formation in North India.* Varanasi: Nav Sadhana, 1982, 123-7.

should contemplation flow into various streams of ministry according to our situation of life?

1. Rediscover Christ as our Centre

Our life is not centred on an idea or ideology, but on a person. We need to rediscover our life as a movement centred on Christ. Basically our religious life is not a matter of a membership in a society; it is the expression of an organic commitment to a person. Everything in life is conditioned by this belonging, this centre. This allegiance to Christ may at times take different shapes according to our whims and fancies, and thus we distort both Christ and the community.⁸ We distort the image of Christ and deform the community for our convenience. The formation houses should be a "Schools of Christ," where centring is done and where candidates discover the Asian face of Jesus (the Risen Jesus, but still having wounds in his body) as *Guru*, healer and compassionate friend. The late John Paul II asked us to contemplate and draw graces from this face of Christ. The emphasis should not be on the *study* house or a place for *training* for a certain job or profession, e.g., employees of the Church. There we should experience God not as an object, but as the subject of our being. God's Spirit should divinize us. This happens not through rituals or devotions but through contemplation. The symbolism of the tree may be of help for the realisation.

2. Be Mastered by the Creative Energy of Spirit

Discipleship cannot be realised without discipline, which does not consist in mastering anything, but in being mastered by the Spirit, the creative motherly energy of God.

- i. Life in the Spirit means a progressive integration of the polarities of life; emotionality and rationality, heart and head, the right and the left halves of the brain, contemplation and action, *yin* and *yang*. Then a contemplative creativity emerges. This creativity generates life. There emerges a passion for something new.
- ii. Openness to the Spirit should create an openness to the manifold ways in which the Spirit unfolds itself in history. One naturally acknowledges the diversity of religions and respects the spiritual experiences of others. The spiritual person is a co-pilgrim with believers of other religions in pursuit of the 'God beyond God'.⁹

⁸PUTHANANGADY, *Class Notes*, 3

⁹S. PAINADATH, *The Integrated Spirituality of the Bhagavad Gita. Class Notes*. Bangalore: NBCCLC, 2005.

Pluralism becomes a way of life even when going for a variety of ministries.

3. Create a Desert in the Market Place, and vice versa

One of the supreme examples of how one can strike a balance between Desert and Market Place, between 'being' and 'doing', is given by Jesus and his disciples. In the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 6, we have the scene of the disciples returning from their first missionary journey. They must have been overworked, tired and weary. And Jesus invites them to "come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mk 6:31). And they followed Jesus to a deserted place by themselves for rest, renewal and prayer. But before their time for rest grew long, the needs of others burst upon them in dramatic ways. And because Jesus had compassion on the crowds, they were once again thrust into doing (Mk 6:34-44).

The renewal of life is always in the direction of the desert "withdrawal" from activity, because the 'pull', the attraction of the market place, or of pastoral situations, carries with it the danger of making the priest forget the values of the desert. This does not mean that we run away from the centre of activity. The art is to know how to bring the desert into the market place. That is why in our priestly formation we should provide time and place for a desert situation, where silence is precious. True silence is the speech of the lovers. Silence is a garden enclosed, where alone the soul can meet its God. Nature can be of great help in this process. Deserts are not necessarily places but states of mind and heart. They can be found in the city and in the everyday of our lives.

We escape to the market place, because we fear the desert, because we are fearful of solitude, fearful of silence, afraid to face the demands and claims which God might make, indeed does make upon us. But we are never safe in the market places unless we are at home in the desert. The word *nostalgia* in Greek means a painful longing to return. So we must have this *nostalgia* for the desert in the midst of the market place. We can create a music from the noise of the market place. I have read somewhere: "Prayer is the sum total of our relationship with God, we are what we pray, our ability to love is in proportion to our ability to pray." To this I would add: Genuine love of God and people is learnt in the desert. Learn it here and you will have something to sell in the market place, the pearl of great price. The art of dying must be learned as we learn the art of living.

4. *Ashrama-Manobhava*

Beyond the fences of traditional religions many people today are seeking a contemplative, liberative and integrative spirituality. One authentic way of Christian response to this global quest for genuine spirituality would be to explore the *ashrama-manobhava*. The Sanskrit term *airama*, means total pursuit, full dedication "tireless striving stretching its arms towards perfection" and *manobhava* means 'frame of mind'.¹⁰ The characteristic elements of an *aframa-manobhava* are the following: a contemplative atmosphere conducive to spiritual pursuits, a relentless quest for the Divine with an intense pursuit of Truth and Beauty, an all-embracing simplicity of life-style coming from authentic renunciation, a compassionate attitude to people, leading to a genuine hospitality towards all, and a vibrant harmony with nature expressed in a culture of non-violence.¹¹ Such an attitude will help us to counteract the onslaught of consumerism brought about by globalisation.

5. Inter-religious Formation

To be a religious today is to be inter-religious. Reality is one but manifested as unity in diversity. Everyday life tells us how the divine plan for the universe is full of diversity and plurality. Therefore, there is no reason to reduce that diversity of religions into oneness. Pluralism is a value to be celebrated. The differences in languages, customs, traditions, etc., have to be prized. What is important here is to accept the individuality of the other. Asian religious traditions are not mere objects of our evangelization, to be 'domesticated' into one's way of belief.¹² "As long as we only think for our own religions, we are going to miss the spiritual mark."¹³

a. Live in harmony in spite of contradictions: Globalisation, instead of bringing about global unity, has created more and more conflicts all over the world. Fundamentalism has given impetus to communalism and the communalisation of society. We actually need a harmony model. The early Church followed this model. Indians love to live in peace and harmony. There are different philosophical

¹⁰Rabindranath TAGORE, *Gitanjali*, 35.

¹¹S. PAINADATH, "The Spiritual and Theological Perspectives of Ashrams," *VJTR* 65 (2001) 214-5.

¹²A. PIERIS, *Cod's Reign for God's Poor*, Kelaniya: Tulana Research Centre, 1998, 79.

¹³Swamy AGNIVESH, 'The Church and Other Religions - a Hindu Perspective', in *Yesu Kristu Jayanti 2000*, ed. by P. Puthanangady, Bangalore: NBCLC, p.351.

systems leading to the various ways of understanding God, the world and human life, yet there is a feeling of oneness at the heart level. *Ekam sat*, reality is one. It may be because for a Hindu the objective truth is not important but subjective attitude is the thing that matters. Objective truth, what God is like, is decided by the head. Subjective attitudes come from the heart which unites people.¹⁴

- b. *Mutual discipleship*: While committing ourselves fully to the person of Christ and to his mission, it is still possible to be open to listen to the spiritual Gurus of other faiths which only helps us to enhance our faith. When I go to listen to the discourses of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, I see him often applying the Gospel values to today's context, consciously or unconsciously. The many meditation movements prevalent in the country are of great help such as *Art of Living*, *Sudharshan Kriya*. They are relevant to face challenges of modern life. This is not syncretism which mixes indiscriminately symbols and other elements from two religions. It is more of a symbiosis which integrates two religions in a meaningful and harmonious manner without destroying their basic identities.¹⁵

6. A Vibrant Community of Equals

(a) A community that lives according to the life of Jesus - taking God as Father-and-Mother - cannot one-sidedly emphasize laws and structures, concepts and definitions, norms and rituals, most of which are determined and controlled by men. In it there can be no room for male domination either in the patterns of thought or in the structures of administration. Feminine characteristics - motherliness, gentleness, compassion - will balance the male aggressive attitudes.

(b) Consequently the language of theology will not be predominantly conceptual; rather it will develop an aesthetic and vibrant language with myths and stories, poetry and music, art and sculpture, dance and folklore, in order to articulate the experience of the Divine.¹⁶

7. Creativity in Formation, Education and Evaluation

Our formees often complain that they are tired of monotonous

¹⁴T. D'SA, "Paths of Mission," in T. D'Sa, *The Church in India in the Emerging Third Millennium*. Bangalore: NBCLC 2005, 542.

¹⁵A. PIERIS, *Fire & Water*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996, 6. ¹⁶S. PAINADATH, "The Father of Jesus is Mother," *Class Notes*. Bangalore: NBCLC 2006, 6.

methods of teaching: lectures after lectures. They are also fed up with our method of evaluation: oral exams, written exams and scientific papers. In the exams they feel, they are not tested but only their memory power is tested. While respecting these traditional methods, once in a while we could go beyond them and be creative. I once introduced a creative and cooperative way of learning and examining, and it worked. The students had to produce something in groups according to their talent, which would be a part-fulfilment of their exams. Some wrote beautiful poems, dramas, conferences and some others produced a painting and a sculptor carved out a statue! They had joy in doing it. They felt their personality had grown, and their individuality had been respected.

Conclusion

A lot of demands are made today on leaders by the associates and the formees. They expect all types of needs to be addressed by the leaders, whether functional, relational, emotional or spiritual. With regard to materialistic and functional needs there can be fairly clear-cut answers, but not so when the needs are spiritual and relational. In the present day world, a lot of needs are automatically met when the spiritual needs are properly taken care of. IQ and EQ have given place to SQ. Because of all these many challenges to be faced, it does not take long for a religious leader to be drained out of his or her energy. Many are burnt out in their ministry and are waiting to be relieved. All this happens when people are too activity-oriented and fail to re-energise themselves because they "do not make time" to go to the sources of energy. Creative contemplation is time-consuming and may appear to be a waste of time. Therefore, people go in for faster methods, like group dynamics, techniques of dialogue within the community, etc. These do not have a lasting effect. Someone has rightly said, "If I were given eight hours to chop off a tree, I would spend four hours in sharpening my axe." Perhaps the person may chop off the tree in two hours if he sharpens his axe for four hours and then he can relax for two hours!