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George M. Soares-Prabhu, SJ: A Prophet for Our Times

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Abstract: Fr. George M. Soares-Prabhu, S.J., was a prolific and creative writer covering a wide range of themes and issues. This paper is an attempt to cover most of his articles and to portray him as a prophet for our time. The first section, The Way of the Prophets, describes how the biblical prophets performed their prophetic ministry. The second section, The Way of Jesus, presents how Jesus realized his prophetic mission. The third section, The Way of Soares, interprets as to how Soares himself understood and carried out his prophetic vocation in the specific context of India. The last section, The Way Ahead, is a brief and humble attempt to understand our task in the future as Indian Christians in terms of mystical prophets.

Keywords: Soares-Prabhu, Way of the Prophets, Way of Jesus, Way of Soares-Prabhu, Soares-Prabhu as a Prophet.

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Introduction

Jesus, who told his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth, … You are the light of the world…" (Mt 5:13, 14), could have as well said, "You are the prophets of the world!" Going through the articles of late George M. Soares-Prabhu, S.J., one could surmise that he had definitely understood his Christian identity in terms of a prophet. In fact, in one of his articles he says: "The Church is nothing if not prophetic." (Soares-Prabhu 1999: 170).[1] The present paper attempts to outline the significance of George Soares-Prabhu Christian vocation as a prophet and its implications for us as Christians in India today.

It is true that George Soares-Prabhu was, professionally, a biblical theologian, an exegete with a clear, committed liberationist perspective (D'Souza, 1997: 3-35).[2] But he lived that profession in the model of biblical prophets (Soares-Prabhu, 2001: 14-23). So, in order to understand the spirit of George Soares-Prabhu as a prophet it would be helpful to look at how Soares-Prabhu himself understood the role of biblical prophets and also how he saw the prophetic ministry of Jesus.

1. The Way of the Prophets

Biblical prophets were rooted in and committed to the foundational God-experience of the Jewish people – God as a liberator from their slavery in Egypt.[3] The main features of this experience are: (a) four hundred years long oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians (cf. Gen 15:13); (b) the call and the commission of Moses by God; and (c) the prophetic ministry of Moses in liberating Israelites and creating an alternative community out of them. The foundation for this alternative community is an alternative consciousness[4], which enables Moses, on the one hand, to criticize and dismantle the dominant consciousness and on the other hand, inspires Moses to energize the community of liberated slaves in forming an alternative community.[5] This two-fold ministry of a prophet is expressed

poetically by Jeremiah: "to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and plant." (Jer 1:10)

The Mosaic experiment lasted for 250 years only. After Israel shifted from charismatic leadership to monarchic rule (cf. 1 Sam 8), gradually the Mosaic vision of a contrast community receded into oblivion and the royal ideology cleverly engineered a social change triptych in form[6], a change that resembled the state of Israel in Egypt before their liberation. It is precisely during the prolonged period of the monarchy which had reversed the movement of the Mosaic revolution that the prophets are seen performing their prophetic ministry of dismantling the royal consciousness and energizing an alternative consciousness to reclaim the contrast community envisaged by Moses. Implicit in their ministry is a kind of socio-cultural analysis of the economical-political-religious nexus. The result is an explicit two-fold critique of the royal consciousness: The prophets (1) condemn ***idolatry*** – which took either the form of worshipping gods of the surrounding city states or turning Yahweh into an idol by making him the legitimizing principle of the economic and political program; and (2) they criticize ***social injustice***, that is, the concrete expressions of exploitation and oppression that result from such legitimizing idolatry (*CWG* 4, 18-19).

The ministry of the prophets, also, reveals, something more fundamental than the socio-cultural analysis -- "an unusual kind of religious consciousness: one in which profound mysticism is jointed to an intense historical concern."[7] Both the pre-classical (Samuel and Elijah) and the classical prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah) were all politically active. The religious concerns of the prophets necessarily took political form, because in the theocratic society of ancient Israel religion and politics could not be separated. With the exception of Ezekiel, Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi, all the prophets were operative during the monarchical period, because it was precisely the kings, by the misuse of their political power, were dismantling the contrast community established by Moses.

The common religious experience of the prophets was the "God of pathos" (Herschel, 1975: 13)[8] – the God who identified with the suffering of the powerless, the poor, the needy and the oppressed. So the primary political concern of the prophets was a politics of justice, because the God of pathos is a God of justice (cf. Deut 32:4; Amos 5:21-24; Hosea 6:6; Isa 58:7) (*CWG* 3, 115). For speaking truth to the power and demanding for justice relentlessly, the prophets inevitably entered into conflicts with the power wielding dominant class. That, definitely, was not a pleasant experience for the prophets and one is not surprised to see the reluctance and resistance when they were commissioned for the work (cf. Ex 3:11; Jer 1:6). And yet, Jeremiah admits candidly "the existential inability to do otherwise" (Jer 20:9).[9]

This paradoxical experience of the prophets is not fully explainable by means of mere psychological or sociological dynamics. The prophetic call-narratives, presented in a stereotypical format, point to the personal call by a concerned God as the decisive element that distinguishes the prophetic ministry (*CWG* 3, 117).[10] Through this call the prophet is invited to enter into the horizon of God, as it were, and interpret human existence from the divine perspective (*CWG* 3, 123).[11] Thus, the prophet's concern for the poor, the exploited and the oppressed is actually the concern of God. The essential function of the prophet was to influence the human beings to bring about a change in the divine pathos. Therefore, the basic and the common message of all the prophets is "to repent" (meaning "to return back to God"), which, in practical terms, means to be concerned with God's concern for all human beings, especially the poor, the exploited and the oppressed.[12]

I conclude this section with an interesting insight of Klaus Koch. He raises a question as to what of permanent importance of biblical prophets for an understanding of human existence in this world is, and answers the question in terms of passionate social criticism of prophets. The interesting nuance that Koch adds is that the human ability to respond constructively to the society, especially to its weaker members, is the indication of the moral

character of the person, which is not only a matter of faith, but the result of rationality, the human ability to be and to behave in accordance with reason or logic. "The God of the prophets demands nothing of men and women except what is reasonable. But human beings fail, and fall prey to irrational self-isolation" (Koch 1984: 193). [13]

2. The Way of Jesus

George Soares-Prabhu believed that no one title could comprehend adequately the mystery of Jesus.[14] The term 'prophet', however, seems to describe the Jesus of history adequately enough, at least as Jesus' contemporaries must have perceived him (*CWG 3*, 126).[15] As in the case of all the biblical prophets, a profound personal experience of God was the foundation for the prophetic ministry of Jesus. The call narratives of the prophets were indicative of their God experience (cf. Is 6:1-13; Jer 1:4-10; Ezek 1:4-3:11; Amos 7.14). But there is no such a call narrative in the case of Jesus, unless we take his baptism at Jordan as one in a broad sense. In any case, Jesus' baptism was his foundational experience (*CWG* 4, 258). Biblical scholars call it the "Abba Experience" of Jesus, an experience of God as unconditional love. It was nothing short of a mystical experience, eliciting the mystical consciousness in Jesus.[16] Like the prophetic symbolic acts in the First Testament, this was the first symbolic act of Jesus, the symbolic significance of which is succinctly expressed by St. Paul in terms of paschal mystery in Rom. 6:3-11, esp. v.10: "the death he died, he died to sin and the life he lives he lives to God." Before dying to sin, Jesus identifies with the sins of humanity.[17]

This experience definitely shattered Jesus' ordinary pattern of existence and impelled him to adopt a different kind of life with far reaching consequences (*CWG* 3, 93). Soares-Prabhu unravels the contours of that life "both as the dharma he practiced (Jesus' dharma) and the dharma he preached (Christian dharma)."[18] We saw that one of the two-fold function of prophetic ministry was to reclaim the Mosaic vision of contrast community. Jesus does something similar, but goes far beyond a contrast community.

His vision was for a "contrast humanity" (an alternative way of being human)[19] and the term he used for it was "the kingdom of God" – a term he adopted with significant adaptations from the Jewish tradition.

Kingdom of God was a typical expression of Jesus through which he articulated his personal experience of God and the concomitant mystical consciousness. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God was definitely the central concern of his prophetic ministry in words and deeds and it was also the content of his symbolic actions such as table-fellowship with sinners, and his healings and exorcisms. Jesus, of course, never spoke in terms of a vision of a new society. But it is not at all difficult articulate that vision from the abundant data available from Jesus' public ministry.

In an excellent exegetical article on Mk 1:14-15 George Soares-Prabhu recapitulates precisely this vision for us (*CWG 4*, 223-51). Although the expression "Kingdom of God" was typical of Jesus the concept was not. His contemporaries did have an understanding about God's kingly rule and articulated it differently in terms of political power, armed power, moral power and cosmic power. What was unique to Jesus was that he experienced it and expressed it in terms of unconditional love. So, what Jesus basically proclaimed was about the free offer of God's unconditional love, which in turn demands from us a response. The following is a good summary of the article, in Soares-Prabhu's own words:

> When the revelation of God's love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in man's acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings *freedom* inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters *fellowship*, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads on to *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt just societal structures which alone

make freedom and fellowship possible. Freedom, fellowship and justice are thus the parameters of the Kingdom's thrust towards the liberation of man (*CWG* 4, 238-239).

As it is clear from this summary, Kingdom of God is the foundation that Jesus laid for a New Humanity, a New World, thereby taking the biblical prophets' way of energizing a contrast community to a new height. Jesus not only proclaimed the Kingdom of God, he also practiced it and inaugurated it by embodying the parameters of that Kingdom in his own person, thus emphasizing the fact that the Kingdom, a gift from God, is, also, both a human responsibility and a human possibility.

Jesus manifested an extraordinary freedom despite the fact that he held no social position or power and he associated it with his baptism experience (cf. Mk 11:27-33).[20] In a society that was politically colonized, socially patriarchal, and religiously conservative, the God experience of Jesus enabled him to confront the religious, social and political establishment of his time with absolute freedom and authority. That authority was evident in the way he taught in word and deed and the manner in which he related with women, children and those who were socially excluded and remarkably in his interpretation of Mosaic law, especially the law of Sabbath and the law of purity. Personally, he was free from inner conditioning, such as addictions and attachments, fear, greed and ambition.

A person who is ***free from*** internal conditionings and external compulsions is ***free for*** loving, that is, to be one's authentic self as an image of God who is love. Unlike the Pharisees and the Sectarians of Qumran, "Jesus opted for a radicalism which sought to realize as perfectly as possible, the spirit of the Law, which he saw embodied in love (agape), that is in interhuman concern" (*CWG* 3, 7). In a very creative way, Jesus, not only, sums up the entire Scripture in terms of the two love commandments - Deut 6:4-5; and Lev 19:18 – (cf. Mt 22:34-40), but further seems to reduce the two into one, by understanding Lev 19:18 as an implication of Deut 6:4-5. In fact, our love for the

neighbour issues from (1 Jn 4:4) and images (Mt 5:43-48) God's love for us.[21] Jesus' practice of and preaching about love, surely, presents *agapē* as "an existential attitude, deriving from a change in one's being."[22] When love received from God is shared with one another it becomes the foundation for fellowship and justice in the human family.

Soares-Prabhu cites Paul's exhortation (Gal 5:1, 13) and Paul's own example (1 Cor 9:19) while explaining the connection between freedom and fellowship, and further asserts: "The freedom of the Kingdom finds its fulfilment not in selfish wilfulness but in commitment. … in our unconditional love for others" (*CWG* 4, 240). Jesus' own example is his prophetic symbolic act of "table fellowship" with those people excluded from the society. "It is the expression of a radically new (and therefore thoroughly disturbing) theological vision, rooted in a new experience of God, and calling for a new kind of society."[23] Later on in the same article just quoted, Soares significantly emphasizes the fact that, "The Eucharist has always carried the memory of Jesus' meals with tax collectors and sinners."[24]

Jesus' commitment for justice is evident from the way "Jesus confronts the exploitative situation of his time by taking a decisive stance for the poor (the oppressed) and against the rich (the oppressor)."[25] Through two comparative studies of Lk 4:18-19 with Is 61:1-2 (LXX) and Lk 6:20-23 with Mt 5:3-12, Soares highlights Luke's clear understanding of Jesus' social stance for the exploited and suffering poor (*CWG* 3, 157-61). Surprisingly, Soares interprets Jesus' ministry of healing and exorcism as incidents of Jesus' subversion of an oppressive power structure, on the basis of Jesus' apocalyptic world-view.[26] Finally, Soares cites a number of incidents as examples of a sustained attack on an 'establishment' which was not just a religious authority but packed much economic and political clout, and therefore an attack on the structures of the society as well (*CWG* 3, 156).

Thus, the brief public life of Jesus could be summed up in terms of a two-dimensional (inter-connected) prophetic ministry of

solidarity and conflict – solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, the victims of injustice and conflict with the people of the establishment responsible for that injustice – both expressions of his foundational God-experience.[27] His experience of God as love, though universal in its object – without any discrimination, is, however, differentiated in its expression, on the one hand in terms of solidarity with the oppressed and on the other hand confrontation with the oppressors.[28]

Teaching was a prominent element in the prophetic ministry of Jesus, which set him apart from the biblical prophets of old. Soares-Prabhu quotes three Markan texts to highlight three aspects of Jesus' teaching: "He went about ***among the villages*** (of Galilee) teaching (Mk 6:6); "he taught them as one who had ***authority*** and not as the scribes" (Mk 1:22); "he taught everything in ***parables***" (Mk 4:33) (*CWG* 4, 253).[29] He, further, qualifies the pedagogy of Jesus as non-elitist and praxis-oriented and in addition, highlights the authority of Jesus as both revolutionary and liberative – an authority that is ultimately rooted in Jesus' foundational God-experience. Finally, he explains as to how the pedagogy of Jesus was liberative in a double way:

> As non-elitist, dialogical teaching, it liberated people by making them conscious of their worth as the children of the one Father in heaven (Mt 6:9) … And as prophetic and critical teaching it freed them from the manipulative myths which legitimized their oppressive and alienating society, and pointed them" (*CWG* 4, 263).

Soares devotes another long article to explain Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, which according to him, "gives us the authentic *dharma* of Jesus – the pattern of existence he lived by and proclaimed."[30] Thus, Jesus' prophetic ministry of teaching was a way of raising an alternative consciousness as a foundation for an alternative world.[31]

3. The Way of Soares-Prabhu

The previous two sections were, in summary form, Soares' own understanding of the prophetic ministry of both the biblical prophets and of Jesus. In the present section, we shall see as to how Soares himself carried out his prophetic ministry in his own specific way.

Almost like Amos (7:14) Soares-Prabhu might have said, "I am not a prophet, but a professor of biblical theology and a writer," and associated his call to be a Jesuit with his prophetic mission, at least in retrospect. And I would imagine his foundational God-experience during his month-long Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, to be more specific, during the meditation on the Call of the Eternal King to labour with him in His mission (cf. Sp. Ex. 91-100). And I would like to envisage his prophetic mission in the pattern of biblical prophets and especially of Jesus in terms of dismantling and energizing, pulling down and building up.

Most of his articles reveal Soares-Prabhu as an expert exegete. He did not claim to speak on behalf of God as the biblical prophets did nor did he have the temerity to declare, "…but I say unto you," as Jesus did. But he did take the pain to tell us "the meaning, now, of what God spoke then." His main task was to bridge the spatio-temporal gap between the biblical time Palestine and the present modern India. He does this by presenting a critique of 'Historical Criticism' as ineffective, irrelevant and ideologically loaded method, and alternatively presenting an exegetical method for India.[32] I can only summarize the salient features of that method.

Soares-Prabhu's major contribution is in terms of proposing two complementary approaches to the Indian reading of the Bible – an Indian 'religious' reading and an Indian 'social' reading – corresponding to the two major and peculiar aspects of the Indian context – the wealth of India's religious traditions and the desperate economic poverty of its people.[33] According to Soares, in a dialogical hermeneutics, essential for an Indian exegesis, the meaning of the text emerges from a creative and

dialogical encounter between the concerns of the interpreter and the semantic autonomy of the text. Having said that, next, he elaborates on the 'hermeneutical circle,' highlighting the two poles of this circle: the negative pole is to do with an ***ideological suspicion*** about our understanding of reality, which in turn leads to an ***exegetical suspicion*** about the way in which Bible has been interpreted; the positive pole is to do with the concerns of an Indian interpreter, namely, a commitment to the poor and religious plurality made within the perspective of the ***inclusive, cosmocentric, symbolic*** and ***pragmatic*** Indian world-view.[34] In brief, the prophetic significance of these efforts of Soares is to pose a challenge to make strenuous efforts to free ourselves from our Western bourgeoisie conditioning in order to get in touch with, and articulate the questions which the 'real' India addresses the Bible.[35] Soares spells out the Christian response to the Indian situation within the liberative thrust of the biblical perspective marked with the following four features. It will be ***historical, incarnational, preferentially weighted,*** and ***integral*** *(CWG* 4, 198-207).

I have come across at least eight articles in which Soares applies the hermeneutical method he has suggested for India, and brings out interesting and relevant insights for our context.[36] Soares studies Jesus' revolutionary praxis of 'table fellowship' with the socially excluded people and relating it to the scandalous practice of caste system in the Indian Church, he makes a very strong prophetic critique of the same Indian Church. He also envisages a Dalit reading of the Mosaic Decalogue of Ex 20 in contrast with the Hindu law of Manu. By highlighting the universal scope of the Decalogue (with no trace of class discrimination) and its underlying vision of an egalitarian society, he critiques the law of Manu. On the other hand, Soares looks at the Tribal community in India and studying their values of anti-greed and anti-pride, he presents those values as strikingly similar to those taught in the Bible in general and in the teaching of Jesus in particular, with a special reference to Mk 10:17-27 and Mk10:35-45. The prophetic function of this article is to emphasize these values as

something which Jesus demanded from his followers, because, "They are the structuring principles of the alternative community he sought to build" (*CWG* 1, 256).

The prophetic passion of Soares is evident in his "Class in the Bible," where he presents a sociological and a dialectical understanding of the poor in the Bible "as all those who are actually or potentially oppressed"[37] to preclude any romanticized or spiritualized understanding of poverty. The Bible also presents the poor as a dynamic group playing a significant role in history, which is understood as the locus of God's encounter with humankind. The prophetic hope (expressed through this article) of realizing a contrast community, which is free, just and non-exploitative, is based on a new understanding of God, who always acts in favour of the poor.

Soares is not just an exegete; he is primarily a theologian.[38] He starts presenting biblical prophets as theologians, highlighting social analysis as an essential aspect of their theologizing process whose ultimate scope is social transformation.[39] And he ends envisaging every theologian as a prophet.[40] Thus, it is obvious that Soares would have understood his mission as a theologian in prophetical terms. We shall see, now, some aspects of his prophetic mission.

Like the biblical prophets, the theologizing process of Soares contains a thorough analysis of the peculiar situation of the Indian context.[41] His prophetic urge is to understand his Christian God-experience in this Indian context and respond to that context from the power of his God-experience. He blends beautifully compassion and care with criticism and challenge. His is a universal perspective and so more theocentric than Christocentric and much less church-centric. Interestingly, the universal perspective of Soares is a legacy he acquired from Christ himself.[42]

If theology means to contextualize one's faith, then, according to Soares Indian theology must be "inculturated theology." Unfortunately, the missionary preachers of the Gospel in the past

did not enter into dialogue with ancient civilizations, instead imposed their own monologue. As a result, Indian Christian theology has remained a borrowed and impoverished theology. An authentic Indian Christian theology is possible only when it attempts to understand Christian God-experience in the specific Indian context with its multifaceted religiosity, its overwhelming poverty and its oppressive caste system.[43] The prophetic concern of Soares is evident in that very attempt when he discovers with reverence the pluralism of religions as "the homage which the finite mind pays to the inexhaustibility of the infinity,"[44] on the one hand and the pathos of God in the suffering of the poor and the dalits, on the other. As part of the prophetic energizing mission, he proposes transformative actions with inculturation[45] and dialogue[46] as essential aspects of that liberative process.

As a part of constructing an inculturated Indian theology, Soares-Prabhu contextualizes Christian mission in the context of India and presents exegetical studies on Christian mission in his usual lucid and convincing style. He studies the shape of the biblical story, developed in three cycles, ultimately leading to the triumph of creation in the new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21:1). According to the logic of the trajectory of the biblical story, the primary mission of the Church is to lead humankind and cosmic history to its fulfilment, in the full realization of God's Reign. The concerns of Christian mission therefore extend beyond the interests of the Church to embrace all the manifold demands of the Reign of God -- its concerns embrace every aspect of human and cosmic liberation (*CWG* 1, 3-15).

Reflecting on Mt 5:13-16 Soares-Prabhu offers a corrective to a flawed understanding of Christian mission and draws attention to forgotten dimensions of mission which are of particular relevance to the Church in India. His concludes that mission is not Christocentric (making disciples of Christ) but theocentric (giving glory to God by building up God's Kingdom); and the way to this mission is not so much individual proclamation as the witness of the Church as a community (*CWG* 1, 16-25).

According to Soares-Prabhu's exegetical study, the two great 'mission texts' Mt 28:16-20 and Mt 10 are not primarily texts about mission but about Christian discipleship. They are addressed not to missionaries, but to the followers of Jesus, exhorting them to continue the mission of Jesus, who did not come primarily to build a Church or even found a religion, but to bring total liberation to humankind (*CWG* 1, 26-47).

Dialogue is not a matter of strategy for proclaiming our faith, but a matter of genuine give and take – openness to learn from the experience of others and willingness to share our experience. As a sign of his openness, Soares-Prabhu proves biblically something which he knows intuitively. From the way in which the Old Testament is quoted by the New, he argues, we can speak meaningfully of the inspiration of the Old Testament and, further, extend it to non-Christian scriptures as well (*CWG* 2, 98). As if to prove his point, he studies a Buddhist text and shows that it is not only inspired, but it "helps us to arrive at a more rounded interpretation of the mission command in Matthew, by pointing to elements implicit in it, which, though explicit elsewhere in the Gospel, could be overlooked in an over-focused, atomistic reading of the text" (*CWG* 4, 66). Soares goes one step further. In defending the idol worship in Hinduism, he does a prophetic critique of a prophetical text (Is 44:9-20).[47] He considers the ferocious attack on idols as both a display of prejudiced ignorance and a fallacy within the logic of monotheism. Ironically, he opines, the religion of Second Isaiah, on account of its "mental images" for God, is as "idolatrous" as that of the people he mocks.[48]

Next, as the foundation for a self-critical exercise, Soares-Prabhu studies the sociological moorings of the Jesus movement. It was one of several responses to the Jewish society of Jesus' time in deep crisis – a crisis caused by colonialism – which had affected all the areas of Jewish life - economic, political, cultural and religious. Jesus' response was in terms of building a community, emerging from and embodying the God-experience of Jesus -- a community that was free, all inclusive, open to sharing, prepared for service, and radically equal. He concludes

the study with this thought-provoking prophetical statement: "Two thousand years after its emergence we still have to 'realize' the radical vision of the Jesus community" (*CWG* 4, 148). In the same prophetical spirit and on the basis of the radical community that Jesus had envisaged, Soares-Prabhu critiques the present state of the Church in India as a community that is divided on the basis of caste (*CWG* 1, 223-40), prejudiced against other religions (*CWG* 3, 163-72) and communalistic in its ideological outlook (*CWG* 1, 173-90). He, however, acknowledges: "Yet there is among Christians today (both Roman Catholic and others) a growing universalist praxis. Christian groups do reach out to others in authentic, respectful dialogue, and in a wholly noncommunal social concern" (*CWG* 1, 186). Basing his hope on this "radical remnant" Soares-Prabhu presents the relevance of Jesus for India today in terms of his ability to hold together in an intimate and indissoluble unity man's God-experience (the concern of various religions) and his human-concern (the concern of various ideologies operative in India) (*CWG* 1, 198).

The deep desire behind Soares-Prabhu's teaching and writing must have been to enlarge and strengthen that "radical remnant" who would actualize the radical vision of Jesus. He was addressing the priests, and men and women religious of India and through them eventually the Christian laity.

On the basis of his inspiring insights into the New Testament, he boldly asserts that Jesus' horizons were prophetic and not priestly and that the sacralization and clericalization of Christian priesthood as unfortunate distortions. The attitude of service is essential to the New Testament understanding of every form of Christian office and priesthood in particular. Further, this service is specified in terms of working for the eschatological 'contrast community' which Jesus called Kingdom of God. He quotes *Gaudium et Spes* 42 in support of his assertion (*CWG* 2, 214-44). In a similar vein, following the lead of Vatican II (*Perfectae Caritatis*), Soares grounds his understanding of religious life solidly in the Gospels and presents it as a way of following Jesus. The religious communities – as communities of ***being***

(following Jesus in his life-style) and as communities of ***action*** (following Jesus in his mission) – are expected to be "contrast communities" symbolically representing the Kingdom of God (*CWG* 3, 205-24). "This twofold structure of religious life as a following of Jesus (the mystical and the political) defines its prophetic dimension. For biblical prophetism can be described appropriately as the presence of the mystical in the historical" (*CWG* 3, 214). From this it is obvious that both as a priest and a religious Soares definitely understood his vocation in terms of prophetic ministry.

Next, Soares-Prabhu explores the three vows (poverty, chastity and obedience) of the Christian religious life against the background of the three puruṣārthas (artha, kāma and dharma) of classical Hinduism and articulates on the meaning and the goals of Christian existence (*CWG* 3, 260-75). He highlights the positive orientation of the three vows as "expressions of the specific Christian freedom … which derives from the core Christian experience of God's unconditional love" (*CWG* 3, 269). But, this freedom, as St. Paul would explain in Gal 5:13, is not a freedom ***of*** the ego, but a freedom ***from*** the ego (the false self) resulting in the freedom ***for*** being one's authentic self as the "image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:27), in other words, in the freedom for loving as God loves. Soares links this positive aspect of freedom with the purpose of human existence as intended by God in Gen 1:28 in terms of dedicating oneself to the compelling task of creating a more human world, the Kingdom of God (*CWG* 3, 270-271).

Summing up, we can say that Soares-Prabhu was and (his presence immortalized through his writings) continues to be a prophet for our times. He definitely understood his call to be a Christian in general and a priest and religious in particular in terms of prophetic mission. He carried that mission, in the specific context of India, relying on the legacy he had received both as an Indian and as a Christian. He followed the prophetic paradigm set by the biblical prophets, especially by Jesus. The foundation for his prophetic mission is the foundational God-experience of

Jesus – God as a loving parent – assimilated, appropriated and made personal. The contours of his prophetic mission consist, on the one hand, in energizing the imagination of Indians with the vision of Jesus for an alternative humanity and, on the other hand, in critiquing both the situation in India and in the Church on the basis of that vision. His deep desire was that Christians would live their prophetic vocation on the model of Jesus himself and that Indians would follow Jesus, not necessarily by becoming Christians but as free and loving human beings experiencing God as the loving parent and loving one another as brothers and sisters and thus creating a New Humanity.

4. Conclusion: The Way Ahead

Twenty-five years since the death of Soares-Prabhu, the situation of India has only worsened. There has been a concerted effort to reduce the rich heritage of Hinduism to a horrendous Hindutva fascist ideology, thereby endangering religious harmony. Many thousands of migrant workers walking miles homeward, during the recent lockdown on account of the Covid-19 pandemic, was only the tip of an iceberg of the widespread poverty in India. The new phenomena of mob-lynching and other atrocities reveal the sorry state of Dalits and minority in India. Added to these is the real danger of systematic dismantling of democracy and the undoing of Indian Constitutions. But one could see a flickering sign of hope in the recent incident of mass support for the senior advocate Prashant Bhushan and the widespread anti-CAA agitation earlier.

In this scenario, what does it mean to be a prophet? We Christians are not only a minority, but a silent minority. Inculturation, dialogue and collaboration are absolutely essential, not only for the sake of survival in the midst of pluri-religious society, (*CWG* 1, 164) but mainly because of the mission of building the Kingdom of God. The very nature and dynamics of the Kingdom demands that. One of the obstacles is an in-built dilemma between two opposing beliefs that Christians

hold . According to Soares, "… the Church's understanding of herself must be coherent with her professed attitude towards others."[49] Fundamental to the challenging theological issues that the Church faces in this self-understanding is Christology – a Christology that embodies a spirituality leading to transformation and praxis.[50] This is the challenging task ahead of us.[51]

Francis D'Sa had already undertaken that task in 1977 (D'Sa, 1977: 418-68). On the superficial level the confluence (***sangam***) of the myth of ***Samsāra*** (the core of Hinduism) and the myth of Salvation History (the heart of Christianity) does not appear to be feasible. But D'Sa takes up the insights of both the traditions and lets them grow into a symbiotic union within an enlightening cosmotheandric perspective proposed by Raimon Panikkar. Within that perspective he shows the complementarity of Bhagavad Gita's vision of ***Lokasangraha*** and Jesus' vision of ***Kingdom of God.*** It is true that, strictly and technically speaking, D'Sa is not presenting any Christology, but if one could realize, on the one hand, that, within cosmotheandric vision, "Humans are not merely Humans and the Cosmos not merely Cosmos and where the Divine Mystery interpenetrates and is interpenetrated by the Human and the Cosmic" (D'Sa, 1997: 456-57) and on the other hand, perceive that Jesus was the embodiment of the Kingdom, then there are enough hints to build a Christology from the Indian perspective. And that Christology, unlike the medieval Christology that we seem to follow, will surely embody a spirituality leading to transformation and praxis.

It is only through this transformative praxis we can sustain the Kingdom reality initiated by Jesus. But for that it is essential to understand and participate in the two "mysteries" of the confessional history of Jesus -- "incarnation" and "resurrection".[52] Because a "mystery" understood in terms of a "myth" points to the transcendental dimension in every human person.

In an enlightening article, George Gispert-Sauch, using an Indian insight, explains the eschatological mysteries of Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus (Gispert-Sauch, 2002: 282-

302).[53] According to Gispert the resurrection of Jesus provides us with a *pāramārthika* experience of reality[54], the ultimate goal of life as life with God (*CWG* 4, 290). This goal of life is realized via the way of the cross – dissolving one's life in the service of others, especially in the option and struggles for the poor.[55] Following the same insight of Gispert, I feel, we could understand "incarnation" as a way of summing up Jesus' life from the perspective of *pāramārthika*. According to Soares, "The solidarity of Jesus with the poor and the outcaste finds its Christological symbol in the *incarnation*." The same could be expressed in terms of the Johannine original (1:14), with a slight modification: "And the ***concern of God*** became flesh and lived among us…."[56] In brief, I like to understand "incarnation" not as pointing to pre-existent Christ (existing before time) and "resurrection" as an end-time experience, but both as *pāramārthika* experiences in the stillness of the present, where time ceases. Gispert explains *pāramārthika* experience as "a higher form of consciousness that will enable us to be aware of the "Supreme Reality" (paramārtha*)* underlying our experience… It transforms our vision of the world and thereby heals us of the experiences of suffering" (Gispert-Sauch, 2002: 296-97). Gispert, actually, is pointing to the need to commute, daily, between the depth dimension of our existence (***pāramārthika)*** and the practical dimension of our daily life (***vyāvahārika***).

I repeat a statement of Soares-Prabhu I had quoted in the first page: "The Church is nothing if not prophetic" (*CWG* 1, 170) Karl Rahner had made a statement: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all." Combining both the statements, the Christian in the future is expected to be both a mystic and a prophet, because both the aspects are inseparable as two sides of a coin, as we saw in the case of biblical prophets and in a special way in the person of Jesus.

The way ahead of us, as human beings in general and Indian Christians in particular, is to follow the life pattern set by Jesus both as a mystic and a prophet. A new earth is possible with a new heaven. (cf. Rev 21:1) The motto of the World Social Forum:

"Another world is possible" is a verbalization of the dream for "the new earth". According to Eckhart Tolle "*'A new heaven' is the emergence of a transformed state of human consciousness, and 'a new earth' is its reflection in the physical realm."*[57] As Albert Einstein had pointed out, we are trying, pathetically, to solve the problems of our daily life with the same mind that had created them in the first place. Therefore, we need to bring the *pāramārthika* dimension of our life (the higher level of consciousness) in order to infuse new vitality into the *vyāvahārika* aspect of our practical life. Finally, if we understand our prophetic ministry not just in terms of speaking but of comprehensive acting on behalf of God then it is an imperative for all to be ***mystics in prophetic action***.[58]

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Notes

1. I have consulted all the articles of George M. Soares-Prabhu from the four volumes of "Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu, S.J., published by Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth Theology Series, Pune. For the sake of space and brevity, henceforth, CWG refers to The Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu, S.J. For more details of the four volumes please see the Reference.
2. Keith D'Souza, while presenting a summary reading of the written works of George Soares-Prabhu, portrays him as "A Theologian for Our Times". In the course of discussing Soares' contributions to Indian theology, Keith quotes Soares: "And how are we to understand professionalism in such a theology? Should not professionalism be at the service of prophetism? Will not the theologian in India be at his or her most professional when he or she is most prophetic in word and dead?," (D'Souza, 1997: 11).
3. This section is a summary of the three articles of Soares-Prabhu, with a few additions from other scholars: Soares-Prabhu, "Socio-Cultural Analysis in Prophetic Theologizing: A Biblical Paradigm" CWG 2, 61-67; Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of the Biblical Prophet" CWG 3, 103-25; Soares-Prabhu, "The Prophet as Theologian: Biblical Prophetism as a Paradigm for Doing Theology Today," CWG 4, 14-23.
4. This is articulated well in the four codes: the Covenant Code of Ex 20:22-23:33; the Holiness Code of Lev 17-20; the Priestly Code of Lev 2-12; and the Deuteronomic Code of Deut 12-26.
5. Brueggemann,(1978: 13). Here, we can see not only Moses as a paradigm for prophets but the exodus liberation itself as a paradigm for various revolutions in world history. See (Walzer, 1984)
6. Triptych in form, because the three dimensions of the change wrought by Solomon (an economic of affluence, a politics of oppression and a religious ideology of domesticating God) could be distinguished but not separated one from the other. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of the Biblical Prophet" (see n.

4 above) CWG 3, 112-13. See also Brueggemann, (n.5 above) 36-37.

7. CWG 3, 113. Buddha in his mystical experience found the root of human suffering in general, but the prophets in their mystical experience discovered the social dimension of human suffering.

8. Abraham Heschel, The Prophets, Vol. II, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1975, 6. According to Heschel pathos of God is the most fundamental understanding of the biblical God.

9. I heard this phrase from my Novice Master and it expresses Jeremiah's situation well.

10. Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of the Biblical Prophet," CWG 3, 117. Soares-Prabhu is quoting Max Weber.

11. Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of the Biblical Prophet," CWG 3, 123. Here Soares-Prabhu is quoting Abraham Heschel who describes prophecy as exegesis of existence from a divine perspective.

12. See Abraham Heschel, The Prophets, Vol. II, 11. In fact, Heschel understands biblical religion not in terms of what the human person does with his/her solitariness, but rather in terms of what he/she does with God's concern for all human beings (p. 10).

13. Later on, Koch makes a statement to the effect that the biblical God is thought as the "rational" ground of all positive reality and all progressive history (p. 196).

14. This section is very important to understand Soares-Prabhu as a prophet for two reasons. One, we will consider Jesus as the prophet par excellence. Two, Jesus plays the central role in the way Soares-Prabhu understood his prophetic ministry. Here, I will try to synthesize a number of Soares' articles on the person of Jesus.

15. Soares-Prabhu, however, prefers and so coins a term "Jesus of Faith" and places it in the trajectory of Christological development somewhere between "Jesus of History" and "Christ of Faith". See Soares-Prabhu, "The Jesus of Faith: A Christological Contribution to an Ecumenical Third World Spirituality"

CWG 4, 267-95. Soares-Prabhu spends nearly one third of the article in presenting the rationale for his preference.

16. As reported by Mt, 11:27, Jesus would say "No one knows the Father, but the Son…" using the word "know" in the deep biblical sense of "sexual union between a man and his wife" (cf. Gen 4:1). Later, John the evangelist would imply the same meaning in Jn 10:30; 14:9. Although the experience is presented in a dramatic way, my personal hunch is that the experience must have preceded the narrated event.

17. Mk 1:4 makes this point obvious without any embarrassment, while Mt 3:14-15 tries to justify and Lk avoids the issue. Along with Mark and Paul, we could understand the baptism experience of Jesus as the first paschal event symbolizing the movement from human alienation to human at-one-ment with God, a movement from divisive consciousness to the unitive consciousness. According to Soares, "… it is this act of identification … that becomes the occasion for Jesus' foundational experience of God." (see Soares-Prabhu, "The Spirituality of Jesus" CWG 3, 99)

18. Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of Jesus," CWG 3, 3. I would designate as 'human dharma' rather as "Christian dharma" for the obvious reason that Jesus never addressed Christians as such. Besides, his self-understanding as a Son will lead him to conclude, logically, every other human person as a brother or sister – a point Soares emphasizes so often.

19. The motto of the World Social Forum – "Another World Is Possible" – could be considered an equivalent for Jesus' vision of "Kingdom of God".

20. In a couple of articles Soares-Prabhu explains convincingly the psycho-social dynamics of the experience of (God's) love in general and its concrete manifestations in the person of Jesus with telling examples from the Gospel narratives. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of Jesus," CWG 3, 4-7; "The Kingdom of God," CWG 4, 239-40; "The Jesus of Faith," CWG 4, 283-286.

21. Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of Jesus," CWG 3, 8. If we understand agapē in the typical New Testament sense as an active and effective concern for the other, then 1 Jn. 4:10-11 captures

beautifully the logical flow of love dynamics in the Kingdom of God. [Understood in this sense, the word love in Deut. 6:4-5 may not mean the same thing as the same word in Let. 19:18. Love in Deut 6:4-5, probably, means "reverence," "respect," or "honour." Soares-Prabhu himself says, "Our appropriate response to God's love for us, is not that we love God in return (for God cannot be the object of our concern: "no one has ever seen God," as 1 Jn.4:12 says,) but that we love our neighbour." See his "The Kingdom of God," CWG 4, 241. Abraham Heschel, too, seems to have understood the core of biblical religion in the same sense. See n. 12 above.

22. Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of Jesus," CWG 3, 8. Soares-Prabhu elaborates the same point, also, in "The Love Commandment," CWG 3, 65-71; and "The Synoptic Love-Commandment: The Dimensions of Love in the Teachings of Jesus," CWG 4, 110-25.

23. Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today," CWG 1, 226. Soares studies elaborately, in this article, the theme of this extraordinarily revolutionary praxis of Jesus, "in which," he quotes Geza Vermes' opinion, "Jesus differed most from both his contemporaries and his prophetic predecessors," 226. The present quotation is practically the summary of Soares-Prabhu' article.

24. Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus," CWG 1, 235. Further, Soares-Prabhu quotes biblical scholars Norman Perrin (end note 32) and Joachim Jeremias (end note 33) in support of this fact. Moreover, he also discusses two related situations in the New Testament: the conflict between Paul and Peter in Gal 1:11-16 and the scandalous way of celebrating the Lord 's Supper in 1 Cor 11:20ff (see p. 236).

25. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and Social Justice: A World in Need of Liberation," CWG 3, 152. See also his brief note on, "The Social Stance of Jesus," CWG 3, 145-48.

26. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and Social Justice," CWG 3, 156-57. He makes a significant statement: "The miracles of Jesus are thus paradigms for the struggle for social justice rather than examples of 'social work,' quoting his own article, "The Miracles

of Jesus: The Subversion of a Power Structure?" in S. Kappen (Ed), Jesus Today, (Madras, AICUF, 1983), 24-29, which is also available in CWG 3, 23-30). Further, see, Soares-Prabhu, "Signs Not Wonders: Understanding the Miracles of Jesus as Jesus Understood them," CWG 3, 13-22; and "The Miracles of Jesus Today," CWG 3, 31-42 for further elaboration of the same theme.

27. Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of Jesus," CWG 3, 10. See also his, "Jesus and Conflict," CWG 3, 136-44.

28. Soares-Prabhu, "The Spirituality of Jesus," CWG 3, 93-98, and "The Jesus of Faith," CWG 4, 288-90.

29. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus the Teacher," CWG 4, 253 (Italics in the original, boldface added).

30. Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of Jesus: An Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount," CWG 4, 155.

31. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus the Teacher," CWG 4, 262. Soares-Prabhu considers the parabolic teaching of Jesus as a form of what Paulo Freire calls "conscientization". I would like to extend that to the overall teaching of Jesus.

32. See Soares-Prabhu, "Towards an Indian Interpretation of the Bible," CWG 1, 207-22. We must note, however, that Soares-Prabhu does not 'throw the baby with the bath-water'. He does acknowledge the limited value of the Historical Criticism for checking arbitrary interpretations and eisegetical attempts.

33. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Historical Critical Method," CWG 3, 75-82. The clarion call of Soares in this article is for an "Integral Indian Reading" combining the two 'readings' suggested as two inseparable sides of a coin.

34. See Soares-Prabhu, "Commitment and Conversion: A Biblical Hermeneutic for India Today," CWG 4, 27-41. In the rest of the article Soares discusses the question, "How does an Indian reading of the Bible relate to Historical Criticism…?," 41-47.

35. See Soares-Prabhu, "Commitment and Conversion," CWG 4, 35. In this context, it is essential to read two important articles of Soares-Prabhu which elaborate on the two major concerns of Indian situation: "The Indian Church Challenged by Poverty

and Caste," CWG 1, 141-56 and "The Indian Church Challenged by Pluralism and Dialogue," CWG 1, 157-72.

36. Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today," CWG 1, 223-40; "Antigreed and Antipride: Mark 10:17-27 and 10:35-45 in the Light of Tribal Values," CWG 1, 241-59; "The Man Born Blind: Understanding a Johannine Sign in India Today," Vol.2, 187-97; "The Sacred in the Secular: Reflections on a Johannine Sutra: 'The Word Was Made Flesh and Dwelt Among Us' (Jn. 1:14)," CWG 2, 201-13; "'And There Was a Great Calm': A 'Dhvani' Reading of the Stilling of the Storm (Mk. 4:35-41)," CWG 2, 245-55; "Laughing at Idols: The Dark Side of Biblical Monotheism (An Indian Reading of Isaiah 44:9-20)," CWG 2, 272-96; "A Dalit Reading of the Decalogue," CWG 4, 208-13; "John 1:1-18: An Asian Perspective – Reading the Prologue of John with an Indian Mind," CWG 4, 214-19. On account of space limit, I can't afford to comment on all of these exegetical articles except a few which has a direct bearing on the theme of my paper.

37. Soares-Prabhu, "Class in the Bible: The Biblical Poor a Social Class?," CWG 1, 269. Consequently, the prophetic concern of Soares-Prabhu has less to do with social work of dispensing charity and more to do with social justice, demanding change of oppressive structures of the society.

38. Soares-Prabhu was a theologian in the sense of Anselm's definition of "seeking to make sense of the foundational experience articulated in the Bible." Interestingly, such theological endeavour is evident in the Bible itself.

39. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Prophet as a Theologian," CWG 4, 14-23, especially the last statement on p.21.

40. See Soares-Prabhu, "Socio-Cultural Analysis in Prophetic Theologizing," CWG 2, 61-67, especially his five suggestions for theologizing today on p.66 which he concludes with: "Would that all our theology were prophetic in this way!" Actually, the two terms – prophet and theologian – are, for Soares, interchangeable.

41. "Contextual Analysis", being more comprehensive, might be a better term than "social analysis". Interestingly and imaginatively Soares-Prabhu rephrases Anselm's definition of theology: "To do theology means to contextualize one's faith." Soares-Prabhu, "From Alienation to Inculturation: Some Reflections on Doing Theology in India Today," CWG 1, 79. Soares-Prabhu presents three aspects of Indian context with a progressive focus: wide spread poverty (common to the Third World countries); rich religious traditions (peculiar to Asian countries); and caste (specific to India). For Soares-Prabhu "Doing Theology" is not just a professional activity of a theologian, but is a concrete way of living Christian faith by every Christian.

42. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Unprejudiced Jesus and the Prejudiced Church," CWG 3, 163-72. According to Soares-Prabhu, we must relate to God as Jesus did rather than relate to Jesus as God.

43. It is not within the scope of this paper to describe as to how Soares-Prabhu does this. That may be done by other writers in this book. My purpose is to highlight the prophetic dimension of his theological endeavour.

44. Soares-Prabhu, "The Indian Church Challenged by Pluralism and Dialogue," CWG 1, 164. We must note that Soares' analysis of the Indian context is based on the universal perspective of his God-experience.

45. See Soares-Prabhu, "From Alienation to Inculturation: Some Reflections on Doing Theology in India Today," CWG 1, 79-111, esp. 93-103 where he presents inculturation negatively as freedom from "colonized consciousness" and positively on the model of "conversion". See also G.M. Soares, "The New Testament as a Model of Inculturation," CWG 1, 112-23.

46. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Indian Church Challenged by Pluralism and Dialogue," CWG 1, esp. 169-70, where he talks about the challenges of this dialogue in terms of articulating an adequate theology of religions, theology of salvation, a Christology and theology of mission.

47. Soares-Prabhu, "Laughing at Idols: The Dark Side of Biblical Monotheism (An Indian Reading of Isaiah 44:9-20)," CWG 2, 272-96

48. We must remember that Soares-Prabhu had presented the prophetic critique of idol worship as a legitimate prophetic ministry, on account of the social behaviour such worship legitimized. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Prophet as Theologian" CWG 4, 18-19. But, unfortunately, Soares-Prabhu does not enter into that issue here.

49. Soares-Prabhu, "Religion and Communalism: The Christian Dilemma," CWG 1, 186. Soares-Prabhu describes this dilemma in detail in pp.185-86.

50. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Indian Church Challenged by Pluralism and Dialogue," CWG 1, 170 and see n. 46 above for the four challenging theological issues.

51. Not that nothing has been done. There have been excellent efforts made along this line. I like to single out one attempt by Francis D'Sa.

52. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Jesus of Faith," CWG 4, 288-92. For Soares both incarnation and resurrection are essential aspects of Jesus of faith, not of Jesus of history, because both are not "historical" in the normal sense of the word.

53. G. Gispert-Sauch, S.J. (2002). "Eschatological or Pāramārthika? Some Reflections on a difficult theological category," in Leonard Fernando, S.J. (ed.) Seeking Horizons – Festschrift in Honour of Dr. M. Amaladoss, S.J., Delhi: Vidyajyoti Education and Welfare Society and ISPCK.

54. See G. Gispert-Sauch, 2002: 298-99. Note also that Gispert does not see this as an exclusive privilege of Jesus, but as a mystery that belongs to the whole human race, 299. Although Gispert does not use the term Cosmotheandric yet the concept is evident in his article, 299.

55. See G. Gispert-Sauch, "Eschatological or Pāramārthika?," 300. St. Paul expresses this in Rom. 6:3-11, esp. vv.10-11.

56. Understanding the word "flesh" in the biblical sense, Soares would apply this verse to the whole human race. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Jesus of Faith," CWG 4, 289.

57. Eckhart Tolle, globally popular author of The Power of Now, A New Earth, and Stillness Speaks, advocates a new spirituality, based on transformation of consciousness, arising to a large extent outside of the structures of the existing institutionalized religions – a spirituality that is appropriate for the future world – a spirituality that integrates the pāramārthika and the vyāvahārika. It also integrates the mystic and the prophet in all of us.

58. Could this be the deeper meaning of Ignatius of Loyola's phrase: Contemplatives in Action?

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