

humanist outlook

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*for the furtherance of human values
through an ethics based on human
perceptions and capabilities*

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The Logo of the Indian Humanist Union

The logo of the Indian Humanist Union, designed in 1966 as the Humanist Outlook was being launched, symbolises five important Humanist ideas. The word man, of course, is used here as shorthand for human being.



All men are equal



Man is not alone



Man reaches out to man



Man inspires man



Man reaches upward

“The problem is: How shall a man eternalize himself? ... My answer is, A man shall eternalize himself by seeking his fellowman, by seeking in him or her that buried excellence, seeking to bring to light that which is lurking there, and then face to face and hand to hand, both will attain the same level. We are eternalized in attempting to eternalize others.”

- Felix Adler



EDITORIAL

Dealing With Religion

When the International Humanist Movement came into being in 1952 its declared mission was to provide an alternative to “*traditional religions which claim to be based on revelation on the one hand and totalitarian systems on the other.*” Now that the Humanist Movement has passed the half-century mark, we need to ask ourselves how far we have succeeded in achieving this objective.

Is the world less afflicted today by religious intolerance and sectarian conflict than it was in the middle of the last century? Have totalitarian systems given way to democratic governments? And - most importantly for Humanists - if any progress has been made in these areas, what has been the contribution of the Humanist Movement? What strategies, if any, have we adopted for achieving our objectives and how effective have they been?

Before we try to find an answer to these questions, perhaps we should take a closer look at our objectives. Apparently the founder-members of the IHEU perceived, in their times, two major ills in the world which had to be dealt with: first, traditional religions which claim to be based on revelation, and secondly, totalitarian systems, taking note perhaps of the situation behind the Iron Curtain. The remedies for these two ills were: secularism for the first; and democracy for the second. The identification of these twin objectives was natural, and conceptually convenient, in the prevailing situation. However, the real adversary of Humanism, which underlies both the evils identified in the founding Amsterdam Declaration, is authoritarianism.

In a communication to the IHEU Board in 1966, Narsingh Narain wrote: “*It seems to us that the most objectionable feature common to all religions is not supernaturalism but authoritarianism, that is, attachment of finality and infallibility to their teachings....This authoritarianism is the more harmful and dangerous as it has not been confined to the religions; its influence has been much more pervasive ... authoritarianism and its offshoots, dogmatism and fanaticism, are to be found everywhere in the world today, and we feel that the primary function of Humanism is to help in the transition from an authoritarian to a non-authoritarian society in all spheres of life.*” (emphasis added) This formulation covers both the objectives - or tasks - set out in the Amsterdam Declaration. But it does involve a certain reorientation of the stated Humanist position, which focuses mainly on its opposition to supernaturalism and theism. This has crucially affected the Humanist Movement’s perception

of its goals, and its response to religion; although thinkers as influential as Hermann Bondi have cautioned against it. Bondi says: *"I think in this country we are too impressed by the concept of God. Many religions, like Buddhism and Confucianism, don't have a God at all. On the other hand, Communism in its heyday had a 'sacred text' which were the writings of Marx and Lenin, and you justified an argument by referring to these writings. So it seems to me that the important thing is not the concept of God - indeed we cannot quarrel with an undefined God, for how can we disagree with a concept that is undefined. No, what makes a religion is a "revelation". And it is the belief in a revealed truth that is the source of religious problems - that the Koran is the word of God, or the Holy Bible is the judge of everything."*

Humanist Response to Religion

The Founding Declaration as well as Julian Huxley's Presidential Address at the first International Congress were clear about the role and self-image of the Humanist Movement. Huxley said: *"As I see it, the world is undoubtedly in need of a new religion, and that religion must be founded on Humanist principles if it is to meet the new situation adequately. Humanists have a high task before them, in working out the religious implications of their ideas. When I say religion I do not mean merely a theology involving belief in a supernatural god or gods; nor do I mean merely a system of ethics, however exalted; nor only scientific knowledge, however extensive; nor just a political social morality however admirable and efficient. I mean an organised system of ideas and emotion which relate man to his destiny, beyond and above the practical affairs of every day, transcending the present and the existing system of laws and social structure. Such systems of ideas and emotions about human destiny have always existed and will always continue to exist; they certainly include the theistic religions; and I believe we have nothing to lose by using the word religion in the broadest possible sense to include non-theistic formulations and systems as well. Otherwise we run the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward by implying that our systems are not so fully satisfying or compelling as those of the theistic and supernatural religions."*

It is more than fifty years since this eloquent plea was made, and the Humanist Movement has steadily moved away from Huxley's vision of a new religion *"founded on Humanist principles."* The very idea of Humanism being a religion - or being called a religion - has been rejected. The question *"Is Humanism a religion?"* conveys a deceptive impression of addressing a question of fact. In reality it is a matter of choice: it depends on how we choose to define religion. If we define religion in terms of its doctrines, such as belief in the supernatural, God and an afterlife, Humanism is clearly not a religion. In recent

times Professor AC Grayling has been a strident advocate of this view. If we define religion in terms of its function, there is no reason why Humanism should not be called a religion. In declaring itself as an alternative to religion, Humanism clearly seeks to perform some of the functions that religion has served. As Narsingh Narain said: *"If we define religion (as I think we should) in terms of the function it has tried to serve, that is, of helping individuals to feel at home in an apparently hostile universe, and not in terms of beliefs and doctrines, such as supernaturalism, then we are perfectly justified in speaking of a humanist religion."*

The practical - and strategically important - question is: "Given that Humanism aims to provide an alternative to traditional religions, which approach is likely to be more effective in helping those belonging to traditional religions to adopt a humanist worldview? Is the outright rejection of any resemblance between religion and Humanism likely to be more persuasive than an acknowledgement of the commonality of certain valuable human purposes and functions between them?"

As quoted above, Huxley felt that we had nothing to lose by using the word religion. *"Otherwise"*, he said, *"we run the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward..."* HJ Eysenck held that *"In rejecting religion altogether, humanism may be throwing out the ethical baby with the supernatural bathwater."* For Einstein the true purpose of religion could be taken to be the emancipation of mankind from *"the shackles of personal hopes and desires, and thereby [the attaining of] that humble attitude of mind toward the grandeur of reason incarnate in existence, which, in its profoundest depth, is inaccessible to man."*

But, in 1989, the IHEU Board decided that the words 'religion' and 'religious' caused contention and confusion and, some years later, a 'Minimum Statement' was officially adopted: *"Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality."* All member organisations are required, under IHEU bylaw 5.1, to accept the IHEU Minimum Statement on Humanism. The leading figures of the movement chose to coin the word 'lifestance' to describe Humanism. This coinage - the equivalent of life-posture - is not likely to inspire much enthusiasm among members of religious groups, or even among humanists themselves. One is reminded of Paul Kurtz's advice: *"Any proposed definition that we wish to introduce must be based, at least initially, upon common usage... The battles for men's moral*

allegiances are often won by affixing a label.” ‘Lifestance Humanism’ now seems to be passing into usage, confirming Huxley’s apprehension: “*Otherwise we run the risk of sterilizing the ideas we put forward by implying that our systems are not so fully satisfying or compelling as those of the theistic and supernatural religions.*”

While distancing itself from religion the Humanist Movement does not necessarily have to reject religion as an unmitigated evil. Such an approach would be neither factually correct nor practically helpful in achieving the Humanist objective of weaning the great masses of people from their dependence on religious beliefs. As Narsingh Narain said: “*...an analysis is necessary for a proper understanding of the complex phenomena which have been grouped under the name ‘religion’, so that we can build our own organisation on solid foundations and also be able to have a sympathetic understanding of the faiths of other groups.*”

Over the last few years two things have become increasingly clear: the objective of providing an alternative to traditional religions has lost its salience for the Humanist Movement; and, to the extent to which it does engage with traditional religions, it has mainly adopted an attitude of rejection and ridicule. The “sympathetic understanding” is missing; and this is likely to prove counter-productive. The following account of the discussions on Science and Religion held in November in the Salk Institute of Biological Studies in California could well be true of a Humanist gathering: “*By the third day, the arguments had become so heated that Dr. Konner was reminded of ‘a den of vipers.’ “With a few notable exceptions,” he said, “the viewpoints have run the gamut from A to B. Should we bash religion with a crowbar or only with a baseball bat?” His response to Mr. Harris and Dr. Dawkins was scathing. “I think that you and Richard are remarkably apt mirror images of the extremists on the other side,” he said, “and that you generate more fear and hatred of science.”* (See ‘*A Free-for-All on Science and Religion*’, George Johnson, *New York Times*, November 21, 2006.) A follower of a traditional religion whose faith is wavering is likely to be put off, rather than persuaded, by the smug and sneering attitude of some humanists.

In the face of the escalating sectarian violence in the world, some humanists still maintain, as Professor Grayling does in his article in this issue, that “*What we are witnessing is not the resurgence of religion, but its death throes.*” As against this there is Peter L. Berger, who once argued that religion will lose against western modernity, but now admits “*that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.*”. “*Muslim, Hindu, Chinese, and Buddhist movements*”, says James V

Schall of Georgetown University, “*seem to have grown stronger not weaker during the supposedly skeptical 20th Century.*” Military history is replete with examples of defeats caused by under-estimating the adversary.

Strategic Options for the Humanist Movement

The Amsterdam Declaration of 2002 states: “*Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to.*” This rightly assumes that, once the basic Humanist values - freedom of thought, the autonomous nature of morality, acceptance of uncertainty - are absorbed, parochial attitudes and reliance on religious revelation and dogma would automatically be shed. Clearly this is a gigantic educational task for which even the single-minded application of all the human and material resources available to the Humanist movement may not be adequate. The simultaneous pursuit of other, even closely related, projects such as Social Welfare or Human Rights may not be affordable; although it can be argued that these also serve to spread awareness of Humanist values. But the counter-argument here can be that there already are a number of organisations devoted to these objectives. The IHEU’s statement that “*Its mission is to build and represent the global Humanist movement, to defend human rights and to promote humanist values world-wide.*” is to be seen in this light.

It seems that, at present, all the intellectual and material resources of the international Humanist Movement have to be focused on its primary mission of providing an alternative to dogmatic religions based on revelation. As mentioned earlier, this might involve a reorientation of the Humanist attitude towards supernaturalism and theism. It certainly would involve a clearer understanding of the emotional and psychological sources of the power that traditional religions have exercised over the minds and hearts of people. Without this understanding, it is highly unlikely that we shall make any headway. “*Humanists*”, Huxley said, “*have a high task before them, in working out the religious implications of their ideas.*” There are indications that, in rejecting religion altogether, we are also denying that there are any ‘religious implications of our ideas’. “*There are six billion people in the world,*” says Francisco J. Ayala, an evolutionary biologist at the University of California, Irvine, and a former Roman Catholic priest. “*If we think that we are going to persuade them to live a rational life based on scientific knowledge, we are not only dreaming — it is like believing in the fairy godmother.*” He adds, “*People need to find meaning and purpose in life, I don’t think we want to take that*

..... A Humanist Movement which ignores the emotional and psychosocial needs of ordinary people can have no success in providing an alternative to traditional religions. Some Humanists, with “an irrational passion for dispassionate rationality”, tend to dismiss many religious ideas, such as the

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idea of the sacred, as irrational. But we must pay attention to Durkheim's insistence that even the most apparently irrational religious ideas correspond to real needs of the social order. Also, following Durkheim, the idea of *membership* has to be taken seriously by humanists. "*It would not be absurd to suggest*", says Roger Scruton, "*that the tie of membership is a function of religion in those communities fortunate enough to exist outside modernity.*" It can be argued that even those whose faith has been eroded by what Walter Lippmann calls the 'acids of modernity' need the tie of membership if the dissolution of the moral community into a state of universal breakdown and anomie is to be avoided.

Of the religions based on revelation, the basic challenge to the Humanist world-view comes from the monotheistic 'religions of the book' of Abrahamic origin. With Zionism acting as a catalyst, there has been escalating hostility between evangelical Christianity and political Islam in recent times, inevitably leading to a hardening of religious orthodoxy, and bigotry, on both sides. The Humanist Movement is confined mostly to the West, but it would be difficult to claim that it has made any difference to the religious attitudes of the general populace. To be sure, there has been a decline in orthodox religiosity in the West; but it has to be attributed mainly to the advance of modernity. Walter Lippmann has described the process very effectively. "*The modern man's daily experience of modernity makes instinctively incredible to him these unconscious ideas which are at the core of the great traditional and popular religions. He does not wantonly reject belief, as so many churchmen assert. His predicament is much more serious. With the best will in the world, he finds himself not quite believing.*" Lippmann goes on to say: "*When men can no longer be theists, they must, if they are civilized, become humanists.*" Whether the Humanist Movement, as such, has been effective in gathering in its fold those whose faith has waned is difficult to say.

In dealing with the other monotheistic religion based uncompromisingly on a single book of revelation - Islam - the Humanist Movement faces seemingly impossible odds. It has next to no presence in the Islamic world. Belief in revelation is mandatory in Islam. For a Muslim, to deny it is to be guilty of apostacy, punishable by death. The aggressive policies of the West, and its blind support for Israel's policies of revenge and retaliation have made matters worse. Confrontation with Iran and Syria will exacerbate the situation further. The best that the Humanist Movement can do in this situation is to strengthen its position in the West. For this it has to assume the role of a successor, not an enemy, of traditional religion.

□

SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN? RELIGION & CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

- Zaffarullah Khan

Sad story from Pakistan

Now, they are called, 'rat children' though were born to normal humans. It happened because they fell prey (and continue to be) to the worst physical abuse by a quasi-religious ritual in Gujarat (Pakistan).

The myth spread by 'pir' (spiritual leader) of the tomb, which perpetuates this abuse, goes that if an issueless woman pledges to give her first baby to be a lifelong devotee at the tomb, the prayers of the 'pir' can bring back her fertility. Pakistan's 70 percent population is illiterate and infertility there means prompt divorce. Therefore, the trap works. As soon as the newly born baby is dropped at the tomb, in order to block his/her mental growth an iron-cap is locked on the skull for years. Eventually s/he grows-up with a very small head and virtually no mental capabilities. For rest of their life to be called 'Shah Daula'h key chohey' (Rats of Shah Daula'h-name of pir) and to perform only two duties; first to participate in the rituals at the tomb and secondly to beg money for their spiritual leader.

Perhaps this is the worst example of abuse of children in the world on the altar of so-called faith blended with customs. However it is not the only abuse on the name of religion or quasi-religious spirituality, in Pakistan-the second largest Muslim country on the globe. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has exposed on occasions, the physically fettered children in 'Deeni madaris' (religious seminaries). The HRCP's recent report, reveals, 'the deeni madaris not only firmly believed in not sparing the rod, many of them literally kept their wards in chains.' The Madina Mosque and madrisa'h in Lahore had 14 children of 7-17 years of age continually in chains for up to three years. The chains were taken off only briefly when it could not be helped, for instance for changing clothes etc. The children's ankles and wrists had developed deep scars from prolonged bleeding and running sores.'¹ This is not an isolated episode, rather fettering children is a common practice in Pakistan. It happens because most of the children find it hard to learn by heart entire verses of Quran in alien Arabic language.

Along with such physical abuse the sexual exploitation of the students of 'deeni madaris' is quite frequent. In 1998 a newspaper reported on this otherwise a taboo wrapped in spiral of silence, only to become victim of the wrath of the religious group involved in it, which attacked the newspaper, burnt it's copies, issued a 'fatwa' (decree) of reporter's death. At the end of day the

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besieged reporter had to run away from the country to seek asylum. Such a high profile case could not put a full stop on the odd practice, which most of the time deliberately goes unchecked owing to the terrorising street power of the religious clerics and undue social reverence they enjoy by selling divine myths.

Another associated form of child abuse on the name of religion in Pakistan is the unchecked recruitment of the under 18 to fight in neighbouring Afghanistan, popularly known as 'Taliban' (students of religious schools). They are taught mediaeval theology and syllabus, leaving them complete dumb and fully indoctrinated. After their so-called victory in Afghanistan, many more 'Deeni Madaris' in Pakistan are imparting military training to their under 18 students, to inculcate firm faith in 'guns and grenades' as the fifth divine book to kill the infidels and seculars and hope for some puritan revolution in the long run. Yet another face of these 'Talibans' is the total denial of education and health services to young girls and women.

Besides the odds growing on the fertile but blessed with ignorance religious schools, at societal level many feudal lords marry their prepubescent daughters with 'Quran' just to avoid division of their property. Hence denying them normal emotional life. Another form of child abuse could be understood from a recent example, that just a month before the recent military take-over in October 1999, a religious political party led by a cleric, brought students of its' religious schools on roads. The children 8-18 (not entitled to vote or join politics as per country's laws) were holding placards, inviting chief of the army staff for help which means nothing but imposition of martial law. None of the protesting child was able to differentiate between democracy and military dictatorship in terms of their rights and owing to the inflated power of clergy very few voices of reason protested on it.

Until now, I have narrated the multiple abuses, which are perpetuated by private religious groups under the nose of a government, which is signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Children and stands committed to improve children's lives by 2000 AD. But what we can expect from the government which itself could be accused of abusing the innocence of the children. It has made 'Islamiat' (*Islamic studies*) a compulsory subject at each and every grade and for every professional degree. *Not only this rather those who have learnt Quran by heart are awarded twenty extra marks, leaving the minorities at disadvantageous position.*

Similarly, the blasphemy laws enacted by pervious military dictator, Ziaul Haq has resulted in worst form of abuses. Young as 13-years, Salamat Masieh (an uneducated Christian boy) was awarded capital punishment in 1995 for allegedly writing disgracing remarks against the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. I can continue with this sad saga and can site many more examples from Pakistan

and many other writers can pick similar episodes of shame from other societies, cultures and faiths. What they establish beyond doubt is an on-going and unchecked abuse of children's innocence on the altar of religion and cults. Definitely a wake-up call for people with conscience.

Global Curse

The abuse of children on the name of religion is not a phenomenon confined to any single country or a particular faith or cult. Donald Capps in his presidential address to members of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in 1992 described religion and child abuse, "perfect together ... and mutually attractive." 2

The above mentioned country specific diverse information testifies his assertion in more than one way. So one can claim that the religious beliefs and structures both, real or ritualistic, often encourage, foster, and justify child abuse. The closed and by and large isolated structures of religious seminaries and places of worship like church, mosque, temple etc. facilitate abusers with opportunities to live with their evil desires and horrifying practices behind the tall walls and dark rooms.

Before embarking on further analysis if we rely on the UNICEF's figures which estimates that there are approximately two billion children (persons under 18) in the world. Nature brought them all to this world through a similar biological process but parents put various tags like Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist etc. to nurture them according to their faith. Religious leaders of each faith make money by facilitating that on the name of faith related rituals. The children as the powerless property of the parents had to bear this oppressive burden of rituals and customs, much before their independent conscience or faculties like critical thinking are developed to enable them to differentiate between what is good or bad for them.

Greven rightly notes that 'abusive parenting styles have been driven by mainstream religious beliefs for centuries.' 3 Along with doctrinal factors other reasons behind it appears to be that by and large children are not valued by religious leaders, and even, very often by their own parents who blindly accept theological and other justifications offered by the clergy to remain uninvolved in the worldly things including the lives of their children.

Along with mainstream religions child abuse in various quasi-religious cults is quite common. The children are often cults' most devastating casualties. Just to quote two examples, 'of the 912 People's Temple members members who died in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978, 276 were children. Similarly of more than 80 who died at Waco, 25 were children. . Apart from these highly shocking examples

another fact remains that in cults children are not harmed only physically, rather rarely receive any formal education or develop correctly on emotional, social, and cognitive levels.’ 4

Religion related abuse is often facilitated or hidden by closed and hierarchical structures of religious institutions like church, mosques and temples etc. forcing the victims to internalise pain and suffering and avoid disclosures against powerful clerics/clergy revered by their parents. Such an attitude results in continuation of the abuse amid imposed spiral of silence, because the chances for the perpetrators being discovered or punished are virtually diminished.

Ostensibly every religion claims to be for the enlightenment and welfare of humanity. But their evolution is stained with massive human blood, including that of innocent children. Just to quote one recent example from Chechnya (Russia) where Islamic militants fought for their independence, of the total casualties of 60,000 to 100,000, forty percent were children. History is burdened with thousands of disabled Afghan children and many other languishing in refugee camps all over the world only to tell us about the scale of their miseries.

There can not be two opinions that opportunities like liberal education and gradual growth of faculties like observation, experiment, analysis, and reasoning enables many of us to reject dogmatic religious claims at the later stage of our lives. A few of us simply rebel to protest what happened to us when it should have not. However few remain unlucky forever especially in the developing world and are bred to remain dumb to become ‘Taliban.’ One only needs to pick up a newspaper to realise the magnitude, gravity and complexities of the problem.

Sufferings have many faces

Broadly we can categorise the abuse of children on the name of religion into three main types: physical, psychological and sexual. All these types have their own share in devastating the innocent souls all over the world. If we peep into these types and try to unmask the cover-ups following picture would emerge.

Physical

Historian, Philip Greven in his research points out encouragement for violent and physically abusive child rearing from Biblical passages such as following: ‘He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.’ And ‘withhold no correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver

his soul from hell' (Proverbs 13:24 & 23:13 respectively)

These passages reflect that the very idea of physical punishment is embedded in the belief system and is primarily aimed at taming or disciplining the children. Such mediaeval thoughts are part of almost every religious theology rather could be seen at work in developed and supposedly civilised countries like USA and Europe as well.

In USA alone more than a million young people suffer abuse and mistreatment annually. Within this wide range of child abuse, religion related abuse figures prominently ranging from healing or treatment through prayers, complete denial or withholding of medical care for religious reasons or orthodox practices like exorcising demons occupying children bodies and number of other ceremonial, supernatural, religious or mystical practices are part of this long list of shame. There appears to be 'a primacy of ideology over biology... childcare may be seen as a disposable superfluity.'

Such beliefs and doctrines create ample space for abuses of worst kind. Just to narrate an example I will bank on this worst episode, 'mild discipline gave way to making young girls strip almost nude in front of the full membership and then forcing them to take cold showers or jump into the cold swimming pool at the Redwood Valley church. Unequal boxing matches gave way to beatings with paddles, then electric shock, and finally something called a blue-eyed monster, which hurt and terrorised younger ones in a darkened room.'

Similarly once The Star and Stripes-a military newspaper in Europe, published transcription of a taped sermon by preacher, Darrell Dunn. 'The tape tells parents when disciplining children to break their will to blister their bottom red to brainwash them to spank weeks old babies, and reassure them that 'little blue bruises' are a positive sign from the Lord.'

In most cases religious places function as closed, often physically isolated and highly subjective societies, which resist any investigation of possible child abuse. Still a modest research on the subject has tried to expose many facts. Gaines, Wilson, Redican and Baffi (1984)⁷ surveyed 70 ex-cult members in order to determine the effects of cult membership on the health status of current and past members, including children Among their findings relevant to the treatment of children were following:

- 27 % of the respondent said children in their group were not immunised against common childhood diseases
- 23% said children did not get at least 8 hours of sleep a night
- 60% said their groups permitted physical punishment of children
- 13% said that children were sometimes physically disabled or hurt to

teach them a lesson

- 13% said that the punishment of children was sometimes life threatening or required a physician's care
- 61 % said families were encouraged to live together and share responsibilities, 37 % said that a doctor saw children when ill.

Psychological

Almost ever religion teaches children that someone (God) is always watching them and how they are supposed to behave, which inculcates fear of an imaginary creature, hell and sin etc. Such teaching scares them to the extent that instead of enjoying their innocent lives they keep on thinking about gruesome forms of death. If you ask a child to draw the caricature of God, s/he would definitely draw a powerful daddy with stick in his hand and always looking at our mistakes to get a chance to beat us.

Such imaginary fears of a vengeful god are often damaging, murderous to child psyche causing depression, suicidal tendencies and disorders. Children born in or pushed towards religious institutions at an early age often do not have a mature personality. They are socialised only into the closed environment, which kills faculties like independent critical thinking and leave them with a very little knowledge about the world

Sexual

Sexual abuse could be further divided into three distinct sub-categories. First is the marriage of innocent children with Quran in certain orthodox Muslim societies and grooming of 'Devadasis' and 'jogins' in Hinduism. The victims in this category are young girls. Second remains the burden of centuries old rituals; like genital mutilation of girls in certain Islamic countries to disturb their hormone and make them completely subservient to the pleasure of dominating males. Circumcision of boys in Jewish and Islamic faith also falls in the same category. Third, oddity remains literal sexual intercourse or paedophile with children, always without their consent (they are not mature and free enough to say no or even differentiate it as good or bad, part of religion or just an abuse). This is worst betrayal of trust, which occurs across the gender more shockingly by the people who are ostensibly responsible for their care and well being.

Organisational hierarchies and closed structures of religious institutions create opportunities for such child abuse to occur within their premises. In 1993 in USA, father David Holly, a Roman Catholic priest was sentenced to 275 years for his admitted sexual molestation of eight young boys. Similarly another study revealed that 'about half 48% of ridding evil cases and a quarter (23%) of neglect cases included allegations of sexual abuse. For example, a psychiatrist reported that his adult female client claimed that she experienced at

age what is the equivalent of gang rape in the name of religion-announcement was made to assemble men, that it was to rid the child of the devil. One can narrate many more stories just to add more to the pain.

Another shocking revelation has been made in recent studies that 'physical abuse has decreased while sexual abuse has expanded as a proportion of the total percentage of reported cases of child abuse. It does not require much intellect to reach a conclusion that the scars of physical abuse are pretty visible, whereas the guilt and pain of being sexually abused may not become public immediately. Especially when the words of children are rarely privileged over that of religious demagogues in many societies. It makes the issue even more critical.

Time to speak out

In 21st century we should have consigned the term 'abuse' to the history instead of retaining it in worst forms like child abuse. However time is changing, though at a very small pace. One can pinpoint number of civic initiatives working to protect the children. However the religion related abuses are missing from mainstream discourses and owing to such silence sizeable number of abuses hardly see the light of day or even if they do the religious nature of the abusers magnifies their capacity to avoid scrutiny. Hence often the crime goes un-punished.

Can we push such visible and invisible crimes under the carpet any more, perhaps not. It is a time to break the spiral of silence and speak out. Keeping in mind the existence of the curse at global level along with its' complexities and sensitivities we need to find viable solutions within the widely endorsed framework of universal human rights. Secondly while these abuses take place on the name of quasi-religious rituals, custom and traditions, thus we need to devise protective shield against the strong abusers by making them realise that time has changed and they too would have to abandon their primitive caves and liberate those who are in their cage.

In this regard first of all there is a dire need to conduct a global research involving all faiths to qualify and document abuses of children under the shadows of various religions and their rituals. Such research should also focus on how parents especially the poor, the illiterate and the dispossessed are easily trapped into the abusive net of religion. Only then we can figure out a humanist policy and a workable strategy to tackle this complex issue.

At policy level, I would endorse the IHEU's stand to treat religion as an adult matter and realise that morality does not come from religion alone.

CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD: TWO POEMS

-Zoya Zaidi

Children are easy to boss over, force into labour, terrorize into submission, and cajole into exploitation, because they are vulnerable, weak, unable to protect themselves, and dependant on their elders. Moreover, they are naïve, gullible, and most of all, totally ignorant (and thank God for that) of their rights as citizens of this world, and inheritors of our tomorrow.

No wonder there is hardly a place on this earth, or an era in history, where child-labour does - or did not - exist, where children are not exploited, be it as domestic workers, plantation employees, or industrial helpers. Nearly everywhere, children are either forced into labour, or lured and cajoled into exploitation.

As the world marked June 12, as the World Against Child-Labour Day, I helplessly watched children working at Car Mechanic, Tailor, Tea-vendor, and Retailer's shops, working day in and day out, being scolded, kicked, and beaten into submission, and labour, often beyond their capacity. It is hard not to be appalled by this situation, even more so, because people, especially employees, are insensitive to the plight of these children, and think nothing of it.

I would like to share a series of five short poems I wrote with the readers.*

Match-Factory Worker

That little boy,
He works in a match factory.
The gunpowder in
The matchstick's head,
Burns deep into his soul,
Burns the desires of his childhood,
The dreams of his boyhood.
The scorching burns to the core,
The sorrow burns him to the socket...

And, one day,
He'll be blown up
In the factory-fire.
The end of his hope,
of his desire.

The Little Beggar in the Street

That young boy by the fire,
He begs in the street,
To quench the collective fire
Of his family's belly.

**Three of these poems appeared in our Summer 2006 issue. ed.*

Crippled -
Sometimes intentionally,
Much against his desire-
To cash in on the pity,
Of the entire world,

He feeds his family
And, much to his ire
Goes to sleep
On a half-filled stomach.
Alone in this world,
He is the child in the street.

And sometimes,
He is picked up
By a peddler of drugs,
who makes him an addict and
Blackmails him into peddling.

His blood filled with the poison,
He sinks into the quagmire
Of disease, addiction, exploitation,
And quenching the desire
Of lusty men, the sire,
To someone debonair
To whom he is catered
On beaches,
In dingy ghettos,
And in bars.

He doesn't reach maturity,
He'll die in the street
On a cold, friendless night,
By some dying fire,
This boy in the street,
Alone in the world.

Dr. Zoya Zaidi is a doctor, born and brought up in India. She received her entire Medical training in Moscow. She later specialised in Rheumatology from AIIMS New Delhi and is now practising as a consultant Rheumatologist in Aligarh.

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FAITH'S LAST GASP*

- AC Grayling,

On the basis of apparently incontrovertible evidence, commentators of various persuasions, among them [Eric Kaufmann](#) in the last issue of *Prospect*, John Gray, writing recently in the *New Statesman*, and Damon Linker, author of *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege* (Doubleday) are convinced that we are witnessing an upsurge in religious observance and influence.

Kaufmann relies on the weak argument that demographic trends will turn Europe into a predominantly religious place, John Gray seems to hope that this will be so, and Damon Linker is convinced that a “theocon” conspiracy has so successfully captured Washington that the US has become a de facto theocracy—the home of faith-based politics, faith-based science (creationism), faith-based medicine (“pro-life”), faith-based foreign policy (conducting jihad for American/Baptist values) and faith-based attacks on civil liberties. Add this to the all too obvious fact of political Islam—Islamism—and the case seems made.

But I see the same evidence as yielding the opposite conclusion. What we are witnessing is not the resurgence of religion, but its death throes. Two considerations support this claim. One is that there are close and instructive historical precedents for what is happening now. The second comes from an analysis of the nature of contemporary religious politics.

If a given interest group turns up the volume, it is usually reacting to provocation. We view the Victorian era as a sanctimonious period of improving movements such as self-help, temperance and university missions to city slums. But prudishness and do-goodery existed precisely because their contraries—poverty, drunkenness, godlessness and indecency—were endemic: some streets of Victorian London swarmed with child prostitutes, and were too dangerous to walk at night. In the same way, today’s “religious upsurge” is a reaction to the prevalence of its opposite. In fact, it is a reaction to defeat, in a war that it cannot win even if it succeeds in a few battles on the way down.

Here is what is happening. Over the last half-century, sections of the Muslim world have become increasingly affronted by the globalisation of western and especially American culture and values, which appears arrogantly to disdain their traditions. Yet latterly, some of these same sections of Islam have been emboldened by the victory of warriors of the faith over a superpower (Afghanistan’s mujahedin over Soviet Russia); the combination

* This article was first published in *Prospect* (www.prospect-magazine.co.uk) Reprinted by permission.

encourages them to assert their opposition to the engulfing encroachment of western modernity, even by taking up arms.

When a climate of heightened tension such as this prompts activists in one religious group to become more assertive, to push their way forward in the public domain to demand more attention, more respect, more public funds (faith-based schools are one example), other religious groups, not wishing to be left behind, follow suit. In Britain, Muslim activism has been quickly mimicked by others—by Sikhs demonstrating about a play, Christian evangelicals demonstrating about an opera, and all of them leaping on the funding bandwagon for faith and interfaith initiatives. To placate them, politicians lend an ear; the media report it; immediately these minorities of interest have an amplifier for their presence. The effect is that suddenly it seems as if there are religious devotees everywhere, and the spurious magnification of their importance further promotes their confidence. As a result they make some gains, as the faith schools example shows.

Yet the fact is that only 10 per cent of the British population attend church, mosque, synagogue or temple every week, and this figure is declining in all but immigrant communities. This is hardly the stuff of religious resurgence. Yes, over half the population claim vaguely to believe in Something, which includes feng shui and crystals, and they may be “C of E” in the sense of “Christmas and Easter,” but they are functionally secularist and would be horrified if asked to live according to the letter of (say) Christian morality: giving all one’s possessions to the poor, taking no thought for the morrow and so impracticably forth. Not even Christian clerics follow these injunctions. This picture is repeated everywhere in the west except the US, and there too the religious base is eroding.

The historical precedent of the counter-Reformation is instructive. For over a century after Luther nailed his theses to Wittenberg’s church door, Europe was engulfed in ferocious religious strife, because the church was losing its hitherto hegemonic grip and had no intention of doing so without a fight. Millions died, and Catholicism won some battles even as it lost the war. We are witnessing a repeat today, this time with Islamism resisting the encroachment of a way of life that threatens it, and as other religious groups join them in a (strictly temporary, given the exclusivity of faith) alliance for the cause of religion in general.

As before, the grinding of historical tectonic plates will be painful and protracted. But the outcome is not in doubt. As private observance, religion will of course survive among minorities; as a factor in public and international affairs it is having what might be its last - characteristically bloody - fling.

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DEMOCRACY, RURAL RECONSTRUCTION AND HUMANISM

- Dr Amlan Dutta

We live in uncertain times and look towards the future with mixed feelings of hope and fear. When we try to figure out the possible shape of things in the years ahead, a few special areas of concern and urgent questions, sometimes with ancient roots yet with deep contemporary relevance, claim our attention. Each of them deserves separate treatment, but they are so intimately interrelated that there is something to be gained by taking them up together for a rapid review.

The functioning of India's democracy provides at this moment a major area of concern. It is not always fully understood that our experiments with the parliamentary form of government is truly extraordinary in some ways. No other country with as large and diverse a population, as economically handicapped and educationally limited, ever entrusted its future to representative government based on adult suffrage. At the dawn of independence, with the subcontinent bleeding from cruel and devastating partition, our leaders put their faith in the people of India to hold the country together and carry out programmes of economic and social development. That was extraordinary and yet it was a wise decision. We have to try and understand the grounds of its rationality.

A distinctive feature of the society and culture of India is its incomparable diversity. There are a number of other countries which are physically much larger in size. Our great neighbour, China, has an even bigger population spread over a more extensive territory. But in terms of language and religion, not to mention other cultural divisions, India has an unquestionably more pluralistic society. Maoism gave rise to a totalitarian political system which China's more homogenous society was ready to experiment with. Aided by talent for orderliness and executive efficiency, qualities with which our neighbour has an advantage over us in the same way as Germany has had over Italy, China is now close to attaining the status of an acclaimed superpower, a dubious distinction that her leaders have long craved for. This is not a route that India could have taken even if she wanted to. Those of our leaders who are drawn in that direction are likely to do more harm than good.

The straitjacket of totalitarianism would be too cramping for India's invincible diversity. A dictator from the north would not be long tolerated by Tamils in the south while southern hegemony over the north is unthinkable. Any serious attempt to impose a totalitarian political system in India would lead to an endless civil war, inflicting a tragic setback to all decent hopes for the future. Leaders like Nehru had, therefore, good reasons for adopting a democratic constitution when the British left. For one thing, it appeared to offer the best

Source : M.N Roy Memorial Lecture - 21st March 2006

way of avoiding Balkanization, in other words, further fragmentation of an already partitioned subcontinent. There were other considerations too. Peace and development were high up on the agenda of independent India. It is a cardinal virtue of democracy that it aims to provide peaceful methods of social change and development. Moreover, certain liberal values are an essential part of the idea of freedom as understood by the finest minds among our leaders and these values require the support of a democratic form of government. Political democracy is not all that one wants, but it provides a framework within which both constructive activities and movements of protest against the established order can hope to find their rightful place for brighter and more secure future under conditions of freedom.

We have recounted briefly the benefits of democracy as a precaution against complacency as well as misconceived criticism. Our society suffers from many maladies and shortcomings. These have to be removed through the organised initiative of the people. Democracy provides a system of rights and duties under which people's initiative can be effectively organised. This, of course, has its risks, so we have to be wakeful. It is not uncommon for the democratic system itself coming under attack and people not taking sufficient notice until it is very late. There are cases of this happening with tragic consequences. A wise maxim has been extracted from that recurrent experience. Eternal vigilance, it has been said, is the price of liberty. It is time for India to take notice.

We are not talking of distant possibilities. Representative government is already under attack in the world's largest democracy. The assault comes in diverse ways. Intolerance based on religious faith presents a specially acute problem which will be discussed later. There are other less advertised threats to democracy with serious consequences which should be ignored. Let us consider, for example, the half concealed threat to democracy in a state which has stood out in recent years as an example of political stability. Appearances though can be misleading.

West Bengal has gained an unenviable reputation of "scientific rigging" of elections. The police, the administration, party cadres and criminals combine to do the rigging, demonstrating a capacity for elaborate cooperation which would have rightly evoked admiration had it been employed for higher purpose. The longest serving Chief Minister in India has reportedly appealed to the police to help his party capture power once more in the coming elections. Another very important person, himself a Minister, though fit to declare in public that his party had all along the past few decades taken care to enlist support of the bogus voters. Such bold truthfulness is rare indeed, but it is mixed with an arrogance which bodes ill for the future of democracy. It is time to pause and consider the consequences of the murder of fair elections.

Democracy even with fair elections does not ensure that the best party will always win. But it does permit the people freely to experiment, to judge a party by its performance and throw it out if it is found wanting. The people of Bihar have thrown the redoubtable Lalu and given Nitish Kumar a chance to prove his worth, with the assurance that he too will be judged by his performance. Conceding that human judgement is never infallible, it is important to leave the way open for peaceful change. This was what fair elections and other democratic rules and conventions taken collectively are expected to assure. When this expectation is killed, fear and desperation take over. Prompted by fear, some assume a posture of habitual subservience to the powers that be; driven by desperation, others secretly or even openly organize themselves for a violent conflict. The country slides towards civil war.

This is the meaning of the resurgence of Maoism in extensive areas of the country. Maoism can not achieve in India what it has done in China. But it can not be suppressed by simply meeting violence with violence. The party in power need not abdicate without a fight. But it has to make it patent that it rules with the free consent of the people and that it does not put its lust for power above all considerations of fair play and honest contest. It can not do so by putting on display a blatant disregard for the rules and spirit of democracy. Such calculated cynicism can only hasten the march towards ultimate disaster. As things are shaping; democracy remains the alternative to civil war. But it has to be honest democracy. Although it is important to have fair elections, democracy is not simply concerned with electoral rules. It has to go deeper, that is to say, nearer to the roots of human association.

Maoism should be thanked for drawing attention to the rural problems in India. Since independence, the country has been ruled by an elite of which the leading component is an urban educated middle class which dominates the administration besides planning the policy of the state. The resultant bias in the development pattern of the country is there for all to see. India produces a superabundance of people trained or urban professions, of which a good number migrates abroad, while rural illiteracy stays on obstinately as a curse on our land. It is time to recognise that this imbalance has done great harm not only to our villages but to the cities as well. The path to the city runs through villages. It is just not possible to create healthy cities surrounded by sick villages.

Let us pause briefly and try to understand the nature of the problem. The surplus generated in the agricultural sector provides a basis for industrial growth. This sectoral interdependence provides a theme which can be conveniently used to build models of growth dear to economists. We will adopt here a different approach which starts with opportunities for productive work in the country side push the rural poor to move to the city in search of jobs. But the city itself has a limited capacity to absorb surplus rural labour of which the

supply is unending, thanks to rapid growth of population. Consequently those who failed to get absorbed in productive occupations in the city are forced to choose begging and anti-social activities. Thus rural poverty makes the city sick and sick culture of the city makes the countryside sicker.

The West in the critical phase of its industrial development, found an outlet for its surplus population in the "New World" with its abundant space and the newly conquered colonies in the old world. Such outlets are unavailable to the industrially less developed countries today. India can export its skilled labour abroad. But surely our problem can not be solved by simply assisting the outflow of our trained manpower. Part of this migrant manpower has already started flowing back to centres of development in urban India. That still leaves unanswered the very important question concerning the fate of the poor and the underemployed in the rural areas. Only a fraction of our rural poor can be accommodated in the cities within the limits of reasonable and tolerable time horizons. There is no alternative to rural development. In India this has to be so designed that a great majority of villagers get opportunities for productive work and decent livelihood without getting uprooted from their community.

We have to move towards that goal with a certain amount of clarity of vision and all possible speed, for time is running out. Let us think out what is strictly necessary and what is not for reaching the goal we have proposed. It will be fanatical to maintain that there is just one correct model of rural development. What is best depends on an interaction between ideals and local conditions. Past experience suggest that a flexible approach is often wiser and socially less costly. Generally speaking, family farming is a good basis for agriculture and collective farming is not strictly required except under special conditions. Granted family farming, cooperation among different families must also find a prominent place at the village level for a variety of purposes. Let us illustrate. Scarcity of water is a problem in many villages and the remedy lies in arrangements for storage of water at the ground level. Proper storage, distribution and utilization of water require careful cooperation at the community level. This again strengthens the argument for land reforms. Extreme inequality in the rural community acts as an obstacle to cooperation. This is just an example. Agriculture can not be the sole basis of rural development if we are aiming at productive work for all concerned. There are other activities connected with credit, small-scale industry, forestry, horticulture and pisciculture, education and primary health care, without which rural development remains incomplete. All these call for diverse forms of cooperation among villagers. What is required then is broad-based program of economic, cultural and social reconstruction. There are some who are already engaged in such activities, building up people's alliance for reconstructing the countryside, sowing hope where there was despair. They are the pathfinders of a new India, and India with a future.

In carrying out these diverse activities in a spirit of local self-help, there is no reason for rejecting all outside assistance. But it has to be a programme of rural reconstruction in the true spirit of democracy, in other words, for the villagers, of the villagers and by the villagers. "Radical" democracy means people's self-government starting from the roots. Consistent with this approach, people must learn cautiously to reject excessive dependence on the state or any centralized authority for gaining their basic objectives. From here we are led on to a more fundamental yet practical question. Does democracy at the village level have to be guided by the same rules and conventions as in the city? There is really no reason why this must be so. Some critics have blamed us for a mechanical imitation of the Westminster model which has been strongly influenced by the spirit and circumstances of the market economy. The rural community may accept the highest ideals of democracy and reincarnate them in a new form to suit its own vital needs. What are these ideals? Democracy, as we noted earlier, provides a peaceful method of social change. It also stands for the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of speech, ideals which we must cherish and preserve as best we can.

Organised competition and struggle for capture of power, along with the disregard for ethical norms that these have generated, are not part of the cherished heritage of humanity. Some of the finest political thinkers of modern India, with unquestionable dedication to the ideal of human freedom, such as M.K. Gandhi, M.N Roy and Jaya Prakash Narayan, disagreeing among themselves on many issues, yet agreed in their ripe old age to recommend "partyless democracy". Gandhi Vichar Parishad and other like minded organizations are actively engaged in propounding and practising that innovative idea. There may be something to learn from them in making our villages safe for democracy. It is great pity that so many of our villages have passed under a veritable reign of terror in the name of that democracy which purports to show the path of peaceful change.

The spirit of partyless democracy must precede and dictate its form. The question is not about the right to freedom of association which should stay, but its assigned role in the political organization of the society and the moral life of the citizen. The citizen must feel that his dignity as an individual demands that his allegiance to any party should only take second place to his loyalty to truth and the basic principles of public morality.

The debate on the partyless democracy will take time to get resolved. Less debateable, there are areas of concern which deserve immediate attention. Once we put faith in the power of people's cooperation, we find ourselves morally committed to a radical reconstruction of society. Traditional society has got used to barriers to cooperations in diverse forms which are unacceptable

to reason and palpably harmful. Such, for instance, are caste barriers and spirit of sectarianism or what in common parlance in India we call “communalism”. Humanism properly understood is revolt against these barriers and defects of vision which prevent mankind from comprehending its essential unity. As these barriers are rooted in and even sanctified by tradition, the spirit of humanism directs us to undertake a reasoned reappraisal of religion as actually practiced in our society.

While the last century was dominated by a prolonged conflict of ideologies, the world today is in the grip of what has been called as a “clash of civilizations” fuelled by religious fanaticism. Yesterday the great debate centered on the choice between democracy and totalitarianism. Today the need for reconciliation between religious faiths has come to be inscribed on the agenda of history as a matter of major importance for the future of mankind. In other words, the leading task for our age is to clarify and put into practice the principle of cultural reconstruction which will make possible a creative and peaceful coexistence of different faiths. Faced with this situation, some earnest souls are content to declare that at the highest level all religions have an identical message.

This idea of essential identity of all religions can not cover up the fact that the heart religions of the world have had different histories and have come to be marked by peculiar distinctions and distortions arising out of those temporal circumstances. Sickness of the mind is easier to cure when the patient himself understands its material causes. In a similar way, a clear awareness of historically caused perversions of religion can guide and assist the purification of tradition.

Consider for an example the cases of Islam and Hinduism. It is well known that the life of the prophet of Islam falls broadly into two phases. In the early part, he was still a resident of Mecca, the place of his Mecca, where the great majority of people in power was basically idol worshippers and strongly opposed to the message of Islam. Prophet Muhammad’s early followers were cruelly persecuted by the dominant tribes, so much so that they had to flee Mecca to for fear of life. The second momentous phase of the prophet’s career started after he migrated to Medina in search of security. Even after he had established himself strongly in Medina, his Meccan opponents tried repeatedly yet unsuccessfully to destroy him and his followers. In this context of war, the prophet’s message combined firmness with clemency. Followers of Islam are clearly told that Allah disapproves of aggression, but when Islam is under attack it is the duty of the faithful to fight back with all possible strength and determination. Once the attack ceases, Allah recommends forgiveness. Looking back, it appears that the Islamic consciousness has been burdened from its early years with an unfortunate historic legacy, further aggravated in recent times by new circumstances. Among Muslims spread over diverse lands, there are many streams of thought, some of which like the Bahai, carry the spirit of

brotherhood and the light of the spirit beyond all narrow limits. But there is a hard core of conservatives, with formidable strength and influence, which strongly rejects these liberal trends and feels that Islam is never safe until it captures political power and combines it with strict religious authority. The spirit of Islam has to be purged of this historically acquired paranoiac strain before it can truly fulfil that mission of peace which its name itself proclaims.

Hinduism under attack has typically reacted in a manner which stands in strong contrast with the Islamic response. Faced with a threat of aggression or encroachment by outsiders, the Hindu mind has far too often sought security in withdrawal inwards. This has resulted in a social formation with strong segregationist features. The Hindu consciousness, in its conservative Brahminical variant, is tainted with the spirit of apartheid, the upper caste anxious to protect their purity by maintaining ritually prescribed distance from others lower down. The traditional Hindu has got so used to this negative code of conduct that he practises it without much thought and often sees nothing wrong in it. He refuses to recognise that it amounts to a callous rejection of the idea of coexistence with one's neighbours on terms of equal dignity for all men.

True there have been against this narrow and discriminatory creed from within the Hindu faith itself, notably in the form of Bhakti movement which proclaims pure love as the essence of true spirituality. However, this movement has had only limited influence in traditional society.

It is only fair to note that other religions can equally well be submitted to a similar historical scrutiny. The perversion of Christianity under the influence of imperialism from the time of the ancient Rome to modern America is there as a stern reminder of the corruptibility of all faiths.

Let us now move beyond specific case histories and consider in a more general way the question of religion and its reform for the advancement of human freedom. Criticism of religion, Marx insightfully observed, is the beginning of all criticism. There is, however, a lack of clarity about the scope and nature of that criticism. It is unquestionable that religions require to be purged of superstitions. As far as that is concerned, a secularist and rationalist approach can be confidently recommended and deemed to be adequate. However, superstitions are not the only obstacles to the progressive realization of human freedom. Narrow collective loyalty presents a particularly stubborn problem and secularism does not show here an easy and assured way out. For instance, Stalinists were and, to the extent they have survived, continue to be secular. But they are fiercely loyal to the party to which they belong and also to the nation as long as they are in power. It is not easy to lift people above narrow and sectarianism and it is doubtful if they can be inspired with the active human co-

passion by the force of reason alone. The rational faculty acts, more often than not, as an instrument of an distinctly circumscribed self interest following the normal bent of the heart. Beyond that “change of heart” which reason accepts when it happens but cannot itself readily produced. As we pursue this question, we are led farther afield.

Religion is concerned with the idea of the place of the individual in the universe. Here too there are riddles and ambiguities which challenge reason and invite the spirit of man to cross the limits of prudence. Reason, as we normally understand it, is “this worldly”. Practical reason tends to be concerned with the readily recognizable interests of the individual in the only life, limited in time and space, that he can call his own. However, man at his highest is ever so often overstepping these limits. A person who risks his own life to save others or in the service of an ideal which he does not expect to see materialized in the foreseeable future is, in fact, deeply interested in a life which lies beyond the bounds of his own time and in goods which he can not directly share. Thus, reason has a choice between two kinds and visions of life of which one is directly accessible to the senses and the other “transcendental”, available to contemplation.

This being the human condition, it is only natural that there are alternative versions of humanism. One of these anxious to stress its materialistic roots, another, its spiritual aspirations. Sometimes they view each other with misgivings. Yet the really important contest lies not between different camps of humanism, but between the essence of humanism beyond distinctions of race and local cultures and that narrow sectarianism which contradicts the idea of human unity.

We have purposely put three different themes - the problem of democracy, the question of rural reconstruction and the dialogue between religion and humanism - all within the compass of a single discourse. While the philosophy of humanism is important enough to deserve separate consideration, it runs the risk of losing its vitality and effectiveness unless it is carefully linked up with practice. Its practice itself can take up many forms, rural reconstruction being a principal form particularly in the Third World and, therefore, in the world considered as a whole. It is not accidental that both Gandhi and Tagore, despite their known differences, accepted rural uplift as a major are of activity in the service of mankind. Sevagram and Sriniketan have a common a message. In the mottoes that Gandhi and tagore chose for their institutions, there was a striking similarity. It is clear that the programmes of social reconstruction which thay initiated were varying expressions of common humanist mission. Democracy provides in our time the political framework within which the humanist mission can hope to move forward.

The form of democracy - radical democracy if we choose to call it so - should be determined by the practical requirements of the ideal of human freedom struggling to realize itself at different levels of society under varying circumstances. Within this broad movement, there should be space for a variety of people, such as writers, artists and social activists. Most of us can be active only in a limited area suiting our special abilities. But we need a shared vision of a future world to integrate these multifarious activities and give them a common direction. In its essence, this is a non-sectarian movement, patient yet persistent, towards a higher form of human civilization, more rational and more compassionate than what we have today.

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However at strategy level after global research we can effectively plead for creation of any world wide child protection authority to monitor on going religious education and the way it is imparted. Of-course it is a global problem and we need global awareness about it. In this regard media can play a role of public eye through investigative reports and help break the spiral of silence.

Along with narrow religious teaching within religious schools, in many countries what we see is a trend of introducing religious studies as a compulsory subject and often the day at schools start with prayers or hymns at assemblies. In our globalised world no place is free of plurality. Thus instead of particular religious studies we need to introduce comparative study of religions or secular ethics. Similarly instead of religious prayers and hymns, poems of peace and tolerance could be a good idea.

Finally, of course it is not going to be an easy task, because what various religions have attained is the result of their centuries old exploitation. However at humanist level it is already a late awakening and if we couldn't divorce our apathy towards child abuse on the name of religion, then it will be too late to break the vicious circle. Yesterday we suffered, today our children are suffering, tomorrow our children's children. If we won't be able to do anything substantial to protect the posterity in the age of human rights and global awareness and advocacy, then we as well will be remembered as a black spot in the course of evolution, but little thick one because we had the information but opted for inaction.

AN ALLIANCE OF CIVILISATIONS ?

- Roy Brown

Last year, the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey called for an Alliance of Civilisations to counter the increasing hostility between Islam and the West. But is such an alliance possible? Surely the Danish cartoon affair will have dashed any such hopes. On what common ground could an alliance possibly be based? For the Islamists, the only basis would be recognition of the supremacy of Islam and its laws. This is what lies behind their calls for “respect” for Islam. But to many westerners such a recognition would be nothing short of renunciation of our highest ideals and hard-won freedoms, amounting to surrender to a medieval philosophy that has no place in the modern world.

No doubt many Muslims found the Danish cartoons offensive, but the massive over-reaction has been purely political, orchestrated at the highest level within the Islamic world. (see p 5). Most Europeans would reply that burning embassies in response to an independent publication of cartoons was even more offensive. This is not a clash of civilisations but a clash of values.

Political Islam poses a major threat to the very basis of European civilisation, a fact apparently lost on most European intellectuals. With a few notable exceptions the response from both politicians and the media to the cartoons affair has been one of cringing apology. Yet demonstrators calling for “death to the cartoonists” outside the Danish embassy in London were protected by the police. Apparently incitement to murder is acceptable, provided your reasons are theologically sound.

While the world has been focused on 9/11 and the “war on terror”, the increasing influence of Islamic extremism among Europe’s Muslims has been allowed to grow largely unchecked by governments or police. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan spoke of the need for mutual respect. But while we ought to respect the right of others to hold and express opinions contrary to our own, we would certainly draw the line at respecting laws that discriminate against women, non-believers, or followers of a different religion. Nor can we accept the institution of a parallel legal system for a minority within our countries, despite calls from some European Muslims for Shari’a law.

Europe has made great progress since the Second World War in assimilating immigrants from a variety of backgrounds. Racism, once widespread in Europe, is now, thankfully, greatly diminished. But ghettos still exist and European governments have been slow to recognise the danger of allowing this fragmentation of society to develop. Coming to terms with Europe’s multi-

*Source : International Humanist News, March 2006
Humanist Outlook - Winter 2006*

ethnic reality is a work in progress.

As Amir Taheri the noted Iranian writer has pointed out, “Islamism is a political movement masquerading as a religion”. The Islamists in Europe have become masters at the blame game. They have manufactured the myth of “Islamophobia”, creating a false association between racism and fear of Islamic extremism. A phobia is an irrational fear, but our mistrust of Islamic extremism is perfectly rational, and criticism of Islam is perfectly legitimate. But Europe’s intellectual elite, fearful of being tainted by any suspicion of racism or of association with the extreme right, have succumbed.

Europeans must understand that our values are now under serious attack. A misplaced trust in multiculturalism, moral relativism and political correctness have so far allowed this attack to go unchallenged. Europe must now begin to explain and defend its values.

Making an Impact

How was it possible for the most technologically and economically advanced society on earth to have fallen so comprehensively under the sway of Christian fundamentalism? How was it possible for the ideas of the Enlightenment and of America’s own founding fathers to have been so comprehensively brushed aside? How did this great nation, standard bearer and champion of democracy, descend into idiocracy?

Reportedly, 14% of Americans are non-believers. Americans give \$80 billion a year to religious organisations. Where are the \$11 billion that pro-rata the non-believers should be contributing to secular causes? Sadly, it seems that part of the problem may lie in the way that Humanism and Secularism in America are organised. Where the churches have cooperated on social issues they have been extraordinarily successful, creating a common agenda and hammering it home. Yet to an outside observer American Humanism often seems fragmented, lacking a common agenda and beset with rivalries, a house divided against itself.

Surely we need to recognise that the problems we face are too great for any one organisation to tackle alone. United we might stand, but divided we shall assuredly fall.

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NEWS AND NOTES

Study Reveals Global Abuse Against Kids

A shocking picture of physical, sexual and psychological violence is going on against children daily, says a UN report. The first UN study of global violence against children says such abuse is often socially approved or even legal. It concludes that violence against under -18s occurs in every country, every society and every social group. The UN has called on states to outlaw violence against children and to ensure their rights are protected. The study which was requested by UN secretary general Kofi Annan, is the result of four years of research.

The report's author professor Paulo Sergio Pinheiro says the situation revealed is not acceptable and decades of silent abuse can no longer remain unchallenged. "Protection from violence is a matter of urgency", writes Pinheiro. "Children have suffered adult violence unseen and unheard for centuries." The UN is calling on every country to have a national strategy to prevent violence against children. The report, the first of its kind, charts various kinds of violence, from prostitution to schools bullying, taking place in different phases and spheres of children's lives - at home, in the community and in institutions. It estimates that some 150 million girls, 14% of the planet's child population, are sexually abused each year, as well as 7% of boys, or 73 million children. Such violence can leave long term psychological scars which result in increased risky sexual behaviour, substance abuse and violence towards others in adulthood.

Source : Times of India, 13th October, 2006

Pak Province Brings In Taliban-Style Laws : Bill Passed by NWFP Legislature is Reminiscent of Vice and Virtue Department in Afghanistan

Pakistan's provincial assembly on Monday passed a controversial law to set up a Taliban-style police system to promote virtue and eliminate vice, a move dubbed by the opposition parties as "Unconstitutional." The Islamic alliance government in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) approved the Hisba (accountability) Bill which establishes a unit led by an Islamic cleric to eliminate the vice with a separate police force to implement its orders.

The bill was presented by the six party religious alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in the NWFP provincial assembly and was ratified by a majority. It was tabled in the house by the NWFP minister for law and parliamentary affairs Malik Zafar Azam and passed in the absence of opposition members. Opposition members, including those from the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q) walked out of the assembly proceedings to protest the passage of the bill. Under the new law, an Islamic watchdog will monitor the observance of Islamic values in public places. The plan is reminiscent of the

infamous Department of Vice and Virtue, setup by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The passage of the bill follows a heated debate between the MMA and the opposition.

Under the new law, the principal duty of the cleric, called “Mohtasib” - one who holds other accountable - will be to ensure people respect the call to prayers, pray on time and do not engage in commerce at the time of Friday prayers. The cleric will also stop unrelated men and women from appearing in public places together and discourage singing and dancing. One of his tasks will be to monitor the media to ensure “publications are useful for the promotion of Islamic values.” The bill was first passed in July last year but the supreme court rejected it in August last year, terming various clauses of the law as unconstitutional and illegal.

Source: Times of India, 14th November, 2006.

Annual Day of IHU and AGMs of IHU & HEFS

The Annual Day, 2006 of the IHU was celebrated on Sunday 12th of November 2006 in a lively Annual Day Meet at IHU Chairman Vir Narain's residence in Saket, New Delhi. The Meet opened with the choral singing of the humanist song "Aisa Ho Sansar Hamara". Mahendra Misra recited a very moving poem written by him in Hindi, bringing out the nostalgia of a civil servant recalling his younger days when he took part with fervour and emotion in causes dear to his heart and his anguish at his now being a silent spectator of much injustice and oppression in society. Nandita Narain rendered an Urdu Gazal written by Faiz Ahmad Faiz. Prakash Narain played an audio cassette containing six narratives under the title "Humanist Words of Faith". This cassette had been developed by Human Horizons, London, and contained short, crisp, well written and elegantly delivered talks whose subjects were: The Humanist Parent, Facing Death, Belief: a Personal View, Tolerance and Truth in a Media World. These were authored by eminent humanists Chris Templeton, John White, Nicolas Walter, Helena Stopes-Roe, Martin Ward and Chris Templeton.

The Annual Day Meet was followed by Lunch and then by the 47th Annual General Meeting of IHU and the 37th AGM of the HEFS. In the AGM's, the organizational and financial position was reviewed and the annual accounts of FY 05-06, duly audited, were discussed and passed. Elections as due were held [The names of the office bearers as at the end of the AGMs appear in the Directory Page of this issue]. Annual donations by members were announced. The donors were DN Chaudhri, Pradip Narain, Ashok Madhukar, Vijay Narain, Latika Narain, MK Misra, GB Bagai, Prakash Narain, Chitra Narain, Vir Narain and Pushpa Shrivastava.

The Humanism of Satyajit Ray

On the eve of the IHU Annual Day, that is on Saturday 11th November, IHU organized a function jointly with the India International Centre, New Delhi . The subject was The Humanism of Satyajit Ray. The main speaker was Mahendra Misra, poet and writer and a Life Member of IHU. K Bikram Singh, eminent film maker, also spoke as a Special Invitee. Noted poet and litterateur, Ashok Vajpeyi was in the chair. Mahendra Misra, in an amazingly panoramic and detailed address made references to a whole array of Ray's films - right from the Apu Trilogy to Agantuk - in which there was a most elegant exposition of human values. He also gave a brilliant historical analysis of Satyajit Ray's humanism, his thoughts and his art which were in the tradition of the earlier masters of cinematic direction and production through films like The Bicycle Thief and Rashoman.

K. Bikram Singh in his presentation lucidly analysed some aspects of Ray's sensitive and gentle approach to the question of justice against injustice but felt that in today's noisy world such gentleness may not work. During the discussions, Prakash Narain, former IHU Chairman, said that as a long time worker in the humanist movement on the one hand and as an ardent Satyajit Ray fan on the other, he had been fascinated by the eloquent reflection in numerous films of Satyajit Ray of "humanist" values as understood in the international humanist movement. In all Satyajit Ray films "compassion" was an invariable undercurrent and the source of the compassion was internal, never imposed from outside, which was a crucial part of humanist values. Narain referred to one of Satyajit Ray's last films "Agantuk" in which Manmohan Mitra, the wandering Uncle, when asked what he thought ethics should be, said "a simple morality above religion and God" Prakash Narain was a little critical of some of the Satyajit Ray scholars who often missed his "humanism", like an eminent Indian Professor in an American University who described the film Devi as a "father-son debate", a depiction of the "dialectics" between Kalikinkar the father and Umapasrad the son and a series of "dyads" between them! The suffering of a simple, young married woman at the hands of religious superstition was hardly mentioned.

Ashok Vajpeyi in the Chairperson's closing observations complimented the IHU for arranging a discussion on Satyajit Ray. He particularly expressed his appreciation for the clause in the Amsterdam Declaration 1952 of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, a copy of which had been given to him, saying " Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination and recognizes the transforming power of art". Ashok Vajpeyi felt that the promotion of human values through art and literature, as so brilliantly done in Ray's films, was one of the important tools for bringing about a more humane world.

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