MASTERY OR MYSTERY

THE CHALLENGE OF OUR TIMES AND THE RESPONSE-ABILITY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

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0. INTRODUCTION

The maternal perspective, it has been suggested, lives not just for ourselves but for our children and children's children. This is to be done not just individually or as "nuclear families", but collectively, as a global people. However laudable the perspective, it is not enough. Today's feminist critique of our times takes us farther than that, farther away from all modes of being, thinking and acting that are built on domination, the domination of the weak by the strong, of nature by Humans, of females by males, of religion by economic and political and social forces; and the critique takes us towards modes that are less exclusive and more inclusive, less authoritarian and more complementary, less hierarchical and more egalitarian, less psychological and more ontological, less moralistic and more inspiring.

This approach, I believe, is built on a profound sense of mystery in contradistinction to that patriarchal presupposition which is bent on absolute mastery of reality, a mastery that is incompatible with any place for mystery.

For a vision to be relevant we have to discern not only the challenges of our age but also the way to meet them. We have not only to go to the root of our problems but also to the root of the solution. If we are not to jump on to the bandwagon of any and every populist movement we need to have recourse to the spirit of discernment. For only discernment opens us up to the mystery at work in the world and in Humans.

The challenges of our times are, as I see it, challenges that are part of a world that worships at the altar of profit, possessions and power with the aim of creating a heaven on earth. Though this is an illusory goal, paradoxically it has produced a world that has no room and no role for the mystery that we call GOD. The goal of absolute control of all reality is illusory but the spin-offs have been disastrous. Now if we religious are intent on meeting these challenges effectively it cannot be from within this world of mastery. The challenges have to be met from within an altogether different world, a world that is open to and promotes a sense of mystery, a world that worships in spirit and in truth; the spirit of discernment and the truth of wholeness. This is both the point of departure and the sum and substance of my reflections today.

To meet today's challenges we need discernment because discernment opens us up to the mystery at work in our world and in our lives.

I DISCERNMENT
To understand discernment properly it is best to distinguish between the discerning person, the discerning process and the product of discernment. It is only a discerning person that is capable of undertaking a discerning process which in its turn brings forth its specific fruit of faith, hope and love. The discerning person is one endowed with a threefold openness to reality. When one is open to the Divine one is in the state of faith, when one is open to the world one is in the state of hope, and when one is open to Humans one is in the state of love. The process of discernment is the actualization of the threefold state of openness to reality. Acts of faith, hope and love are the fruits of this actualization.

The first aspect of openness to the world is that it works to make the wholeness of the world more obvious and less obscure. It is an openness that leads to hope that looks forward to making the sacredness, the sacramentality of the universe more palpable. For what consciousness is to the body, sacramentality is to the universe.

The second aspect of discernment is openness to Humans, to all Humans; this openness is really is in the nature of a Sacra-Mentality that takes Humans as a community. The result of this Sacra-Mentality is love. Love is the state of communion among Humans. For what water is to fish, community is to Humans.

The third aspect of discernment is openness to the Divine. This openness to divine presence is faith. Faith is discovering oneself in the divine presence. For as light is to the eye, divine presence is to the discerning person.

Actualization of the threefold openness (as faith, hope and love) is the process of discernment and the result is expressed in acts of faith, hope and love. The life of a discerning person is an on-going process of discernment, a life filled and full-filled by faith, hope and love.

Christian tradition has understood faith, hope and love as virtues that are indispensable for all righteous living. We have to retrieve this tradition by appropriating the full force of the word 'virtue'. Virtue comes from the Latin *virtus*, and the Greek word for *virtus* is *dynamis*; together they mean force, power, dynamism. Faith, hope and love are primarily the dynamics of reality and only secondarily are they to be understood as acts of faith, hope and love. Openness to reality evokes acts of faith, hope and love. Our acts of faith, hope and love are our responses to the dynamics of faith, hope and love.

Discernment implies wholeness; it is a comprehensive opening up in three directions: (a) discerning the wholeness of the world; (b) discerning the wholeness of human beings, that is, seeing Humans as a family without economic, political, social, racial or religious discriminations; and (c) discerning the quest for wholeness as the Divine Mystery at work in the world of Humans.

Discernment is not so much a method as an attitude, a be-attitude, a state of awareness in which one comes in touch with things as they are. It is not so much a set of steps as a heightened awareness of wholeness.

To be a discerning person then implies: firstly that one is open to God, world
and Humans, secondly that one is filled with faith, hope and love, and thirdly that the virtues of faith, hope and love are not decorations but dynamic movements.

A. Discerning the Challenges

We are living in a world whose spirit is embodied in the synthetic nature of our life and the analytic nature of our love, in the reckless pursuit of profit and the meaningless variety of the products, in the devastation of nature and in the nature of devastation, in the power of politics and the politics of power, in our market forces and in our armed forces.

It is a world managed by super-computers, moving at supersonic speed with the help of satellite-communications, nourished by fast foods and instant drinks, electrified by nuclear energy, defended by nuclear weapons with the blessing in many parts of the world by the high-priests of caste, creed, colour and race. Speaking realistically however it is the world of a strong and ruthless rich minority built on the lives of the powerless poor; a world of affluence and superabundance resting on and sustained by the untold misery of the overwhelming majority; and the most unkindest cut of all, a world of colossal material waste and vast deserts of spiritual meaninglessness. It is a complex combination of intellect and individualism, irresponsibility and irrationalism masquerading as progress of the global village; it is the latest version of the animal farm where all are equal but some are more equal; it is a new eschatology where every lion has not only its lambs but also its lands with its herds and hirelings.

We find ourselves today at the cross-roads of history where the future of the human race and of our planet, and perhaps of our universe is at stake. It is the parting of ways between the spirit of the world and the world of the spirit, a world of having replacing the world of being, a world of mastery emptying the world of all mystery. We have three major but unmistakable sign-posts: one, the instrumentalization of the world; two, the fragmentation of the human being; and three, the meaninglessness of the Divine.

a. The Instrumentalization of the World

The dominant characteristic of today's world is its view of the world which leaves no room for mystery, its tendency to reduce the world and every thing in it to a manipulable object, and if possible, to an objective formula. True, it tries to see the interconnection between the parts and the whole but its understanding of the parts and the whole is that of a completely reified reality.

There is hardly anything in our world that is not reduced to its merely measurable, quantifiable, economic and instrumentalized aspects. Whatever our age undertakes and researches aims primarily at material and military benefits; it is rarely or never a search for wholeness.

Thus the one and only goal of our industrial enterprises seems to be profit with little or no consideration of the price paid in terms of the atmosphere, the rivers, seas and oceans, the forests, the animals, our material resources and the human spirit. Our research in space has primarily military and strategic motives; not the sense of
mystery much less the welfare of the human community. Today's authoritative understanding of the human body is to be found in the revelations made in our technically perfect advertisements. What has worth and value is the body of the bold and the beautiful, the young and the strong; but the weak, the aged or the handicapped are no-body. Our understanding of the human is being reduced to an understanding of the human body, not of the human spirit, much less of the whole human being. The human being of the future will be a product of the manipulation of genes, not of the dialogue between divine grace and human response. Is it surprising that we are asked to make love, not war? Like war love too is of our making!

Our understanding of peace is like that of love and war; a product of human determination. For our peace is in terms of war and training for war. To have peace we have to be prepared for war. Peace is the product of the deterrent called war. Today it is not religion that talks authoritatively of peace; our armed forces determine the content and the conditions of peace.

The absolute instrumentalization of the world is best symbolized by the impending threat of the nuclear holocaust. It is the symbol of an age which has been struck by the disease called hubris, a disease with which the Greek Gods destroyed the overconfident who dared to be like them. In our times however hubris has been turned up-side down because our overconfident age wants to be not like the Gods but like created matter that can be grasped, controlled and manipulated. For instrumentalization of the world is absolutization of the relative and relativization of the Absolute. It is a refusal to accept the world as a divine creation; it is a systematic effort to replace it with human creation.

A world without mystery is a world without meaning. Shiva without his creative power Shakti is Shava, a mere corpse. Mystery like Shakti is the soul of the world. To instrumentalize the world is to deny the existence of Mystery and to create an illusory world with illusory values and an illusory sense of identity.

b. The Fragmentation of the Human

Humans cannot escape the effects of instrumentalization; they realize these effects in their own bodies. Humans know themselves first and foremost through their bodies. If bodies are taken to be the temples of the Holy Spirit the self-understanding of Humans will be holistic because it will be grounded in Mystery. But if the body is only the sum-total of the measurable and the pleasurable the self-understanding of the Humans will be affected in a profoundly negative way: there is bound to be a rupture in the depths of the Human. And indeed this is what Humans are going through today: a fragmentation of their very being.

Today's Humans have lost their sense of integration and internal unity, and become schizophrenic beings: beings whose core is shattered to such an extent that they experience themselves as body and 'psyche', spirit and matter, time and eternity.

No wonder then that our age has suffered such a massive attack of loneliness. We have everything but are in effect nothing. Denying the body its due we have
become a nobody; anonymous entities living in well planned colonies but as unconnected and unrelated human islands. Has there been any period in human history that has undergone such pangs of loneliness and such a wide-spread loss of a sense of belonging?

In order to survive today Humans have to cope with a vast fund of information but there is no demand at all for wisdom. Yes, there is need for courtesy and etiquette, for law and order, for know-how about how to win friends and influence people but you don't need wisdom to survive. The old saying, be simple like doves and prudent like serpents, is only half-true today: to survive it is enough to be prudent like serpents!

Furthermore not only are Humans fragmented in the depths of their being, they are further divided into interest groups along economic, social, political, national, religious, racist and sexist lines. As the history of multinational companies is showing humans can unite more easily in matters that lead to profit and power. It is an odd orbital movement whose centripetal force divides in order to conquer and whose centrifugal force unites and internationalizes by swallowing the smaller units. This is because what makes sense to Humans is alas only that which is reducible to an object so that it can become an object of desire, an object to be grasped and controlled.

Is it not symptomatic that in a world of phenomenal poverty, our world economic order concentrates on catering to the ever increasing wants of the few instead of supplying the basic needs of the vast majority? It is these wants that motivate and promote the formation of interest groups. Our politics, our religion, our cultures - all seem to be bent on promoting and deepening these divisions. There is hardly any concerted effort to find out and make known the interest of the whole human family. What is of ultimate interest to one and all is the rate of bank interest.

If there is something that is woefully lacking in human consciousness, something completed omitted by our economics and politics, something totally neglected by our religions, it is a sense of community, of human community, a sense of belonging together.

What we have instead is an ever deepening sense of the individual, hardened by private property and legalized by individual rights. Individual achievements are what our histories recount and highlight either to praise or to condemn. Individual identities are what are proposed as models to be emulated or anti-models to be avoided. Even group-identities like religious, national and economic groups are constructed according to individualistic parameters.

Accordingly the Human today is merely a psyche possessing a body. If this body is young, beautiful and strong or is from the high castes the individual has high potential, but if the body is old, ugly and weak or belongs to the low castes the individual has a tremendous handicap even merely to survive.

The symbol for the fragmentation of the Human is woman and in India the Dalit woman, not a human being, much less a person but the symbol of inhumanity, injustice and insensitivity.
c. The Meaninglessness of the Divine

If the world of mastery reveals itself in the instrumentalization of the physical world, its immediate effect is felt in the fragmentation of the world of consciousness; this leads to complete blindness to the Divine. Fragmented Humans in an instrumentalized world are unable to cultivate a sense for the Divine. Their sensitivity to the Divine is blunted by an instrumentalized world and blinded by the glare and glamour of possessions and power.

It must be remembered that the lack of sensitivity to the Divine is not so much due to a lack of good-will on the part of Humans as due to the kind of world in which they live and the kind of consciousness that animates them. In a world with a one-sided consciousness and partial values that exclude wholeness there is no place and no function for the Divine. Here the traditional understanding of the Divine becomes totally meaningless.

Meaningless means that in the universe of meaning that is prevalent and operative in today's world it does not, indeed cannot, make sense. GOD is no more a charged word; it no more sets our hearts on fire, no more makes life worth living and death worth facing. GOD has become more of an investment than an inspiration, more an insurance than an assurance, more a political and economic bandwagon than a mystery that liberates and unites Humans so that they discover meaning in life. The traditional GOD does not respond to the needs of today and so the Human's search for meaning is no more fascinated by GOD.

Institutionalized religions have got stuck with the traditional understanding of GOD irrespective of the fact whether such an understanding answers today's needs or not. The consequence is that religions are gradually turning into ideologies that replace faith with emotion, supplying emotional satisfaction rather than holistic meaning to its adherents and in the process becoming oblivious of their reason and role in the world.

The search for meaning occurs today more in the secular fields than in traditionally religious precincts. Religion has lost its identity because it is busy preserving answers instead of diagnosing the situation and searching for the real questions. Religion can regain its identity once it becomes part of the search for meaning and begins to re-interpret its message in the context of this search. The idea of the Divine has to be such that it answers the innermost needs of Humans. Which does not mean that our idea of the Divine has to be such that it plays to the gallery; but it does mean that the idea of the Divine has constantly to be re-interpreted in such a way that it makes sense in our contemporary context.

The sense of meaninglessness that pervades our age is best symbolized by drugs, a symbol that brings out unambiguously the Human's ability to do business even with something that spreads misery on the one hand and deepens our meaninglessness on the other.

B. Discerning the Opportunities

There is no doubt that we have to take the challenges of our age seriously if
we wish to be relevant and to remain relevant. But taking the challenges seriously does not imply that we turn a blind eye to the other aspects of our age. The dangers alone neither describe nor constitute the whole picture. There are opportunities too that are unique to our age. These also need to be discerned if we are not to despair at seeing the dangers but also learn to take advantage of the unique opportunities of our age.

a. Discerning the Sacramentality of the World:

The World as Sacrament is a World of Hope

What does discerning the sacramentality of the world mean and how is it connected with hope? The question has to do with our way of perceiving the world. What is the world, what does it mean to us, how do we look at it, is it just a collection of objects, is it reducible to its mutable aspect?

By the sacramentality of the world we mean that the world is a sacrament. A sacrament is a symbol that re-presents, makes really present, the symbolized reality but itself is not the symbolized reality. A smile is a symbolic action, it is symbolic of the joy which it really makes present. The symbol smile makes present the symbolized reality joy. Similarly the symbol world really makes present the symbolized reality of the whole world. But the symbol world is not identical with the symbolized wholeness of the world. Just as the symbol smile is the only way to the symbolized reality joy, the symbol world is the only way to its symbolized wholeness.

However it is important to note that just as recognizing the joy in the symbol smile is not a mere intellectual exercize but a holistic experience so too recognizing wholeness in the symbol world is not a mere intellectual exercize but a holistic experience. As the joy is really the inner meaning, the soul as it were of the smile so too wholeness is really the inner meaning, the soul as it were of the world. As the joy cannot be separated from the smile so too wholeness cannot be separated from the world.

If this is so why do we speak separately of smile and joy, why don't we simply put them together and speak of a smile? The reason is simple. There are smiles that are full of joy and there are smiles which are empty of joy. The joyful smiles are to be found in babies and the empty smiles are to be found in politicians. Here however our analogy does not take us further, for though there are smiles devoid of joy, there is no world that is devoid of GOD. Not even the real symbol of the body can match the symbolic nature of the world for when a person dies the symbol body disintegrates. That is why the world as a real symbol of its wholeness is unique.

To recognize the symbol world as symbolizing its wholeness is to recognize the sacredness, the sacramentality of the world.

Firstly, it means that we really take the world seriously. That means we do not reduce the reality of the world to its perceptible aspects only. The world has a mystery aspect too which cannot be neglected. For a good many of us this is indeed a hard saying. To believe that this world soaked in and overflowing with injustice and misery is really a world of mystery is almost asking for the impossible. For there is a
sneaking suspicion in the mind of most of us that the world is basically an evil world. It is here that the spirit of discernment brings us back to our senses, back to the realization that there is a Mystery that always and at every moment sustains and holds our world in being.

Secondly, openness to the world means openness to the mystery that reveals, expresses and communicates itself in this world to us. Whatever grace comes to us does so always and only in a form that is of this world. In that sense the world is the concretization of the mystery that rules this world. Thirdly, openness to the world of mystery further means that we recognize that we are part and parcel of this universe, that we are made up of and constituted by the stuff of this universe. Our being is inextricably interwoven with the universe and its mystery. The deeper implication of this is that the destiny of the universe and the destiny of the human family are interconnected. A new creation, a new earth and a new human are all interrelated and interconnected beliefs. The resurrection of the body cannot be separated from the restoration of all things in Christ. For all that is sown in corruption will be raised up as uncorrupted.

Fourthly, the wholeness of the world which we are referring to as the sacramentality of the world is not an emotional label but the dynamic presence of the mystery in the world, a presence that calls for the ever deeper and more intensive realization of the wholeness of the world, it is a call to establish a world-order and a world-society that reveal more clearly and less ambiguously the wholeness of this world. Lack of openness to the wholeness of the world is the reason for the way the world is today.

Fifthly, and collating all the preceding points, hope is the process that is built on the faith that the world is a world of mystery and that all Humans are part of this world of mystery, and makes one work for and look forward to the manifestation of the wholeness of this world.

Hope is an extension of faith; it is built on faith but it is neither separate nor can it be separated from faith. If faith emphasizes our origin, hope lays stress on our final destiny. Hope is built on the faith that the world is GOD's world and GOD'S revelation. I is not the same as faith but its continuation because hope is nourished on the conviction that GOD is the wholeness of this world of Humans and that this wholeness is to be made more manifest through the contribution of the human community. Wherever Humans commit themselves honestly and selflessly to the welfare of the world GOD'S presence becomes more manifest in the wholeness that is revealed. The depth of hope is proportionate to the depth of the Human's commitment to the welfare of all.

Openness to the world is in effect openness to GOD'S world; it is this that brings forth hope as that dynamics that motivate us to work for and look forward to the wholeness of the world to which GOD is leading the whole of creation. This working for and looking forward to our wholeness is far from being either a blind enthusiasm for work or an empty gazing into the future. It is a commitment to realize the wholeness of the world of Humans, a commitment that emerges from the belief that the world is GOD'S world. It emerges as spontaneously as does laughter from a good joke.
Genuine hope however is to be distinguished from expectation. Expectation has to do with waiting for things which ultimately will pass away. Expectation is in-built in our world and its development; what we call progress is of the essence of expectation which appears to be similar and related to hope but in truth is of an altogether different order. Hope is as different from expectation as love is from lust. For one thing, hope is not a waiting for but a working for something that ultimately will not pass away; and for another hope is built on faith, unlike expectation which is built on calculation.

One may be tempted to interrupt and ask: all this is very elevating but is there any sign on the horizon of our times that the sun of the sacramentality of the world is rising?

Yes, there are quite a few signs of this. In the emerging ecological consciousness, for instance, that is cutting across all political, national, religious, sexist, racist, economic, social boundaries we have a movement that is bringing all kinds of peoples and professions to an awareness of the dangers and damages to the world's fragile ecological balance. This awareness cannot be reduced to the need to protect our trees and forests, our atmosphere and our waters, the different species of life. It is a new kind of awareness of the organic and vital nature of the cosmic community in which all life has its base and sustenance. It is an awareness of the communitarian nature of the world where there is no individual object but where every thing is connected with every thing and can be what it is because of this interconnection and interdependence.

The sacredness of the world-body is in the process of being re-discovered. This sacredness cannot be reduced to this or that aspect of the body or to all the single parts because it is more than the sum of its parts. The total whole here is more than the sum of its parts. The total whole is the symbol world which is being recognized here in the concern for the welfare of the whole. Just as the person is recognized in and through the body but the depth of the recognition is in proportion to the extent that the body points beyond itself, so too here what is being recognized faintly as if through a glass is the mystery of divine presence.

Much could be said too of the awareness of the human body, especially, a woman's body. At last we have the beginnings of a new approach to the body, the body as the sacrament of the human person.

The intimations of the symbolized mystery in the symbol world are the beginnings of a new awareness which is the one and only adequate and effective answer to the instrumentalization of the world. At work in all this is an implicit faith that there is a sacredness, a sacramentality that needs to be accepted, respected and obeyed.

This is being dramatically illustrated all over the world in movements like Greenpeace where simple people and highly qualified professionals are committing their lives and fortunes to accept, respect and obey the sacramentality of the universe. Such commitment is the concrete expression of hope. Hope, we may recall, is working for and looking forward to the wholeness of the world.
The symbol of hope not only for India but for the whole world for the
discovery of sacramentality of the world is Medha Patkar's *Narmada Bachao*!

b. Discerning the Sacra-Mentality of the Human:

**Sacra-Mentality Discovers and Promotes Communion among Humans**

Being part of the world is one of the constitutive aspects of being human but
the Human is not reducible to the world-aspect alone. A human being is also very
much part of the human community which is constituted by a common stream of
consciousness. It is consciousness of course that brings us the realization that we are
part of the world; and it is the same consciousness that makes us aware of our sense of
longing for and belonging to the human community.

When we assert that discernment opens us to the community of the Human
what is primarily meant is that it makes us aware of and accept as legitimate our
longing for and belonging to the human community. A human being is not an
individual but a person. An individual is a monad and hence an abstraction. It is true
that we behave like individuals and that our societies are built on individuals. For in
order to survive in today's world people have to behave like individuals and societies
have to behave like groups of individuals. But the price we pay for this is enormous:
loss of sense of community on the one hand and an extreme loneliness on the other.
The result is a world of monads in an instrumentalized world.

But a person is constituted by relationships and is a knot in a network of
relationships. The measure in which these relationships are recognized for what they
are and accordingly acted upon is the measure of the depth of the person. The ability
to recognize the relationships that constitute a person is, what I am calling, Sacra-
Mentality. Sacra-Mentality is the Human's liberation from selfishness and discovery
of it originary communitarian sense of identity. It is the mentality that recognizes the
wholeness that the Cosmic and the Human stand in need of in order to be fully cosmic
and fully human. Sacra-Mentality retrieves the sense of community in two different
realms of reality: the cosmic community and the human community and in the process
introduces a major re-vision of the Human's self-understanding.

It is the Human's Sacra-Mentality of course that is able to recognize the
sacramentality of the world. To see the world as it really is by going beyond the
misleading appearances, to see it holistically is the hallmark of Sacra-Mentality.
Sacra-mentality perceives the unity of the cosmic community wherein every thing is
interrelated. Without the perceptive ability of Sacra-Mentality it would be impossible
to experience the symbolized reality in the symbol world. The presence of
instrumentality is symbolic of the absence of Sacra-Mentality.

In a similar way it is Sacra-Mentality that discovers the communitarian nature
of the human spirit, first by laying bare the communitarian nature of the human body
which is interrelated to every human body and then by proceeding to the
communitarian nature of the human spirit. Human consciousness is part of the stream
of a communitarian consciousness that has flown down the river-beds of time right up
to our own times.
The cosmic community is only an aspect, a dimension of reality. It is the quantifiable and measurable dimension of all things. And the human community is also only an aspect, a dimension of reality. It is the consciousness dimension of reality. Humans and world are intimately related to each other: they belong together in such a manner that one without the other is not possible. The world is an organic body and the human community is a community of consciousness and both together are part of the symbol world, part of the sacramentality of the world. However the Human as the symbolizer, as the one who recognizes the symbolized in the symbol, is more than this. What makes the Human really human is Sacra-Mentality.

The identity of the Human is thus doubly determined: as an integral part of the cosmic community and as an integral part of the human community; over against such a complex identity the individualistic understanding of the Human will be seen as illusory. Illusory too the values that support and sustain a society whose corner-stone is the monadic individualistic human psyche. There are thus two ways of understanding the Human: like a solitary island or like an island that is the beginning of the ocean. The former is an individual and the latter a person.

The core of a person is its identity as symbolizer, that is, its ability to see the island as the beginning of the ocean, to see the symbol as symbolizing the symbolized reality. This is the essence of Sacra-Mentality. It is Sacra-Mentality that not only cures instrumentality and discovers the sacramentality of the whole universe, not only transforms an individual into a person but above all perceives that the wholeness symbolized in the world symbol is really the divine presence at work everywhere in all beings and at all times.

Now is there any evidence in our historical situation today of such a Sacra-Mentality?

There is more than enough evidence to assert that Sacra-Mentality is at work in today's world. Institutions like the United Nations, the International Red Cross Society, the United Nations' Refugee Agency, movements like Amnesty International, Human Rights' movements, peace-movements, etc. all manifest signs of Sacra-Mentality. Without denying their weaknesses all these are symptoms of a new mentality that, irrespective of nation, religion, social, economic and political system, shows concern for and a sense of belonging to the whole human family.

In our whole human history this is an altogether new phenomenon: concern for and a sense of belonging to the whole human family! This concern is shown through solidarity at various levels: international help for victims of famine, floods, earthquakes; for victims of war and prisoners of war; mediation between warring parties and warring countries; the fight against disease and drugs; against the exploitation of women and children; against violence in the streets and at home; the movement towards demilitarization and peace. For the first time in history we have phenomena like organized care of the sick and the aged, medical insurance, trade unions, health education, research in food and health, care for the health and the beauty of the human body, concern for traffic control and safe travel, etc., etc. In spite of selfishness at all levels Sacra-Mentality reveals itself as a relentless search for the wholeness of the human family.
Sacra-Mentality is a manifestation of that supremely divine attitude which makes the sun shine over the good and the bad and the rain fall over the just and the unjust.

The symbol for Sacra-Mentality is Kiran Bedi's programme in the Tiwari Jail.

c. Discerning the Divine in the Wholeness of Humans and their World:

The Divine as the Soul of the World and the Home of the Humans

The essence of Sacra-Mentality, we said, is the ability of the symbolizer to perceive the symbolized reality in the symbol, that is, to perceive the symbolized wholeness of the Humans and their world in the world of Humans. This wholeness is not something that is fixed and known in advance; it is something that irrupts without advanced notice or prior planning. It is something that Humans cannot control or manipulate. It is something that they have to discover step by step in the sweat of their brow.

Humans are not, indeed cannot be, satisfied with things as they are. Sooner or later they set themselves to changing things for the better. The urge towards 'more' and 'better' is characteristic of all peoples of all times. Hardly have they found something more or something better their satisfaction does not last long and their search begins all over again.

This is true at the personal, family, national and international levels. Out of this urge develop culture and cult whose high-point is religion in the sense of the experience of the Divine. Today more than ever before there is a tremendous sense of dissatisfaction with almost everything in every field of human life but more so with religious traditions and practices. Perhaps people are giving up traditional religion not because of loss of faith but precisely because they are undergoing, I think, a new experience of faith, a faith with which our traditional interpretations of God and religion do not keep pace.

Answers can be relevant only if they respond to questions. The old traditional answers do not ring a bell because they were answers about God. Our questions today are about Humans and their world. Accordingly today's answers have to be about Humans and their world and their search for wholeness. The search for meaning is not different or separate from the search for wholeness, the same wholeness that fascinates the Sacra-Mentality of the Humans and that we search for and discover in the sacramentality of the world.

The wholeness that Humans are looking for in themselves and in their world is the wholeness of meaning, ultimate meaning, such meaning that ensures that water is not merely water but living water, and bread is not merely bread but holistic bread that feeds the body and nourishes the soul; and a person is not just a body but somebody; and a building is not just a house but a home; and humans are not just individuals but a family; and families are not a clique or a clan but a community; and a community is not just an organization but an organism, the body of the divine mystery as it were.
The search for wholeness does not stop there. What Humans are looking for is creative contribution towards a metanoia, a re-vision of not just Humans but of the whole world. What is needed is involvement that ensures the passing away of the old earth and the old heaven. For the search is for a metanoia of our earth so that it becomes a new earth and for heaven itself so that it becomes a new heaven and for Humans so that they become a new creation.

What is this search for a new heaven and a new earth and a new humanity if not the search for the divine mystery, that is the soul of the world as it were and the home of the Humans? We cannot afford to stick to the old heaven and the old earth and the old Adam and Eve. The new answers are not first going to be articulated in words but in works. The dialogue of religions will first have to be a dialogue of service, about serving the earth and bringing together the whole human family, about meaning in life and the sacramentality of the world and the Sacra-Mentality of the Human.

Religion, Christianity and religious life and the contribution of women religious' creativity to social transformation will do well to keep this horizon before their eyes.

The symbol for interpreting the search for wholeness as the search for the Divine is the irruption of the awareness of women as the search for modes of consciousness that are free of alienation and domination and distortion.

II RELIGIOUS LIFE AS A RESPONSE TO OUR TIMES

A. Religious Life Today

An answer, any answer, to be relevant has to be an answer to a question. Obvious as this may seem, most of the answers that we inherit from our respective traditions are rarely answers because the questions that they are supposed to answer have changed. Hence it is not surprising that many of the traditional answers do not sound very convincing.

If this is true in our everyday life it is not less true of the tradition of religious life. What is the question or questions that religious life is meant to address? To serve GOD more authentically, more faithfully, more exclusively? Can this not be said of married life? In today's understanding of person and personal love can the life blessed by the sacrament of matrimony said to be a less authentic, less faithful, less exclusive service of GOD?

If religious life is to grow it needs a new understanding vis à vis the challenges of our times. For how does a tradition grow if not by meeting contemporary challenges?

A living tradition is something dynamic that responds to real needs; and its growth is proportionate to the number of needs of the times that it responds to. Contrary to general belief, tradition is not a handing down of rules and regulations; rules and regulations constitute customs and ways of going about but an authentic tradition is constituted by a certain spirit, a spirit that inspires us to respond to and
gives courage to meet contemporary challenges. It is impossible to encapsulate such a
spirit in constitutions and control-mechanisms; indeed the opposite is the case, where
constitutions and control-mechanisms are really relevant they are relevant because
they are animated by the spirit of that tradition.

That is the reason why constitutions are amended in the course of time. Traditions have to be kept alive if they are to be relevant to our times but it is the
spirit that keeps a tradition alive. All this is equally true of the tradition of religious
life. The spirit of religious life alone is what keeps genuine religious traditions alive.
And I am suggesting that the essence of spirit of religious life is the spirit of
discernment, the spirit that is able to discern the signs of the times. The task to discern
the signs of the times is a religious task, a task entrusted to religious.

Discerning the Signs of the Times

Discernment is reading the signs of the times. Reading the signs of the times is
not like reading the Times of India. The Times of India reports about happenings, and
perhaps in some cases it analyses the causes and predicts the consequences. It is really
concerned about happenings, and mostly sensational happenings, not those events
which in the last analysis shape and form history. Probably no journalist would have
reported the birth of a child in a God-forsaken stable; simply because most of them
would consider it to be a non-event.

Tradition is spirit at work in history, animating us to take history seriously and
making us respond to its challenges. Reading the signs of the times means discerning
the working of the Spirit in history; it is has to do with salvation history, that is, it has
to do with how God is saving the world. The world is God's world; appearances to
the contrary, God is still in charge of the world because God is always in charge of
the world. And this because God is that Mystery that never abdicates its
responsibility. Hence reading the signs of the times means, discerning how the
Mystery is present in our lives and in our times, and how our foolishness and
sinfulness make us and our world blind to this divine presence.

That is why it is the discerning spirit alone that can indicate what leads us to
God and what takes us away from God. Only such a spirit is in a position to perceive
Humans and their world constantly and continuously on the background of this divine
space.

But is everybody able to read the signs of the times? Can any Tom, Dick and
Hari interpret them? Who can discern the work of the divine Mystery in and around
us?

If we move away from a juridical perspective and look at the issue from a
spiritual viewpoint, a religious is one who is filled with the prophetic spirit, the spirit
of discernment. Can there be another or better qualification than the spirit of
discernment? In the classical tradition discernment boiled down to seeing God in all
things and all things in God. God is that space, to employ an ancient upanishadic
expression, in which all things are born, in which they exist and to which they return.
It is the discerning spirit that is aware of this space that constitutes the warp and woof
of all that exists. It is in this space and in relation to this space that every thing has to
be seen and experienced.

Accordingly I am suggesting that such discernment is of the essence of religious life; only a person imbued with the spirit of discernment is a religious and only such a religious person is capable of reading and responding to the signs of the times. For the discerning spirit alone is sensitive to, conscious of and lives in the presence of the Divine.

But does not such exclusive concentration much on the Divine make religious persons otherworldly, so otherworldly that they tend to forget Humans and their world? That would be so if we were to separate the Divine from Humans and their world but if we consider the Divine to be the final and definitive full-ment of Humans and their world then the objection will not hold water.

The principle and foundation of religious life then is the spirit of discernment. Principle because it is the source, the beginning, the origin of a divine realism which enables one to see things as they really are and not merely as we have made them to be - in the image and likeness of our possessiveness and greed. Foundation because on it every other aspect of religious life could be built. A spirituality, if it is to be genuine and holistic, must of necessity have this foundation. The practice of discernment is the beginning of a chain reaction as it were. It does not stop, indeed cannot stop, after the initial movement; rather it will always keep us on our toes, it will always keep us on the move.

Negatively without this principle and foundation religious life today would be built on the sand of passing fads and personal fancies. With it a religious community would symbolize openness to GOD's world and to all Humans. For the spirit of discernment is a reflection of the spirit of GOD who makes the sun shine over the good and the bad and the rain fall over the just and the unjust.

b. Responding to the Signs of the Times

Accordingly religious communities are communities that professionally discern the signs of the times and also respond to them professionally. No other community is better equipped for this task. Both in terms of calling and of formation religious are those who can best read and respond to the signs of the times. Such religious communities are barometers that indicate the spiritual weather of their times; signposts that show in which direction humankind has to move; mirrors that reflect the spirit of the age, and glasses through which one can see what is going on behind what is happening.

Whether it is in discovering and developing the different aspects of the sacramentality of the world, or deepening or sensitizing the Sacra-Mentality of the Human or re-interpreting the intimations of Divine Presence, it is religious that will give the lead in the diverse initiatives to serve the world, in the innovative movements to remove prejudices, support the weak and the helpless and promote understanding among peoples and countries, and in the efforts to make Humans more alert to the hidden aspects of wholeness.

c. Symbolizing Wholeness
The one quality that could be said to be specifically characteristic of religious communities is their openness expressed in the holistic nature of their approach. For religious communities symbolize wholeness in their understanding of and attitude towards the world, Humans and the Divine Mystery. Their openness towards the world is shown in the hope that motivates them to work for the welfare of all; their openness towards Humans is made manifest in the love that motivates them to promote a sense of community and communion among all peoples; and their openness towards the Divine Mystery is revealed in the faith that motivates them to deepen their search and concern for wholeness.

It such total openness that endows religious with faith, hope and love. Indeed it is depth of their faith, hope and love that gives credibility to their ability to discern with passion but without prejudice, with concern for others but with no calculation for themselves, with clarity but no conceit. The wholeness of their approach makes them locate and identify the seeds of faith, hope and love in different events of our times and cultivate them in such a manner that the search for wholeness becomes more intensive, the commitment to the welfare of all more extensive and the promotion of communion more comprehensive.

B. Religious Life as a Response to the Challenges of our Times

On a background such as the one that we have been exploring there should be no doubt about the response of religious communities to the challenges of our times. As communities specializing in hope, love and faith their commitment will be to a clearer manifestation of the sacramentality of the world, their Sacra-Mentality will always discern emerging symptoms of deepening of communion among Humans, and their concern always be for wholeness in everything and everywhere. Their hope will make them renounce possessiveness and so become open to the whole of creation, their love will strive to break down walls and barriers and cultivate communion between all peoples, and their faith will discern how and where wholeness is to be discovered.

a. Commitment to the World Through Renunciation

The more the instrumentalization of the world decreases through a paradigm that is build on renunciation of possessiveness born of hope that works for the welfare of all, the sacramentality of the World will come into its own. The Sacramentality of the World is not a romantic but a realistic approach to a situation that over a long period of time has come to believe that instrumentalization of the world is inevitable and the only practical way of survival. It is a realistic attitude because it is aware that basically it is the spirit of possessiveness that is ultimately responsible for the world in which instrumentalization is the only way of looking at reality, and that the answer to the spirit of possessiveness is renunciation and hope. If renunciation is a giving up, hope is a looking forward to finding the wholeness of all things.

Religious communities, convinced that greed is at the root of instrumentalizing the world, will renounce possessiveness. At the same time filled with hope, they will work to uncovering the full sacramentality of the world. As environmentalists they will search for wholeness in the waters, in the atmosphere, in the forests, in the earth, in wild life. As artists and poets they will express how
world is charged with the grandeur of GOD. As scientists they will search for the mysteries of the universe in creation, in life, in space and the stars. As realists they will think of food in terms of wholeness, wholesomeness, health, sanity and sanctity. As mystics they will open our eyes:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.³

b. Communion with all Humans Through Love for All

Before it can be cured the fragmentation of the inner core of human beings needs first to be diagnosed and its cause ascertained. As we saw earlier, Humans are fragmented beings because though persons they are taken to be and behave like individuals. Humans are reduced to only an aspect of what they in reality are. As individuals they have their rights and privileges but these instead of helping them to realize their full potential, further deepen their sense of individualism, cutting them off from any real sense of belonging that might be left in them.

This individualism can be cured only when Humans retrieve their originary sense of community. The kind of individualism that is at the root of all fragmentation is founded on a false sense of identity. Humans as basically part of a community have to recover their originary communitarian sense of belonging together. This belonging together is primarily not an emotional affair but an ontological belonging. Our bodies are part of a larger cosmic body and our consciousness is really not an individualistic consciousness but part of a larger community of consciousness. Discovery of the sacramentality of the universe retrieves the sense of belonging to the cosmos and activation of Sacra-Mentality retrieves the sense of belonging to the human family.

For Sacra-Mentality is the light which, on the one hand, dispels the darkness of divisions which obscures the real but complex sense of unity that constitutes a Human. There is the oneness with the cosmos which is community of the body, and there is the unity of consciousness which is community of the spirit. The Human is the meeting-point of these two communities and human love is the outcome of the communion between these two communities which Sacra-Mentality discovers and deepens.

Religious communities whose Sacra-Mentality is actualized to a high degree are concerned about all Humans so that love may be their first beginning and their final fulfillment. These communities set themselves the task of uniting Humans whatever their culture and customs. Being themselves free of all caste, class and creed prejudice they work for unity while respecting diversity. For the religious communities the whole human family is their parish.

The tasks here are obviously enormous: conscientizing all and sundry about the structural inhumanity of our economic, political, social and religious systems, about the causes and consequences of war and the universal and urgent need to train for peace, about the beauty of the body and the sacredness of marriage, about the effects of patriarchy, about equal opportunities for all, especially the marginalized
and the handicapped, about the evils of caste and the grace of being a member of the human family, etc., etc. The prophetic spirit exercises a social critique, as for instance, our Sant Tukaram did in his own inimitable way.4

He who refuses to touch a chandal
Has a polluted mind.
Says Tuka, a man is only as chaste
As his own belief.

c. Search for the Divine Through Concern for Wholeness

History is not only a good judge but also a good teacher. It is a good judge because though it takes its own time to sort out things it shows no sense of urgency; it can therefore identify all the more easily the really important factors at work in history. But this is not the only reason why it is a good teacher. From the historical process we come to know, for example, the burdens imposed on our language. This can be a great help in our effort to interpret the Gospel-message meaningfully. Language which is a living reality is a bearer of life and its experiences. Life and its experiences clamour to be understood anew and afresh by each generation. It is here that religious communities can contribute in interpreting them relevantly for their times, knowing full well that the language of scientific formulae is not the best way of understanding human language.

Today's concern for wholeness is a search for meaning, for ultimate meaning, for Paramâtârtha (parama artha), as the Indian traditions call it. It is in fact the ever ancient but ever new search for the Divine.

Religious communities are called to identify accurately this search in all spheres of life so that it is understood properly, taken seriously and followed faithfully. That this task has to be continually accomplished is seen from the fact that traditional religion is losing its hold among thinking people, that it is being exploited for non-religious purposes, that the cult of violence is being proposed as the solution to human problems, that even among people religiously inclined vital practices like prayer, meditation, ritual, etc., far from being properly understood or appreciated are being steadily neglected and forgotten.

Religious communities are called upon to learn and teach spiritualities and spiritual exercises, Yogas and forms of prayer that are meaningful in today's world of widespread automation, worldwide pollution and deepening loneliness. Pious but mechanical repetition of traditional prayers and formulae will be no great help in these matters. What is required is an on-going process of re-interpretation of tradition and traditional values, a re-interpretation that emerges from people who free from vested interests are concerned about a new vision of wholeness.

III CONCLUSION

The crisis of religious life is in fact not a crisis of religious life. It is a crisis of our understanding of religious life. It is a crisis of pouring new wine in old wine
skins.

If our reflections have any relevance then it is this: there is need of a re-vision of religious life. This re-vision implies moving away from individualistic navel-gazing to discerning the problems of our times, away from alienating attitudes to liberating life-styles, away from moralizing, sermonizing and psychologizing to promoting world-wide understanding and communion.

The prior question therefore is not what we do or should do but why we do or should do what we do or should do. In that case the why will critique the what and also determine the how. Religious have a creative role to play and not just in social transformation; social transformation is only one aspect of the overall transformation that the new millennium will hope for. A for Ayodhya and B for Bosnia are stark reminders of a revolution that is fast changing the social, economic, political and religious alphabet.

Our reflections were meant to put forward the plea that the time for religious life is not over that religious life has not outlived its role. On the contrary it has not lived up to its role: the role of a discerning community that realizes that the world is a sacrament, that life is a liturgy, and that all Humans are priests ordained by Sacramentality to discern all things in the Divine and the Divine in all things.

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2 Ibid. pp. 18-19. "The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption."

And on p. 20: "This also implies that women cannot simply reverse the sin of sexism. Women cannot simply scapegoat males for historical evil in a way that makes themselves only innocent
victims. Women cannot affirm themselves as imago dei and subjects of full human potential in a way that diminishes male humanity. Women, as the denigrated half of the human species, must reach for a continually expanding definition of inclusive humanity - inclusive of both genders, inclusive of all social groups and races. Any principle of religion or society that marginalizes one group of persons as less than fully human diminishes us all. In rejecting androcentrism (males as norms of humanity), women must also criticize all other forms of chauvinism: making white Westerners the norm of humanity, making Christians the norm of humanity, making privileged classes the norm of humanity. Women must also criticize humanocentrism, that is, making humans the norm and crown of creation in a way that diminishes the other beings in the community of creation. This is not a question of sameness but of recognition of value, which at the same time affirms genuine variety and particularity. It reaches for a new mode of relationship, neither a hierarchical model that diminishes the potential of the "other" nor an "equality" defined by a ruling norm drawn from the dominant group; rather a mutuality that allows us to affirm different ways of being."

3 William Blake, Auguries of Innocence.