

**SREE NARAYANA GURU'S VISION OF LIBERATIVE
RELIGIOSITY: A POST-SECULAR AND POST-
RELIGION MODEL¹**

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Sree Narayana Guru's vision is slowly becoming acknowledged as comparable to those of Ambedkar and Gandhi, Aurobindo and Vivekananda. The present article is an attempt to follow up my two earlier articles on the Guru. Here I would like to argue that Sree Narayana Guru's vision anticipates the contemporary rethinking of the role of religion within Indian society. Religion has been perceived either as a weapon of oppression or as a means of social protest. The tradition we are dealing with seems to favour neither of the above.

After scouting the contemporary post-religious and post-secular scenario, we shall outline the redimensioning of religion accomplished by Narayana Guru, taking the cue from his immediate disciple, Dr Natarajan alias Nataraja Guru.

The last two decades have seen significant changes in the assessment of the role of religion and especially of its stranglehold on peoples. The colonial reading sought to root classical Indian culture mainly in the Upanishadic-Vedantic philosophy. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century revivalism in Hinduism confirmed the role of religion as reinventing a people and their culture. The last decades of the twentieth century saw cultural homogenization proposed as the point of unification of the subcontinent. The goal of establishing a religio-cultural nationalism is a quite steady feature of the socio-political agenda of our times. While modernity and the ideals of the Enlightenment have played their part in the construction of the modern Hindu identity, there is from the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century an alternative move to deconstruct the traditional and classical conceptions of religion. The Dalit, Tribal and Feminist critiques are along this line.

On the global scene, ever since the dawn of the Enlightenment on European shores, there has been a growing bias:

that of giving prominence to one's own shore as the only one on the globe. The histories of colonialism, slave trade, propagandist religion, market economy and globalization encapsulate the bias of 'universalism' as an ideology that claims the universe for a few millions on one part of the globe. Since the dawn of the twentieth century, however, this myth has been dismantled in slow and measured steps. On the Indian scene, the rise of fundamentalism and the depreciation of secularism open up the need for rethinking the erstwhile cultural primacy of religious pluralism. Does post-secular religiousness call for a shift in understanding of pluralism as 'a state of mutual exclusion minus conflict' to 'the convergence of the fundamentals of different faiths,' though variously expressed? Or does it mean 'that every religion requires the other, for no religion has a monopoly over the whole truth'? The present article intends to trace how the Sree Narayana Guru tradition deals with the issue without getting bogged down in either the 'superiority-inferiority' debate or the 'all are equally true' proposition.

In order to unveil the emerging contemporary consciousness of religiosity, Liberation Theology is taken as a dialogue partner. The dialogue is therefore between the redimensioned religiosity of Guru Vision and the liberative religiosity of Liberation Theology. This dialogue will focus neither on the details of liberative action nor on its structures and methods, but rather on the nature of 'involvement' grasped by concentrating on the respective visions as spiritualities. This choice is born out of the conviction that the pre-eminent field of transformation is the level of attitudes, affections and feelings. There is, in other words, a privileging of experience and mythos over thought and logos.

1. Post-Religion Religiosity: Sree Narayana Guru's Vision

Applying the insights of Sree Narayana Guru's vision to 'religion,' Nataraja Guru maintains that a new interpretation² of religiosity³ is possible. The insights emerging from this reinterpretation are threefold. We shall first enumerate and then explain the implications: firstly, religion is of the realm of faith, both subjectively (for one person) and objectively (for a group). The

ordinary notion of 'faith' as a part of religion is reversed, and religion is considered as part of 'faith.' Faith is fundamental to being human.⁴ It is the intrinsic character of the self as related to the Absolute. It is another name for this relatedness.⁵ In a non-dual perception of reality, 'being human' involves faith. Faith is the realization of one's relatedness to the Absolute — the totality of reality.⁶

Secondly, religion as faith is sustained in and through 'myths and symbols.'⁷ Myth is to be regarded not as something fictitious, but as a 'non-definable,' 'non-rational' horizon of understanding. The 'symbol' is not something that points to or signifies something outside of itself, but rather the very symbolization of the reality.⁸ 'Myth' and 'symbol' are mediations of reality, of the Absolute.⁹ They are the area or field of communion of the Self with the Absolute, because they reveal and conceal the Absolute.¹⁰ All worship and genuine ritual have their place within this background of the symbolic character of the Absolute. Reality defies total explanation and transparency; it has dimensions that go beyond consciousness and logos.

Thirdly, any action that is rooted in the Absolute is a sacrificial action. It is sacrificial by being generative or creative. A holistic action is a sacrificial action. It is an action that is performed with the welfare of the totality taken into consideration. This concern for the welfare of all is revealed in the search for the happiness of all. Sree Narayana Guru, in his *Atmopadesasatakam*, clarifies the fundamental link between the 'one' and the 'All' in this way:

What is dear to me, what is dear to you and what is dear to another;

What is dear to oneself, do realize to be dear to another too.
(v.21)

To other man's interest, that is even mine; what to oneself
Is beneficial is so for the other man also; such is the course of
Discreet conduct. All acts aiming at each man's Self-happiness
Must spell at once the happiness of the fellow-man. (v.22)

For the sake of fellow-man, unceasing, day and night,
Unstinting strives a kindly man. (v.23)

What here we view as this man or that,
 Reflection reveals to be the Self's prime form;
 That conduct adopted for one's Self-happiness,
 Another's happiness must also secure at once. (v.24)

What spells benefit to one, while to another disaster brings,
 Such conduct is one that violates the Self; beware! (v.25)¹¹

The texture of this new religiosity is identifiable firstly, in the position of faith as a common denominator for all traditions/religions and belief systems; secondly, in the way the new religiosity of the post-religious/secular era stands for and manifests a human attitude, a rediscovery of the Human in humankind; and thirdly, in the fact that authentic religiosity is not far removed from either genuine culture or welfare-oriented politics.

1.1 Faith—A Common Denominator

Faith is common to all religions, and as such is a potential unifying factor. Besides, every religion has 'some sort of satisfaction or happiness'¹² as an implicit goal; this happiness is another source of unity or else a meeting point between religions. Faith and happiness are internal dimensions of religion. When they become codified in a network of social relationships, there emerge common beliefs and patterns of behaviour, giving shape to the 'sociological, sacramental and doctrinal'¹³ dimensions of religion.

These latter constitute the horizontal aspect of religion, whereas the former, 'faith and happiness,' constitute the vertical aspect. The perception of a common religiosity in and through faith and happiness sustains the hope of an ever-widening form of 'new religiosity.' "Viewed in this light, humanity can belong to only one religion, which is that of Absolute happiness through an absolutist way of life."¹⁴

The absolutist's way of life is reminiscent of the appropriation of human agency and the concurrent freedoms. It is the realisation of the fact that the human being is on a pilgrimage to the centre—one's own centre and that of reality. If belief is belief, the tenets of

belief manifest a certain impenetrability. The fundamental human dimension of faith is reflected in this inability to convert belief into knowledge. The human being faces the project of life as an open-ended uncircumscribed series of interventions. This is applicable whether one is theist or atheist, fundamentalist or secularist. In short, it is a post-religious and post-secular attitude.

1.2 Religion—A Human Attitude

Religion, as understood in the above sense, is a human attitude. It is the attitude of the human being to the ultimate. It is a result of the realization that the human is an integral component of the real, Being.¹⁵ It is a realization that the be-ing of the human is a be-ing of the totality of reality, that the human possesses reality by creating, sustaining and destroying reality. The manner of living flowing from such an awareness is religion.

Faith is the owning up of the responsibility of the total-knowledge-situation (*aham-arivu*).¹⁶ The appropriation of *Sat-cit-amrdam*, within oneself, enables a manner of living that is liberative, holistic and integral. We quote the last two verses of *Atmopadesasatakam*:

Knowledge and I-consciousness—both are one to him for whom the veil is removed; to another there is doubt; if knowledge, having separated from “I”, can become another, there is no one here to know knowledge. (v.99) Neither that, nor this, nor the meaning of existence am I, but existence, consciousness, joy immortal; thus attaining clarity, emboldened, discarding attachment to being and non-being, one should gently, gently merge in Sat-Aum.”(v.100)¹⁷

Religion, which is a human attitude, is an attitude of ‘freedom.’ ‘Freedom’ here symbolises a new way of being religious, or, better, the most authentic way of being ‘religious.’ Religion as an attitude of freedom is choiceful, decisive, conscientious living. Freedom is thus a sacred attitude. Religion as a human attitude of freedom, or a religiosity resulting from freedom, cannot be regarded as the only religion, because that would amount to negating the

need for and validity of all other religions. Such a stand would make this new religiosity ‘another religion’ just like the ones already existing.¹⁸ The search for the core of all religions does not end up by promoting another religion; it emerges into a post-religious religiosity.

The genuine ‘One religion’ of religiosity as human attitude is a discovery of the essence of any and all religion as freedom. Therefore, it is neither a running away from existing religions nor the creation of a new religion. True religion is the recognition of the immediacy of the free act. It brings a radical meaningfulness and responsibility to the performance of action, making activity sacred. Any action performed with the awareness of its sacredness becomes a religious action *par excellence*.¹⁹ Any authentic ‘free’ act, therefore, becomes liberative action, a way to liberation, a way of salvation.²⁰ It is the way of realizing the ‘ideal’ of ‘One religion’ for human beings.

1.3 Religion—Cultural and Political Welfare

The revaluation of the *mahavakya* of Narayana Guru, “One in Caste, one in Religion and one in God is humankind” leads us to note two distinctive features in the way ‘religion’ can be understood. These further clarify the relationship of religion to culture and politics. This in a way is a reading into the text, an interpretation, which we think legitimate in the light of what we have argued thus far.

As we have been saying, religion, for Narayana Guru, is the ‘inner search,’ an act of ‘freedom’²¹ that sets each individual on the path of salvation, of *atmasukham*. Since the desire and search for *atmasukham* or spiritual happiness is common to all, ‘religion’ can be conceived as a fundamental human attitude. But we can go further and consider the common welfare that the ‘one religion’ urges each participant and follower to pursue. This is the first distinctive feature in the way religion can be understood.

The second feature consists in the fact that, whether one talks of God (*Daivam*), Caste (*Jati*) or Religion (*Matham*), it is done always in relation to the human being.²² The primacy of the human being calls for the dictum, “One in Caste, one in Religion

and one in God is humankind.” It captures an insight that there is a ‘Oneness’ within and surrounding the human being — whether it is in relation to the Divine (God), or in terms of the Human community (religion) manifested in the world of ethnicity, language and caste (*jati*, species²³). The ‘Oneness’ of the human community is a symbol of the oneness of the divine and cosmic dimensions of the real. The human community in its “collective communitarian, inter-relational domain,”²⁴ is symbolized by ‘religion.’

Religion (*matham*),²⁵ as the human realm, is a symbol of reality, the Absolute. Within it, whatever enhances and constitutes relationality and interdependency are part of and related to ‘religion’ (*matham*). It is here that culture and politics get intermingled with religion or become non-dually related to religion. Culture and religion mutually support, construct and enhance each other. Development or growth in religion affects culture as much as cultural changes affect religion. The history of religions and evolution of cultures are ample proof of this mutual interpenetration.

Similarly, religion and politics have a nuanced, non-dual relation. Religions and politics both aim at the human community’s welfare. They are one in their goal but different in the means employed, though even here there is a mutual critique. The relationship of religion and politics is evident from the histories of state and ‘Church’ or ‘religious hierarchy’ in all the cultures. A total merger of religion and politics results in theocracy; a total separation results in the secular state and private religion. The goal of human welfare (salvation, liberation, *moksa*) is a concern not only of religion but also of politics, and the means used to arrive at the goal are the concern not only of politics but also of religion.²⁶

We could continue in this manner with our description of the interrelationality of the spheres within human community: not only are culture and politics related, but also other realms such as economics. However, the point we are making is that religion is a symbol of the interrelativity within the human community.

To summarise, religion (*matham*) can mean two things: first, the inner search or path of freedom which is an individual and personal dimension; and second, religion as the collective search

for human happiness. The two, though distinct, are not unconnected. The former has received attention as spirituality, whereas the latter is regarded as the institutional, external and politicised face of religion, where religion is perceived as a 'function' of or within culture. The direction of post-religious religiosity and post-secular secularity lies in the former perspective.

But what motivated the emergence of the new religiosity outlined above? The answer is the socio-historical context in which Narayana Guru lived. In Narayana Guru, the liberative potential of genuine religiosity breaks through the shackles of the stratified and insitutionalized religion of the time. The plight of the human being, bogged down in the mire of lethargy, negativity and blind forces of tradition, goaded Narayana Guru to action on a war footing. He identified the decadence of religion as one of the causes of decadence in society. He rejected what was practiced in the name of religion and set the foundation for a new religiosity superceding the boundaries of existing religions. He thereby provided the tools of empowerment to a people shattered by tradition and by their past.

The massive conscientization among a people and the organizations and structures that were set up continue to echo the message of 'freedom' and 'power.' Narayana Guru succeeded in relating the spiritual to the material, the self to the other, oneself to one's neighbour. His vision unleashed a hidden power of renewal from within Indian society. He has broken the chains that shackle tradition from being able to respond creatively to the needs of the time.

Nataraja Guru, one among many prominent immediate disciples, carried forward the legacy of Narayana Guru by working to overcome the divide between the sciences, philosophy and religion. Nataraja Guru anticipated, in his own way, the postmodernist critique of modernity, and carried out a diatribe against the exaggerations of a logos-centric, rationality-dominated Western civilization. Immersing himself within the Western tradition, he recovered a lost wisdom tradition and re-emerged with power. Further, he pointed out to the modern wo/man a path towards the ever-elusive goal of 'One World.'

2. Post-Secular Secularity: Liberationist Utopia

We shall now look at the manner in which liberationists within the Christian fold envisaged the movement towards a just world.

The history of religions reveals recurrent efforts to redimension religion in order to make it serve its purpose. Whenever religions became blunted in their ability to achieve their goal, there has been a reevaluation or redimensioning.²⁷ We have been tracing the contours of one such process in the attempts of Narayana Guru and the tradition that he began. In order to accentuate its contribution, we now place it alongside a similar re-dimensioning within the Christian religion, the one introduced by Liberation Theology.²⁸

Liberation Theology is at the forefront of contemporary Christian consciousness.²⁹ This new consciousness is a direct response to the contexts in which it arose. After World War II, there was a euphoric expectation of a united and reconstructed world. It was a period of hope, as colonialism gave way to new nations, and as the United Nations took up the responsibility of monitoring the welfare of peoples across the world. Despite developmentalism, however, this hope was belied. By the middle of the 1960s, the structural nature of the evil behind the perpetuation of poverty and injustice was exposed.³⁰ The hidden agenda of 'neocolonialism' came to light.

The Christian response in the third world to this situation of oppression and injustice came to be known as Liberation Theology. A Marxian critique of society along with sociology of knowledge³¹ created a new awareness about the material, physical, this-worldly nature of the liberation promised by Christ and the need to work for the same. Liberation Theology emerged as a cry from within the 'Basic Christian Communities'³² in their struggle for freedom from their oppressors. The motivating ideology and the spirit of resistance came to be known as Liberation Spirituality.³³

The reliance on Marxian principles and analysis by Christian groups and movements came under attack. The liberative efforts within Christian countries of the third world were either quelled peacefully or put down violently.³⁴ The oppressive local regimes

were often in collusion with the megapowers. An ideological resistance manifested itself in the domination by other Christian countries with their traditional and Eurocentric conception of Christianity.

The challenge thrown up by liberationists was thus cultural and economic as well as political and religious at the same time. It was a demand for freedom for and by people at the periphery. It was a call to face poverty as a human and social evil rather than as something having purely financial dimensions. Without entering into details (the movement is profusely documented and the literature is still growing³⁵), suffice it to say that there is in the world an unjust structure working for the benefit of a few to the disadvantage — to the extent of death and decimation — of the majority. The Christian response in such situations of outright injustice cannot but be one of resistance to the oppressive forces, because God is on the side of the poor as Jesus and the Bible consistently reveal.

Though this is ordinarily associated with the countries of Latin America where the Christian population is sizable, the movement has had almost simultaneous expressions in other parts of the third world as well.³⁶ It has many forms like feminist liberation, black liberation, Dalit liberation³⁷ and Asian liberation.³⁸ Our intention is to highlight the break with the traditional conception of religiosity brought about by liberationist religion within Christianity. We shall do so by commenting on four aspects: a new conception of salvation, the primacy of the poor in the interpretation of the Word of God, the emphasis on the context, and the newness of spirituality. Our exposition shall be followed by a cross-cultural comparison between the spirituality of liberation and the spirituality of Narayana Guru.

2.1 From Salvation to Liberation

One could read the developments within Christianity down the centuries as efforts to make religion contemporary. The Reformation, the emergence of the scientific spirit, modernity and the openness to the world promoted by Vatican II are all manifestations of efforts within Christianity to update itself. The

new liberationist perspective is better understood against the background of a shift in the worldview of the Christian from pre-modern to modern times.³⁹

The traditional worldview had two prominent tenets: first, it was a vertically layered cosmology in which heaven was up above, earth below, and hell underneath. Salvation consisted in the effort to escape from the clutches of evil by having recourse to asceticism and rigorous moral life. It consisted in the acquisition of heaven in the afterlife. It was a move away from the revision brought by Jesus, and a return to more traditional Judaistic and Hellenistic conceptions.⁴⁰ This process was aggravated when Christianity became the state religion. The second tenet, related to the *fuga mundi* (flee the world) mentality, was the diffidence about worldly affairs and history.

The modern conception of liberation, in contrast, involves a radical change of worldview.⁴¹ History, which was merely a stage on which the drama of salvation was played out, came to be understood as the result of human engagement in the world bringing about growth, change and development. In the new evolutionary perspective, the history of salvation moved parallel to the progress of history towards its end. The interaction of sacred and profane history sanctified the historical and made it a potential collaborator in the attainment of salvation. Salvation was attained at the end of the individual or collective journey of life.

The newness brought about by liberation theology consists in its radically different way of understanding 'salvation.' In the traditional Christian perspective, salvation was largely otherworldly and spiritual. For liberationists, salvation consists precisely in being liberated from the clutches of oppression and material poverty.⁴² Salvation as liberation is the new understanding of religiosity, though we must confess that this was not altogether absent in earlier ages.⁴³

2.2 The Primacy of the Poor

Liberationists bring about a revision in the understanding of religion by going back to the roots of religiosity and the God-Man relationship found in the Bible⁴⁴ and in the life of Jesus of

Nazareth.⁴⁵ An unmasked stand for the poor is rediscovered in the Bible. God's word as addressed to the poor and the poor as the best interpreters of God's word is stressed by the liberationists.⁴⁶ Jesus preached a Kingdom of God where there would be justice. The followers of Jesus have to preach this Kingdom of God rather than a masked Jesus relevant only in an abstruse 'faith-world'.

The option for the poor means 'doing' more than 'rationalizing,' praxis more than theorizing.⁴⁷ While the traditional religion stressed orthodoxy as a criterion of belonging to the Church, liberationists introduce the criterion of orthopraxis (transformative action). They reverse the idealistic conception that changing of consciousness would bring about change in reality, that changes in theory would result in changes in practice. Therefore transformative involvement, specific and target-oriented action with and for the poor, gets the primacy. All theorizing (including theology) is a second moment, following upon the first moment of committed action. It is an affirmation of the thesis that life determines thought, that ideas emerge from praxis.⁴⁸

The option for the poor, then, is a new way of understanding reality. It also provides a new measuring rod for the assessment of historical reality. The awareness about the exploited situation of the poor, with local, regional, national, and international ramifications, generates and sustains this critique.⁴⁹ Changes in the structures of politics, economics and religion are called for, and genuine discipleship consists in working for the same.⁵⁰ Whatever maintains the *status quo* in an unjust situation is decried as supportive of an exploitative structure.

Liberation Theology is a critique of traditional religion and an effort to redimension religion as a liberative force. It is an effort to extricate religion from its connivance with powers of oppression. The salvation offered by liberationist religion is thus liberation from the oppressive forces in the here and now. *Moksa* or salvation is not away from and beyond the historical but within the historical. There is but one history, the history of salvation, and salvation means being liberated within history.

2.3 Contextuality

Contextuality is the third feature of liberationist perception of religion. It refers to a distancing from the universalistic tendencies of traditional religion. The reaction to universalism is an outcome of the historical awareness that particular ideologies emerge in particular contexts but are often superimposed on other contexts.⁵¹ It is a consequence of the insight into the relation between ideology (theory) and praxis, especially of the discovery that massive poverty in third world countries is directly related to the increasing affluence of fewer and fewer people in the first world. The critique of the ideology that perpetuates unjust structures in the world also raises questions about the support systems of such an ideology.⁵²

The universalist concept of truth and the assumption about the developmental mission of civilizing peoples were exposed as ploys to perpetuate an unjust world order.⁵³ The awareness arose that the manner of practising religion or living the faith should no longer be imported from outside the context; they should be discovered within the diversity of the context itself.⁵⁴ Liberationists oppose universalism and uphold the intrinsic contextuality of living religiously. True universality or catholicity ought to be an indirect outcome of many 'contexts' co-existing in mutual interaction and dialogue.

The liberationist redimensioning of religion is a radical questioning of the role played by religion in the maintenance of an unjust world order.⁵⁵ Liberationists stress the need to discover religiosity by confronting the forces of oppression and working for integral liberation.⁵⁶

The meaningfulness of the Christian presence in India consists in joining the forces of liberation to bring about and keep alive the hope of a reign of God. The forces of liberation are to be organized, supported and sustained. The weak and the oppressed of today's India are the Dalits, the tribals and women. All efforts to defend, protect and promote the cause of these groups are works of liberation. One cannot perceive any other religiosity as being meaningful in situations of oppression, poverty and misery. Only an action that is a direct involvement in lessening the burden and reducing

the misery can be ‘religious,’ ‘liberative,’ ‘salvific.’

2.4 The New Liberative Spirituality

Surprisingly, Liberation Spirituality is traditional, in the sense that it discovers the very authenticity of Christ in his own context, as revealed in the Gospels. Liberation Spirituality “is purely and simply the actualisation of the spirit of Jesus in our own times.”⁵⁷ Yet, Liberation Theology and Spirituality are not only considered new, but also viewed suspiciously. We mention five reasons.

First, Liberation Theology and Spirituality indicate a shift away from a Eurocentric Christianity. They sprouted as convictions from the experience of the ‘Basic Christian Communities’ and presented themselves as alternatives to an otherwise idealised model of Europeanized Christianity.⁵⁸

Second, there is the discovery of the historical dimension of reality as the arena for working out one’s salvation. Salvation consists in toiling in the here and now to liberate particular contexts of poverty and oppression. It means a transposition of the ‘spiritual’ and ‘material’ realms.⁵⁹

Third, Liberation Theology and Spirituality have a welcoming attitude towards the social sciences and developments in the study of society, politics, and economics; these are regarded as pertinent to the way Christian life is to be lived and holiness sought. Spirituality is related to politics, and there is something called a ‘political holiness.’⁶⁰

Fourth, while traditional spirituality flourished in a minority status, the new spirituality is open-ended. Earlier, spirituality was considered “to be of a select group, the religious, the privileged, the called, the baptized.”⁶¹ In contrast, the call to socio-political involvement is an imperative for all within the context of oppression. Consequently, the spirituality that sustains and nurtures such involvement is for all in the struggle.

Fifth, while traditional spirituality is individualistic in tenor, liberation spirituality is communitarian. Earlier, spirituality was a matter between oneself and one’s God, and, spiritual life was called the ‘interior life,’ lived exclusively by the individual. In contrast,

liberation spirituality comes as a surprise with its claim that 'the poor' are not individuals, but are a group.⁶² The poor are those at the fringes of society; their number increases by the hour; they are usually considered expendable, although they are a community of persons.⁶³ Liberative action is collective action, it is action for justice in the here and now, in and through which the communitarian spiritual journey is accomplished.⁶⁴

The source and summit of this new spiritual awakening are the poor of the world — the poor not as mere numbers on a statistical table, but as the suffering, starving, deprived, humiliated, downtrodden, trampled upon masses of the earth. The poor are the increasing half of humankind, reduced to 'non-persons' by the increasing affluence of the super-rich. In the race for one-up-manship and control over the global market, increasing populations are nothing but waste, non-marketable refuse, scum of the earth.

The decreasing space for the increasing number of poor of the world is the battle-field (*karma-bhumi*) of God. The battle is on, and one has to take sides: either for God with the poor, or against God with the marauders. The very commitment to be with the poor is the beginning of a spiritual journey. The choice, if consistently and persistently held on to, becomes a radical choice. Its radicality will make one (the poor) scale the summit of sacrificing oneself in martyrdom. Choice for the poor, then, is an offering of life, which becomes the real liturgy of life. The discovery of Christ can only be in, among, and with the poor of the world; in their suffering and amidst their oppressions. Being urged, induced, forced or led to act for their liberation, one hits the source and anchors at the summit of the spirituality of liberation.⁶⁵

Gutierrez wrote a book on liberation spirituality and poignantly entitled it, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*.⁶⁶ The 'well' Gutierrez speaks of is suggestive of the tears and blood of all the poor of the world. Commenting on it, Sobrino says it is "a 'well' filled with the water of life (*Jn* 4:10), filled with the faith, the hope, the love (*1Cor* 13:13), the dedication and joy and often enough, the tears and the blood of Christians who have committed themselves to the liberation of their own poverty stricken peoples."⁶⁷ We could add that it contains all the sweat and shrunken skins of the millions who toil the land and

crowd the slums in the emaciated cities of the world.

Gutierrez, who challenged the Christian conscience to a new consciousness with his book *A Theology of Liberation*, demonstrates *the impossibility of there being any spirituality without liberation*.⁶⁸ He shares his intuition about “*the impossibility of total liberation, without a spirituality*, in as much as spirituality endows liberation with a new dimension.”⁶⁹ In the first work, he argued that “only if one is interested (wholeheartedly, all-out) in the poor, one can be spiritual.” In the second, the proposition is that “if the poor are to be liberated, one has to invest oneself or commit oneself, and that *will be* only if one is spiritual.”⁷⁰ Sobrino refers to this new dimension as “*liberation with spirit*,”⁷¹ or as the free surrender to the dictates of the Spirit, in the work for liberation. In other words, he says, “It is not only doing what Jesus did, but doing it with his ‘spirit.’”⁷²

Aloysius Pieris compares the new spiritual awareness among the Christians with the traditional (pre-Vatican) outlook, and pinpoints three characteristics: first, spirituality gets a new content, and that is, liberative action, which in turn is true liturgy. “In the rise of the Basic communities... one begins to observe mutual enveloping of ‘liturgy,’ spirituality and secular action.”⁷³ Secondly, the ‘contemplation and action’ of traditional spirituality gets redefined by Liberation Spirituality. Thirdly, liberationists discovered anew the humanity of Jesus. In the words of Pieris, “the new emphasis on the humanity of Christ comes from the praxis of the Basic Communities,” and, while a theology that was non-liberational or traditional “loved to produce ‘devotions,’ a Liberation Theology stimulates ‘commitments’ to Jesus who is God-become-our-neighbour.”⁷⁴

Spirituality is openness to the whole of reality. A subject experiences the openness. It is an acknowledgement of the subject as related to the totality. The spirit of the subject in quest is what provides or creates spirituality.⁷⁵ This openness to the whole of reality discloses the historical dimension of reality, including its warts: the process by which people are subjugated and exploited by people. The subject undergoes the experience of wanting to move towards wholeness, from being in a context of exploitation to attaining a

utopia, the reign of God. This 'movement,' 'journey' or 'walking with the spirit' is spirituality and it has certain conditions.⁷⁶

Firstly, it implies a precedence of the whole over the parts. This is precisely the recognition that the historically limited and constrained 'here and now' quest of a people for liberation is related to the hope for the 'reign of God.'

Secondly, it implies a transcendence or overcoming of the dichotomy between the spiritual and the material or the historical. The subject who is open to the whole of reality encounters the transcendent and the spiritual through involvement in the historical and the here and now. The spiritual is in and through the material, and not over and above it.

Thirdly, spirituality is always in the making, in the becoming; it is never done with or completed. Therefore, it is 'processual.'⁷⁷ Spirituality is being on 'journey', on the 'way' or path (as with the mystics). Theorization of what spirituality is comes as a consequence of having walked the path and not as any futuristic prediction.

Fourthly, the subject is (unlike in older or earlier spiritualities) the people, the collective, group of the oppressed in search for liberation. Spirituality, therefore, cannot be individualistic.⁷⁸

3. The Non-Duality of the Post-Secular Post-Religiosity Models

In our third and final part we shall attempt to do three things. First, we will establish that the vision of Narayana Guru is a Spirituality of Liberation in the Indian context. Second, we will draw certain parallels to the Christian liberation spiritualities of the third world. Third, we will propose the birth of a post-secular religiosity in the meeting of 'religiosity' and 'poverty,' as exemplified in Indian Liberation Theology and in the approach of Narayana Guru. Our intention is to note that any genuine solution to the Indian (world) problems of cultural/religious pluralism and economic/social disparities calls for a meeting point, and that such a meeting point is available in the work of Narayana Guru.

The Indian word for 'liberation' is *Moksa*, understood ordinarily as something personal, individual and spiritual. In Narayana

Guru, instead, we consistently find two points: first, he was a social activist who worked for the upliftment of a people who were dispossessed economically, socially and culturally; second, he was a philo-sopher (lover of wisdom), religious thinker and spiritual person. In contrast to the traditional separation of social activism and spirituality, especially in the Indian wisdom heritage, the meeting of the practical and theoretical, of spirit and matter in the vision of Narayana Guru mark him out as an *a-dvaitin* with a difference.

Narayana Guru was an *a-dvaitin* (without denying other strands in his vision). The man and his accomplishments reveal the spiritual depth of his understanding of reality, of God-World-Man. His involvement in the socio-political context of his day marks him without any doubt as a ‘liberationist’ of the socio-political order. The manner in which he combined these two dimensions is what makes ‘his way,’ a genuine Indian liberationist-spirituality. We shall now look into its content.⁷⁹

3.1 Non-Dual Spirituality

Narayana Guru’s vision is his spirituality. His vision is summarized in the phrase “One Caste, One Religion, One God, for the Human being.” It is at once a statement on God (as human conception of Divine); on the World (as sum total of all the *species* in it); and on the Human (as community, as network of relationships sustained by *religions*). The vision is non-dual in the sense that it is ‘cosmotheandric’ and ‘trinitarian.’ Reality is what it is primarily as constructed by the human component of its tri-dimensionality. The integral welfare of the human is primary and ultimate. Narayana Guru’s vision of integral liberation is clearly centered on the human being.

The dictum “One Caste, One Religion, One God for the Human being” is a vision and a programme of action for humankind. The human being is the centre and the goal of this vision. ‘Reality’ is what human beings make of it.⁸⁰ The human being’s conception of others of the same species is concerned with maintaining the World for total human welfare. It promotes a mutual, non-greed based relationship. Further, one’s relationship with fellow beings is

what lies at the root of religions. Religions, in other words help sum up the socio-political and cultural ordering of any society at any given time. It is in this ideational sense that the Indian reference to religion as *Dharma* is to be seen. *Dharma* is not just one aspect of social existence, but rather the sum total of relationships.⁸¹

The threefold stress on 'Oneness' in the dictum reveals a spirituality of non-duality. Firstly, in the efforts to preserve the integral order of the Cosmos, human investment cannot but be singular or 'One,' a question of preserving the one geo-ecosystem. Secondly, no human being can be excluded from the inner search and freedom that nurture relationships paving the way for 'One' religion. Thirdly, the human being's perception of the Divine is a consequence of the integral, interrelated, interdependent character and being of reality. In other words, perceiving the 'real' nature of the world and of religion, the human being (Wo/man) will have to acknowledge God, the Divine, as 'One.'

Therefore the above vision, when considered as a project to appropriate 'Oneness,' reveals a new dimension of religiosity as secularity. In other words, the 'Oneness' perceived in the human being's openness to reality is a post-secular vision. The vision, in the process of being appropriated by the human being, is a spirituality that can be characterised as post-religious. The post-religious religiosity or spirituality is the vision of a post-secular secularity.

What bearing did this integral vision and its method (spirituality) have on the socio-political liberation of a caste-ridden society? How does Narayana Guru's vision and method differ from the revolutionary (Marxian), Ambedkarian (Dalit) or Gandhian (Pacifist) styles? How far was his liberative praxis different from a mere compliance with the Sanskritization process? In answer to these queries we shall look into the mystical component of his liberative praxis, placing it side by side with the mystical component of liberation spirituality.

3.2 The Open Secret

If we were to sum up the reinterpretation of Guru Vision by Nataraja Guru, it would be to say that the writings and activities

of Narayana Guru had a fourfold import: “pragmatic, philosophical, mythological and mystical.”⁸² These fourfold implications could be related to the quaternary as follows: the pragmatic and philosophical vertically, and the mythological and mystical horizontally. A fourfold interpretation of Narayana Guru’s life and activities is possible because of the ‘Absolute-neutral-stand’ from which he functioned. He was a *Jivanmukta*, a ‘liberated self’ acting dispassionately,⁸³ but fully conscious and aware of the relative realm of day to day existence. It is such a standpoint, and action therefrom, that makes us speak of the mystical tenor of his liberative spirituality.

What we mean by the ‘mystical’ in Narayana Guru is his ability to overcome or transcend polarities without evading the tension necessarily involved. In the language of liberation spirituality, it would be ‘to have known God and the world alike,’ the objects of “contemplation and of action.”⁸⁴ Or, “the contemplation of God is simultaneously a contemplation of the world with God’s eyes; and the practice of God is the implementation of God’s word according to God’s will. Thus the movements of contemplation and action are not ‘diversified,’ as if the one were referred to God and the other to the world.”⁸⁵

What Nataraja Guru calls ‘the absolutist stand,’ then, is to act in the relativistic (socio-political) context with ‘God’s eye;’ in Gutierrez’s words, it is action that is ‘free.’ This is a ‘mystical’ solution, the only solution to overcoming the polarities of oppressor and oppressed, persecutor and victim. An action that is socio-political and purely from a relative (victim’s/ victor’s) standpoint would only repeat the show if the revolution turns out victorious, with the oppressed becoming oppressor in turn.⁸⁶

We would like to clarify further the above cross-cultural assertion by taking just up one issue—the respective understandings of the ‘Self’ in Narayana Guru and Liberation Theology. In order to highlight the conception of ‘Self,’ we shall place it against the prevalent notions of the same in three prominent cultures of the world, despite the risk of easy generalization.

Among the prominent civilizations, the Chinese value society the most. Careful delineations of the relationships between people are found in Chinese ways of life. “There are special names for

family members and special terms of respect for friends outside the family.”⁸⁷ On the personal level of relationship there is a great element of thoughtfulness, courtesy and regard. In contrast, in a crowd there is no such consideration for the ‘other.’ In a way, within the Chinese frame of reference, the ‘other’ as family member or friend is a part of a person’s definition of ‘self,’ but beyond the circle of family and friends, the ‘other’ is a non-person.⁸⁸

In the Indian society, one notices a great sense of conscientiousness about personal hygiene. There is fastidiousness about bodily cleanliness, clothes, preparation of food and order in the house. But once one is outside on the street, there is no such consideration. The street is a place where dirt can and does accumulate. This indicates that the ‘self’ extends to one’s body and the immediate dwelling, but not beyond it and outside its boundary. Outside of the body, the self does not belong, the self is not a part thereof, it is non-self. The environment of the community and the wider world is not part of the self.⁸⁹

If we turn to the Western world, we find great respect for the individual, the human person, finding expression in gentleness and formality in relating. All developments and progress are for the comfort and welfare of the human person. But this attitude coexists with a ruthless aggression towards nature and disregard for the environment, the cosmos. The ‘self’ is restricted to the ‘self of the person’ and that too of the white race. A disregard for non-Western peoples and their environment is a glaring characteristic of modern Western civilization. The ecological problem has become a global problem in and through the concept of ‘self’ as anthropos alone.

3.3 Liberationist Non-Duality

The awakening to the discriminatory treatment of the poor of the ‘third world’ lies at the root of liberation struggles, movements, and spiritualities.

We are, for the moment, concerned with the differences in the perception of the ‘Self’ in the two respective spiritualities of liberative involvement.⁹⁰ Differences may be perceived most especially in the conceptions of the relationship between the ‘Self’

and ‘God’ or ‘Absolute.’

Sobrino and Gutierrez brought about a paradigm shift in Christian spirituality. It is within this new perspective that we get the best entry into the conception of ‘Self’ in Liberation Spirituality. The duality between ‘contemplation and action’ is part of the old paradigm, where action is secular and contemplation spiritual. The shift has been brought about by the use of two words, ‘gratuity’ and ‘response.’ In the new perspective, both action and contemplation are infused with gratuity and response. We act because the situation demanding the action is a gift, something that is gratuitously given. Our action, therefore, is simultaneously the reception of the gift as well as a response to the gift. We easily perceive this gratuitousness in our experience of friendship and love, where there is a free choice and free commitment on the part of the one who loves or offers friendship and the one who responds. Gratuitousness is the perception of grace in the given situation and freedom is one’s response of involvement in the situation.

The socio-political, economic-ethnic, religio-cultural dimensions of the here and now (geographico-historical) situation come to oneself as the gift of the Divine: the Divine pole is confronted or met with in and through these dimensions. One’s manner of being, acting (contemplation or action) is the response to the ‘Real,’ to the Divine. The relationship between ‘Self’ and ‘Absolute,’ Man and God, Reality as gift and Oneself as response is the Primary Dualism of greater significance. It is to this truth that Sobrino refers when he says:

The ultimate, primordial duality that makes spirituality possible cannot be sought in the distinction between contemplation and action. Rather it lies in the irreducible duality implied in the human being’s relationship with God.⁹¹

This duality, nevertheless, is subsumed into a deeper unity, the unity of experiencing ‘gratuity’ on the part of God and at the same time as a ‘response’ on the part of the human being. It is the perception of this ‘unity’ (as a possibility in God’s way of seeing) that can overcome the duality between ‘Contemplation’ (of the Self in action) and ‘Action’ (of the Self in contemplation). The spirituality

of liberation is spirituality in the Christian (Western) sense only when the duality is there (between God and Man). But at the same time, if perceived through God's eyes (mystically), there is no duality, or in other words, the duality is subsumed. It is this 'mystical insight' that enables the poor of the world, and those who work for and with them, to realize that they are being "graced by God" and are being "transformed into grace for others."⁹²

Another way to overcome the duality implicit in action and contemplation is in and through 'love.' Spirituality is "freedom to love."⁹³ Love, which presupposes and includes contemplation, is action. Thus in love, "the moment of action is neither separated from, nor subordinated to, nor consequent upon the moment of contemplation."⁹⁴ The direction is towards unification but it always presupposes and begins from a duality.

3.4 Renunciation and Reclamation of Self: the Root Paradigm

The notion of 'Self' operating in the spirituality of liberation can also be clarified with the traditional word 'self-abnegation.' Both contemplation and action stand in danger of being vitiated. A self-seeking that refuses to undergo the 'baptism of the cross' and accept 'self-sacrifice' (*Rom 12:1-2*) is in no way a spiritual journey. One could seek contemplation and/or action in all earnestness and still be promoting 'oneself.' Therefore the move to 'self-abnegation' becomes a criterion for reclaiming the Divine, God. The Christian tradition presents, as the model for such abnegation, the person of Jesus, the 'God-Man' Christ.

The kenosis of the cross is a symbolic paradigm of the tension to be preserved in the polarisations of God and World, Man and God, World and Man. Therefore "one can always touch God in Man and reach Man in God, provided one opts for the cross, where alone, love for God and love for Man are convertible."⁹⁵ Seeking God in total self-abnegation, one touches the depths of the Human. And conversely, in committing oneself to human liberation without self-seeking, one experiences God. What is implicit is a discovery of the merger of the Self and God, in the letting go of the Self—a 'mystical discovery' of Western Christian tradition.

In our study, we have more than once hinted at the diverse Indian approaches to reality that influenced Narayana Guru. We mentioned *Saiva Siddhanta* in particular. The Guru was also influenced by the *Alwars* and the folk traditions of the coastal regions of South India. *Darsanamala* gives us special reasons to confirm his familiarity with the Buddhist tradition as well as the other *Darsana* schools. We return to these biographical references because his spirituality of non-duality is best manifest in his personality: he was open to English education as well as the revival of Sanskrit education; he admitted students of all castes and religions to his schools; he established temples and insisted that they be centres of mass-education rather than of religious ritualism; he founded the *Gurukula* for would be *Sanyasins* but did not debar marriage.⁹⁶

These not only reveal the non-dual facet of the Guru's personality, but also project him as a forerunner of the contemporary concerns of folk traditions, Dalit world-views, tribal meaning-systems and feminist alternatives. Even in his day, between the demands of denouncing the conception of a super-religion of Vedantic mould and having to promote folk-Dalit religiosity, he showed it possible to acknowledge and transcend both, and thus be true to the religiosity of 'non-duality.'⁹⁷

One characteristic of his vision that shines through his person as well as his works is the definitive link between spirituality and renunciation. At the heart of his vision is hidden the great pearl of 'renunciation.' To be 'non-dual' is to appropriate the essence of renunciation. To 'renounce,' on the other hand, is to be 'non-dual.' *A-dvaita* is, in this sense, a renunciation of dualism, a renunciation which is a transcendence of the two poles of the duality. Renunciation cannot be static, nor can it be solidified. The truth of 'renunciation' comes alive only in the discovery that the very desire for renunciation needs to be renounced

4. Conclusion

In the vision of Narayana Guru, the Self is the Absolute. The Absolute is Reality. Reality is Cosmotheandric. The perception of 'Self' is perception of God, of World, of Other Human beings at

one and the same time. Fundamental to the liberative spirituality of Narayana Guru is non-duality and the freedom implicit in non-duality. Non-duality is the realization that the 'Self' and everything 'other-than-Self' are 'not-two.' It is a manner of be-ing by transcending even the 'Primary Dualism,' a realm of which no description is possible but only surmises can be made. The 'Absolute-neutral-stand' is the transcending of Primary Dualism at the heart of Reality, at the meeting point of all polarities.

There is, as a consequence, no trace of any preference for any one country, people, or religion. A method of liberative action rooted in any such preference will lead to discrimination of 'another.' The only really liberative action is therefore the fallout of a neutral, absolutist stand, a contemplative stand, a 'free' and 'non-aligned' stand. One has to transcend affiliations to religions, to nations, and to race and language in order to be a genuine liberator, to journey on the path of Liberative Spirituality. One's spiritual journey can only be a letting go of all identities, even while struggling tooth and nail to hold onto them.

Notes

¹ A paper prepared for the national conference on "The Post-Secular and Post-Religious Discourses on Religion and Secularity: Emerging Frameworks in the Indian Context," 14-16 December 2001, jointly organized by the Department of Philosophy, University of Madras and the Faculty of Philosophy, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. This is also the concluding part of a series of articles on the Sree Narayana Guru Movement of South India from a socio-philosophical perspective. Cf. Nitya Chaitanya Yati to George Thadathil, "The Discovery of a Tradition (*Parampara*)," *Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education* **9** (1998) 1-17; George Thadathil, "The Birth of a Tradition: The Philosophy of Narayana Guru," *Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education* **10** (1999) 293-317.

² "The history of religion is nothing other than the history of a dialectical reevaluation of prior positions in terms of posterior doctrines." Nataraja Guru, *Saundarya Lahari* 21. I would like to position this new interpretation amidst discourses about the role of religion and spirituality in India and in Asian society. Cf. Rajan Gurukkal, "Counter Culture and

Containment Strategy in Pre-Modern India,” *Jeevadhara* **31** (2001) 299-313; Kalpana Sharma, “The Myth of the Spiritual East,” *The Nepal Digest* (1 July 1999).

³ By ‘religiosity’ we refer here to the interiority dimension of religion. Cf. Balakrishnan V., *Lokamatha Vijnana Kosa Nikhandu* (Kottayam: National Books) 227-233.

⁴ In comparing the use of metaphors by Sankara and his own use of the structural scheme, Narayana Guru quotes a text referring to faith in the *Brahmsasutra*, III.1.5 (Narayana Guru, *Integrated Science of the Absolute* II:224). Further, applying his unitive approach to religion he says: “Religion is a whole-hearted relationship binding man with his fellow-men or with some unseen value-factor... If we may refer to him as the ‘subject’ of religion or faith, the other or second pole of the relational situation, which consists of whatever is dear to him religiously, could be referred to as the ‘object-matter’ of his faith. Religion is thus a bipolar relation between these aspects of the Self and the non-Self respectively. When we approach the question of religion in this bipolar fashion, wherein a man and his faith are treated as dialectical counterparts, we are in reality approaching the subject unitively.” (Nataraja Guru, *Wisdom: The Absolute is Adorable* [Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1994] 93. Hereafter, Nataraja Guru, *Wisdom*.)

⁵ To quote his words: “A man and his faith may be said to condition each other reciprocally in the same subtle way as when we say that ‘the dress declares the man.’ It is in this sense that the *Bhagavad Gita* lays down the law of bipolarity implicit in all religion in the following words: According to the truth-quality (*sattva*) of each man, O Bharata, his faith comes to be: the man consists of faith; that which his faith is, he is even that. (BG XIII:3).” (Nataraja Guru, *Wisdom* 94).

⁶ Cf. Raimond Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Cross-Cultural Studies* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1983) 190.

⁷ Nataraja Guru, *Wisdom* 136.

⁸ Nataraja Guru refers to the symbolic as the vertical dimension of reality and the factual as the horizontal dimension in the following words: “The vertical is the world of pure symbols while the horizontal refers to practical values of action. A reference to particular objective values is implied in the horizontal. In the vertical, values exist for their own sake. The duality of ends and means remains unresolved in the horizontal. The distinction between the two as between the perceptual and the actual, the unitive and the dualistic, is perhaps the subtlest of philosophical differences that a man is called upon to recognize... Symbol exists for its own sake in the vertical and what is called ‘fact’ recedes into the background, while in the

horizontal world, facts, actualities and things, gain primacy over ideas.” Nataraja Guru, *Wisdom* 97.

⁹ Deborah Buchanan, *Gestures in Silence: Who and What Narayana Guru Is* (Varkala: East West University, n.d.) 6-7.

¹⁰ Buchanan, *Gestures in Silence* 6-7.

¹¹ Narayana Guru, *Atmopadesasatakam*, v. 21-25, as quoted in Nataraja Guru, *Experiencing One-World* (Delhi: D.K.Printworld, 1994) 258. Hereafter Nataraja Guru, *One-World*.

¹² Nataraja Guru, *One-World* 252. Verse 49 of *Atmopadesasatakam* goes as follows: “All beings are making effort in every way, / all the time, for the happiness of the Self; in the world, this is the one faith;” Cf. Nitya Chaitanya Yati, *Neither This Nor That But... Aum* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishers, 1982). Hereafter, Nitya, *Neither This Nor That*.

¹³ Cf. Dominic Veliath, *Theological Approach and Understanding of Religions: Jean Danielou and Raimundo Panikkar, A Study in Contrast* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti College, 1987) 154.

¹⁴ Nataraja Guru, *One-World* 254.

¹⁵ “The horizontal corollary of the axiomatic verity of a God conceived as a vertical axis of correlation of all worthwhile values in human life consists in recognizing in fellow man one’s equal as dear to one as one’s own self.” Nataraja Guru, *Wisdom* 109.

¹⁶ Nataraja Guru, *Wisdom* 99.

¹⁷ Nitya, *Neither This Nor That* 219,221.

¹⁸ A. Padmanabhakurup, *Sree Narayanaguruvinte Sahityavum Darsanavum* (Calicut: Mathrubhumi Publishers) 55-56.

¹⁹ Cf. v. 48 of *Sreenarayana Dharmam*, T. Bhaskaran, *Sampoorna Kritikal* 646.

²⁰ To quote Nataraja Guru: “What is called ‘salvation’ results from the cancellation of the non-Self by the Self. Beauty is a visible value in which line, light and color can cooperate to reveal man’s true nature to himself. When thus revealed, that final cancellation of counterparts can take place which is capable of removing the last impediment to what we might soberly call ‘unitive understanding.’ This is none other than emancipation, or final Freedom with a capital ‘F.’ This is the promise that the wisdom of the Upanishads has always held out as the highest hope of man. There is both inner beauty as well as beauty ‘out there,’ as it were.” Nataraja Guru, *Saundarya Lahari* 10.

²¹ Cf. George Thadathil, “The Birth of Tradition: The Philosophy of Narayana Guru,” *Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education* **10** (1999) 308. Hereafter Thadathil, “Birth of a Tradition.”

²² Nataraja Guru, *Wisdom* 188.

²³ It is significant to note that the word *Jati* in Malayalam has the following meanings: kind, class; birth; family, race, tribe, caste; position; rank; the nutmeg tree; the gooseberry tree; teak; jasmine; fire place, hearth; and as adjective, good, genuine, excellent, superior, of noble breed (*NBS Malayalam English Dictionary*).

²⁴ Cf. George Thadathil, "Guru vision—A Liberative Reformulation: A Study of Nataraja Guru's Revisioning of Narayana Guru" (unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, University of Madras, 1997) chapter 5, 68.

²⁵ In the original Malayalam, this word enables a much wider understanding of the implications of religion on a community. Besides, the word is to be also understood without the distinctions drawn between religion, science and philosophy in post-enlightenment Western language.

²⁶ Cf. Raimon Panikkar, *Cultural Disarmament: The Way to Peace* (Westminster: John Knox, 1995) 43-44. Cf. also Rajeev Dhavan, "The Road to Xanadu: India's Quest for Secularism," *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, ed. K.N. Panikkar (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999) 34-72.

²⁷ Sebastian Kappen, *Jesus and Cultural Revolution: An Asian Perspective* (Bombay: A Build Publication, 1983) 37ff.

²⁸ Rosino Gibellini, *The Liberation Theology Debate* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) 4ff.

²⁹ "During the last three decades, the Latin American continent was recognized... as a kind of ecclesiological laboratory.... This reputation was due mainly to the prophetic practice of some groups within different confessions, committed to the liberation of the poor." Jose Bittencourt, "On Theology and Economy," *Echoes* (September 1996) 4-6. There is a similar spurt of literature in India about the emergence of Dalit liberation theology and feminist critique of culture.

³⁰ Cf. E.F.Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Vintage Books, 1973) 134-230.

³¹ Panikkar, *Cultural Disarmament* 37-41.

³² Aloysius Pieris, "Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches," *Liberation in Asia*, ed. S. Arockiasamy (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987) 17-38. Cf. also Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1988).

³³ Pieris, "Theology of Liberation" 17-38.

³⁴ Sobrino *Spirituality of Liberation* 87-88 gives a list of martyrs in the Latin American subcontinent since liberationist ideology gained ground; Felix Wilfred mentions the tactics used by the CIA to quell the resistance movements of Central American countries.

³⁵ In order to focus on just a few issues like the arms race, the advertising

industry and foreign debt, the inequalities in GNP ratios across countries and even within the richer countries, cf. The UN reports on human development. For a revealing selection, cf. Panikkar, *Cultural Disarmament* 111-112.

³⁶ One of the first to create a new wave of liberationist thinking within Indian context was Sebastian Kappen. His more prominent works are: *From Faith to Revolution* (Malayalam) (Kottayam: National Book House, 1977); *Jesus and Freedom* (New York: Orbis Books, 1977); *Jesus and Cultural Revolution: An Asian Perspective* (Bombay: A Build Publication, 1983); *Marxian Atheism* (Bangalore: Reliance Printers, 1983); editor, *Jesus Today* (Madras, AICUF Publication, 1985); *Liberation Theology and Marxism* (Puntamba: Asha Kendra, 1986); *Tradition Modernity Counter-Culture* (Bangalore: Visthar, 1994). The other well-known names in India in connection with liberationist thinking are Felix Wilfred, Samuel Rayan and George Soares-Prabhu. The works of Felix Wilfred are: editor, *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation* (Trichy: Claretian Publications, 1996; a German translation appeared in 1988); *Sunset in the East? Asian Challenges and Christian Involvement* (Madras: Chair in Christianity, University of Madras, 1991); *From the Dusty Soil: Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity* (Madras: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 1995).

³⁷ Dalit liberation activities and thinking emerging from such praxis is currently a growing field. We note a few writings of a theological nature: Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity* (London, 1979); Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, *Swami Anand Thirth: Untouchability, Gandhian Solution on Trial* (Delhi, 1987), and "The Dalit Desiyata," *The Kerala Experience in Development and Class Struggle* (Delhi, 1990); M. Azariah, *Christ and Dalit Liberation* (Madras, n.d.), and *The Un-Christian Side of the Indian Church: The Plight of the Untouchable Converts* (Bangalore, 1985); Victor D'Souza, *Inequality and its Perpetuation: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New Delhi, 1981); Walter Fernandes, *Caste and Conversion Movements in India: Religion and Human Rights* (New Delhi, 1981); M.E. Prabhakar, *Liberty to the Captives* (Deenapur, 1987); Prabhakar, *Towards a Dalit Theology* (Delhi, 1988); V.T. Rajshekar, *Christians and Dalit Liberation* (Bangalore, 1987); Xavier Irudayaraj, ed., *Emerging Dalit Theology* (Madras, 1990); Arvind Nirmal, *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology* (Madras, 1991); Nirmal, ed., *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras, 1991); John Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994).

³⁸ The literature on Asian theology of liberation is steadily on the increase. A few select works are: V. Fabella ed., *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*

(Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1980); D.S. Amalorpavadass, ed., *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981); Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988); Tissa Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984); Franklyn J. Balasundaram, *EATWOT in Asia* (Bangalore: ATC, 1994); C.S. Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People's Political Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982); S. Arockiasamy et al., eds., *Liberation in Asia* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987); T.K. John, ed., *Bread and Breath* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1991); P. Puthenangady, *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation* (Bangalore, 1985); V. Fabella, ed., *Asian Christian Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992); Masao Takenaka, *Towards a Theology of People* (Tokyo: CCA-URM, 1977); Takenaka, *God is Rice: Asian Culture and Christian Faith* (WCC, 1986); John Vattamattom et.al., *Liberative Struggles in a Violent Society* (Forum, 1991); George Soares-Prabhu, "The Jesus of Faith: A Christological Contribution to an Ecumenical Third World Spirituality," *Voices from the Third World* **15** (1992) 46-89; R. Sugirtharaja, *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994). Cf. also note 36 above.

³⁹ Symbolic of this shift are the words of Walter Rauschenbush written in 1907: "Christian asceticism called the world evil and abandoned it. Humanity is waiting for a Christian revolution which will call the world evil and change it." Quoted in Gibellini 14-15. Cf. also Zygmunt Bauman, "Postmodern Religion?" *Religious Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 55-87.

⁴⁰ Kappen, *Jesus and Cultural Revolution* 14-16.

⁴¹ It calls for a renewed use of hermeneutical mediation: "scripture and tradition do not stand in the abstract." The process of theological articulation consists in transforming with the help of 'salvation' (theological) 'liberation' (sociological) as to enable 'liberation is salvation.' In other words, whereas academic [traditional] theology does not use hermeneutical circle, Liberation Theology reintroduces it thus: "it begins from a specific situation, from which current questions arise, and puts these questions to the revelation. The revelation, interrogated in this way, provides a response which illuminates the individual and social situation of the person putting the questions." Leonardo Boff, quoted in Gibellini 8.

⁴² Liberation can be said to have three levels of meaning: (a) the socio-political level: liberation of the oppressed, exploited classes, despised ethnic groups, marginalized cultures; (b) the anthropological level: liberation for a qualitatively different society with a human dimension; (c) the theological level: liberation from sin, ultimate root of all injustice and

oppression. Cf. *Ibid.*

⁴³ A summarization of this nature is evidently a generalization. A detailed history of the growth of Christianity would reveal an ongoing dialectic between these two trends. Still, the newness of the liberation perspective is a function of the context of today with its awesome disparities, a context apparently ignored by mainline religions.

⁴⁴ Samuel Rayan, *Liberative Struggles in a Violent Society*, ed. John Vattamattom et.al. (Hyderabad: Forum Publication, 1991) 183-84.

⁴⁵ George Soares-Prabhu, "The Spirituality of Jesus as a Spirituality of Solidarity and Struggle," Vattamattom 135-161.

⁴⁶ Cf. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973) 366, and K.C. Abraham, *Liberative Solidarity* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samity, 1996).

⁴⁷ Enrique Dussel, "The need for Creative, Historical, Concrete...Thought," *EATWOT: Voices from the Third World* 8/4 (1985) 116-122.

⁴⁸ Paulo Freire emphasized this key concept in education through his works: *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967) and *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971). He proposes a liberating education, that is, an education not only aimed at literacy but understood as the practice of freedom, as an act of consciousness which offers help towards a critical reading of reality, as a process of conscientization.

⁴⁹ J.A.G. Gerwin van Leeuwen, *Fully Indian Authentically Christian* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1990) 160-161.

⁵⁰ Rayan 183-84; cf. also G. Haragopal, "Socio-Philosophical Implications of Movements of the Oppressed," Vattamattom 119-129; George Soares-Prabhu, "Good News to the Poor: The Social Implications of the Message of Jesus," *Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, ed. D.S. Amalorpavadas (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981) 609-626.

⁵¹ Felix Wilfred, *Impulses from Third World Liberation Theologies: Towards Emancipatory Social Sciences with a Human Face* (to be published).

⁵² Cf. Ashish Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford Books, 1987) xviii.

⁵³ Cf. K.C. Abraham, "Mission in the Context of Endemic Poverty and Affluence," *Liberative Solidarity* (1996) 79-95.

⁵⁴ Cf. Wilfred, *Impulses from Third World Liberation Theologies*.

⁵⁵ "The Church by her neutrality is supporting the existing political and economic system. They are denying the power and responsibility they have to contribute to a just and human social order." Susanne Toher quoted Vattamattom 16.

⁵⁶ Soares-Prabhu, "The Spirituality of Jesus," Vattamattom 139, and also

Paul de la Gueriviere, "Socio-Cultural Imports of People's Struggles," Vattamattom 11-118.

⁵⁷ Sobrino *Spirituality of Liberation* x.

⁵⁸ Indian theology, which had its beginnings already in the middle of last century or even in the earlier attempts of De Nobili, should also be considered along this line, though it was not allowed to flourish by the dominant concept of 'Christianity.'

⁵⁹ Sobrino *Spirituality of Liberation* 1-7.

⁶⁰ The subtitle of the work of Sobrino on spirituality is "Toward Political Holiness."

⁶¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (SCM, 1983) 15-16.

⁶² Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Wells* 15-16, and also Felix Wilfred, class notes (Madras: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 1997).

⁶³ It is too elaborate to go into the whole question of a global economy based on currency speculation and its ramifications for those in an agrarian economy. Cf. Panikkar, *Cultural Disarmament* 86,124.

⁶⁴ Panikkar, *Cultural Disarmament* 86,124.

⁶⁵ Sobrino *Spirituality of Liberation* 153-183.

⁶⁶ Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* 15-16.

⁶⁷ Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* 50. In the Indian context a similar reflection has been made by George Soares-Prabhu, "Good News to the Poor," Amalorpavadas 620. Commenting on *Lk* 4:18-19 he says: "The salvation Jesus announces here is primarily a liberation from the pressures of social, economic and societal oppression."

⁶⁸ We refer in this section to Gutierrez and Sobrino as representatives of this new awakening. As we have hinted earlier, for an Indian version of the same one could glance at the writings of Sebastian Kappen, Samuel Rayan, George Soares-Prabhu, Felix Wilfred, etc.

⁶⁹ Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* 50.

⁷⁰ Emphasis added. A different way of stating the same would be: "it is one thing to say that only if one is interested in the poor, can one be spiritual; it is another thing to say that if the poor are to be liberated one has to be spiritual."

⁷¹ Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* ix (emphasis in text).

⁷² Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* 5.

⁷³ Aloysius Pieris, "Spirituality in a Liberation Perspective," in *East Asian Pastoral Review* 2 (1983) 139-151.

⁷⁴ Pieris, "Spirituality in a Liberation Perspective" 146-150.

⁷⁵ Pieris, "Spirituality in a Liberation Perspective" 13.

- ⁷⁶ Pieris, "Spirituality in a Liberation Perspective" 66-67.
- ⁷⁷ Pieris, "Spirituality in a Liberation Perspective" 66-67.
- ⁷⁸ Pieris, "Spirituality in a Liberation Perspective" 67.
- ⁷⁹ For an idea about the basis for such an assertion, Nataraja Guru's biography of Narayana Guru suffices. Cf. especially the direct quotations of the words uttered and responses made by Guru Narayana to different people in different circumstances. Cf. also Bhaskaran, *Narayana Guru Vaighari* (Calicut: Mathrubhumi, 1996).
- ⁸⁰ One could of course add that the assertion is equally true of God and the Cosmos.
- ⁸¹ Cf. "Sree Narayana Dharmam," Bhaskaran, *Sampoorna Kritikal* 638-651.
- ⁸² Buchanan, *Gestures in Silence* 2
- ⁸³ Sukumar Azhikode, *Guru Symposium*, ed. Kesavan Vaidyar 27.
- ⁸⁴ Sobrino *Spirituality of Liberation* 68.
- ⁸⁵ Sobrino *Spirituality of Liberation* 68.
- ⁸⁶ Cf. Raimond Panikkar, "The New Role of Christian Universities," *Vidyajyoti* 54 (1990) 561-562.
- ⁸⁷ Buchanan, *Gestures in Silence* 9.
- ⁸⁸ Buchanan, *Gestures in Silence* 9.
- ⁸⁹ Buchanan, *Gestures in Silence* 9.
- ⁹⁰ In elaborating liberation spirituality, we have relied on Gutierrez and Sobrino in particular. However, they are only two representatives of a movement that is beyond the boundaries of Latin America. The emerging field of Dalit Theology in India offers new approaches to the spirituality of liberation. Cf. D. Alphonse, "Dalit Emergence in Society and Church," *Vaiharai* 5/3-4 (2000) 1-2.
- ⁹¹ Sobrino *Spirituality of Liberation* 69, emphasis added.
- ⁹² Gutierrez, as quoted in Sobrino *Spirituality of Liberation* 69. I am aware that this stand of Gutierrez is not without its problems seen from a Dalit or feminist point of view. I am grateful to Pushpa Joseph for having brought this to my attention. Arul Raja also made me rethink my reliance on Gutierrez to some extent, with his Dalit critique of the notion of 'gratuitousness': cf. A. Maria Arul Raja, "Living Streams Across the Parched Land: Some Tenets of Dalit Spirituality," *Vaiharai* 5/3-4 (2000) 81-93.
- ⁹³ Raja "Living Streams" 81-93.
- ⁹⁴ Raja "Living Streams" 81-93.
- ⁹⁵ Cf. Pieris, "Spirituality in a Liberation Perspective" 45. Here again I would like to note Pushpa Joseph's comment to me: "Feminist theology has problematised the concept and institution of love as a tool used by traditional religion to disempower, oppress and efface women and the

marginals.” Cf. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983) 76-80.

⁹⁶ Cf. Bhaskaran, *Narayana Guru Vaighari* 258. The following quote about Narayana Guru’s impact on Kerala society is telling: “The caste polarization and their organizations are becoming increasingly anachronistic in Kerala with the rapid spread of education and the political articulation of the will of the people. The general tendency among the new generation is really one caste or community, an ideal proposed by SNG, the undeniable leader of the Ezhava community. It seems that today very few people are making conscious efforts to fight openly for the interest of a particular community. Kerala is rapidly moving towards social democracy, where liberty, equality and fraternity reign supreme with one prime religion, the religion of humanity, as SNG would have it.” Thomas Kadankavil, “The Ezhavas: A Call for Religious Co-existence,” *Journal of Dharma* 26/3 (2001) 392.

⁹⁷ Cf. the dialogues of Narayana Guru with Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore on their visits to his centre at Varkala, in Bhaskaran, *Narayana Guru Vaighari* 277-306; Nataraja Guru, *The Word of the Guru*. Cf. also J.N. Mohanty, “Advaita Vedanta as Philosophy and as Religion,” *Explorations in Philosophy Essays by J.N. Mohanty*, ed. Bina Gupta (New Delhi: Oxford, 2001) 105-113. Rajan Gurukkal, “Counter Culture and Containment Strategy in Pre-Modern India,” *Jeevadhara* 31 (2001) 299-313 has recently argued that the protest element in the counter-cultural movements of pre-modern India was blunted by the religious aspirations for coherence and harmony in society. He offers a critique of the Bhakti movement as well as the esoteric theologies as having played into the hands of the dominant sections.