Religion, Spirituality and Social Work Engagement
Sanjai Bhatt

Abstract: Religion, Spirituality and Social Work are independent concepts, however these terms are closely interconnected. The word religion has its etymological roots in its Latin term *religare* which means "to bind, to tie or to re-connect'. The Latin word *religio* was originally used to mean only "reverence for God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things". It is difficult to define the word religion. There are differencing opinions among scholars as it encompasses the boundaries of the term culture. The common man's understanding of religion revolves around the belief in the existence of God as supernatural power, sanctioned moral codes, respect for sacred or reverence for God. Religion is an articulated way of social life, a common way of living, believing and organising with definite commonalities. Gellman and Hartman summarised that a religion is a belief in divine (superhuman or spiritual) being(s) and the practice (rituals) and the moral codes (ethics) that result from that belief. Belief gives religion its mind, rituals give religion its shape, and ethics give religion its heart. The religion by nature is social formation which creates strict adherence in relation to others through the element of fear, guilt, rejection, punishment, repercussions, reprimanding, and causal effects with elements of negatives. Consequent upon this, religion has created more God-fearing in place of God loving persons. In the process of following and practicing religion, it has brought the element of people controlling other people, instilling morality, forcing adherence of rituals and ethics and perpetuates institutionalisation.

Keywords: God-fearing, God-loving, Morality, Culture, Social Work

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Religion, Spirituality and Social Work are independent concepts, however these terms are closely interconnected. The word religion has its etymological roots in its Latin term *religare* which means "to bind, to tie or to re-connect'. The Latin word *religio* was originally used to mean only "reverence for God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things". It is difficult to define the word religion. There are differencing opinions among scholars as it encompasses the boundaries of the term *culture*. The common man's understanding of religion revolves around the belief in the existence of God as supernatural power, sanctioned moral codes, respect for sacred or reverence for God. Religion is an articulated way of social life, a common way of living, believing and organising with definite commonalities. Gellman and Hartman summarised that a religion is a belief in divine (superhuman or spiritual) being(s) and the practice (rituals) and the moral codes (ethics) that result from that belief. Belief gives religion its mind, rituals give religion its shape, and ethics give religion its heart. The religion by nature is social formation which creates strict adherence in relation to others through the element of fear, guilt, rejection, punishment, repercussions, reprimanding, and causal effects with elements of negatives. Consequent upon this, religion has created more *God fearing* in place of *God loving* persons. In the process of following and practicing religion, it has brought

the element of people controlling other people, instilling morality, forcing adherence of rituals and ethics and perpetuates institutionalisation. The various deformities and ills encountered by the institution of religion today are in itself by product of organised, structured, institutionalised forms of religion. A few religions born to break this vicious cycle but these religions also become prey to its own cycle. The Our many cotemporary social problems like communal violence, terrorism, tattered group relations can be traced created by hard core Hindutava to Islamic Jehadi to Sikh khadkus are not mere reflections.

Contrary to religion, spirituality is more personal way of relating with the sacred or divine. It is inward looking in comparison to religion which is more outward looking with relation to others. Spirituality has its roots in religion but it is quite different than religion. Spirituality has been described as a universal phenomenon (W. Teasdale and & Dalai Lama, 1999). It is an awareness about life, its meaning and purpose which may or may not be developed out of the religious belief, conduct or practices. Cashwell, Bentley and Bigbee (2007) have defined spirituality as a developmental process that is both active and passive wherein beliefs, disciplined practice, and experiences are grounded and integrated to result in increased *mindfulness* (non-judgmental awareness of present experience), *he artfulness* (experience of compassion and love) and *soulfulness* (Connections beyond ourselves, Cashwell, Benley & Bigbee 2007). In simple sense, spirituality means process of discovering meaning and purpose of own life. In the path of spirituality, person dissolves its ego, develops understanding of the true *self,* and becomes more genuine, authentic, real, and complete. The ego is always relational as it exist in relation to others and therefore it creates more confusions, irritants, problems, obstacles in relating himself or herself with others. The *others* may be person(s), group(s), community (ies), system(s), an institution(s), the universe or even god.

Religion and spirituality are two different terms and often considered synonymous to each other. However, both terms have some commonalities, close interaction and overlaps. There are commonalities in their purpose, qualities and value frames. The religions are highlighted by core values philanthropy, altruistic motives, compassion, selfless services and spirituality inculcates the same values. Spirituality is highlighted by qualities such as kindness, compassion, tolerance, caring service, welfare, concerns for others and, so does religion in its real sense. All religions give themselves expression through symbols, rituals, prayers, practices, behaviours, language, sacred text, literature, scriptures, disciplinary routines even restrictions full of do's and don'ts (including dietary) extend helping hand to people during their journey to explore spirituality. It is often argued that religion is an organised spirituality whereas spirituality is a personalised religion. Different people have analysed this statement differently. Religion is organised spirituality in the sense that it thrives upon as collectivise individual actions to attain the same value base as goal whereas spirituality is personalised religion followed and practiced by different individuals differently in more personalised manner in different ways in different forms of their choice. Religion is an external aspect whereas spirituality is an internal process. The primary concern of the institution of religion is worldly, related to supreme power, exterior in character and social by nature whereas spirituality is an individual centric process which begins internally and may grow outwardly during its experiential growth. It may connect one from internal to the external environment, unknown to known, invisible to visible in its process outcomes. Religion can exist away from individuals but spirituality cannot as it is essentially oneself to others.

Religion has been described as a social institution for social control; therefore it has enjoyed power in all societies in one or other ways. Its controlling mechanism has crossed boundaries and when rulers or political masters have realised the power of religion, they misused or abused the institution of religion for their own ends. The people those who are going into the politics of

religion they have forgotten the religion of the politics. The politics by origin was meant to serve the societal ends not personal so was the case with religion. In today's politics, the religion has strong visible role and its convoluted manifestations appears in contradictory forms of religious values – hate, dissension, hostility, violence, bloodshed, war and so on. It is saddened to note that an institution has reversed its avowed role and defeated its very purpose in present context. That is why, the concept of spirituality is gaining more and more importance and is now talked everywhere from schools to colleges to universities to corporate to governments to UN system and is also gaining currency in market driven economy. Self-awareness programmes, yoga, meditation, vipasana, self-transcendence and various other forms of self-discovery and exploration are now-a-days most popular terminologies and pedagogies for combating growing individual and social problems on one hand and experiencing growth and development on other..

In the beginning of the 20th century, two disciplines started taking shape - social work and management - and later on grew as human service profession. Having its roots in scientific charity, the growing social problems like industrialisation, immigrations, urbanisation poverty, labour unrest provided fertile ground for the development and expansion of state responsibility for demand of effective professional services. Social work passed through four stages namely charity, welfare, development and empowerment and shaped the mission and vision of social work profession. Since the professional social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, its values revolved around worth and dignity of people with equality and social justice as its main pillars. The International Federation of social Workers and international association of Schools of Social work defined social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and

social justice are fundamental to social work.[1] Since its inception, social work has focused its efforts on responding human needs and developing their potentials so that they may take the charge of their own problems. It always intended for preventing dysfunction, solving problems at individual, group and community level, improving their conditions and enriching the life of disadvantaged population. The problem solving and developing capacities became its main agenda with changes at all possible levels. In order to achieve its goals, social work employed varied forms of skills, techniques, methods, pedagogies including case work , counselling, psycho support, group work, community action, family therapies etc.

The practice of social work is about the interface of people with their families and their communities. Social workers are agents of social control but they also promote social welfare and social change to empower the individual, the group and the community. As a result, they regularly work with the disadvantaged, disenfranchised and oppressed population (Armitage, 1996 quoted in Csiernik, Furge & Rishchynshi, 2006: 12). The present society is witnessing a second great societal transformation as it is in the transition from industrial society to information society. This transformation has widened the gaps between people, groups in terms of availability, access and affordability of new technology among already marginalized groups and communities. The mad race under the cover of competition and performance has drained the values and ethics of individuals, groups and people. Consequently, there are more inter personal and intra personal problems in addition to changing socio political and economic environment. The common man is trapped in the complex spider- web of raucous growth of consumer society and losing its peace, quietude, tranquillity. The need, greed, anger, resentment, frustration, rage, ferocity, violence, stress etc are increasing at such fast speed to spur disenchantment with personal and social life to the extent of world-weariness, thus questioning even the civilized character of human beings and society. The other side of the coin depicts that the relationship between man and

nature is weakening and the space is also shrinking. To respond back, the necessary tools are either missing or incomplete to offer permanent solutions. These facts necessitate that human service professions should adopt a critical appraisal of the implications of the available mechanisms and practice tools. Spirituality seems to offer those new mechanisms and tools required by the society with accessibility and affordability.

Looking at spirituality as the mechanism and tools of problem solving in present scenario, the need is to understand spirituality in practice sense. Thus, it requires considering misconceptions and prejudices. Spirituality practice is commonly misunderstood with religious practices. All religious persons need not to be necessarily spiritual and all spiritual persons need not to be religious. Spirituality has nothing to do with age, caste, gender as it can be practiced by anyone at any age. It has no boundaries. The person need not to belong a particular religion or caste as precondition in practicing spirituality. If spirituality is considered as education or pedagogy to understand self, or as therapy, it can be enjoyed by all without any restrictions or boundaries. Spirituality is free from all kinds of *ism* and it is in true sense completely secular in character. Spirituality has no settled foundation (Pandikattu 2012). Raising questions, finding some answers and then, asking more questions are basic human traits. Essentially, humans are questioning animals. "Question has answer in its word itself, it means quest is on. Through spirituality, one can find answers of his/her problems as Quest is within us." The fundamental difficulty with human beings is that they take the easy way out, accept other's answers and live our lives according to them. Even our social institutions like religious or educational system do not answer the more serious and fundamental questions on life, its goal and meaning as majority of people are either don not raise questions or are satisfied with the simplistic solutions and persist with those answers, even when the questions have changed.

There is need to revisit our education system and educational pedagogies. Spirituality should be brought as part of practicing skills in the education. There is more need to include the same in syllabi of Social work courses. Many experiments are going on in the field of social welfare and development and one such experiment by a voluntary organisation named Social Orientation to Human Aspirations through Meditation (SOHAM) is worth mentioning. This experiment is an attempt to raise orphan traumatic children through meditation and claims to provide better possibilities of development of children and reducing their trauma of being neglected through simple practice of meditation. This is the right time to define and redefine the terms, reinstitute the same. Social work profession need to re look at their own life seriously as social work is not only for others but for the own self also. Social work is not a subject but an experience with our and other life, therefore human service professionals require for deep reflection, questioning before moving on for helping others or in the process of extending services.

Notes

1. International Association of Schools of Social Work/ International Federation of Social Workers, Definition of Social Work Jointly Agreed 27 June 2001 Copenhagen.

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