

SPIRITUALITY AND MATERIALITY – are they related?

India is in the middle of a phenomenal economic growth. We are the 2nd fastest growing economy in the world and in the foreseeable future could be one of the largest economies on this planet. We are also witnessing drastic changes in life-style where a basically conservative society is abandoning its values of marriage and family in order to accommodate itself to the pace and pressures of a new civilisation. Christians are rightly concerned about the obvious decline in morality that accompanies this phenomenal growth. Glitzy shopping malls and expressways with clothes and cars to match will impose new challenges on Christians who would strive to live and teach as disciples of Jesus Christ. In this short article, I would attempt to point out ways in which we can develop a Biblical worldview on the material world and how we should be able to communicate the gospel in the context of the world in which we live.

In this article, I have suggested the use of the word *Materiality*, an obscure term that could mean 'material nature or quality' or 'something material'. It came into use c. 1520-30 C E and was adapted into the English language from the Middle Latin word *materialitas*. This word has been in use only in purely academic, philosophical articles. I think the time has come for us to rescue it from pure academia and incorporate it into our understanding of the Biblical narrative and therefore in fashioning a truly Christian worldview. The word *materiality* can be used in a way similar to the use of the word *rationality* in apologetics. We reject *rationalism* – the view that reason is the only way to true knowledge without any need for revelation – but we affirm *rationality* – the view that affirms the rightful place of reason in the created world order. In the same way, we reject *materialism* – the pursuit of material prosperity without reference to any transcendent reality – but we affirm *materiality* – the rightful place that material world occupies in God's creation.

The Biblical opposite of the word **naturalis spiritual**(*I Cor.2:14,15* -KJV); the English opposite of the same word is **artificial** I suppose many Christians behave in an artificially affected way and delude themselves into thinking that they are spiritual! We need to discover, in the light of the total Biblical revelation and the life of our Lord Jesus, that to be truly spiritual is to be truly natural – the way God had created us to be; and that kind of *naturalness* expresses itself through the material aspect of our lives.

Paul's advice to the Christians in Rome that they should present their bodies – material and natural – as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1) would have resulted in some Christians influenced by Gnostic ideology suffering heart attacks! (The Gnostics believed that the physical body was inferior and evil by its very nature – the Bible, by contrast, tells us that it is our nature that is sinful and true holiness is expressed through our physical bodies).

Christians hold two opposing views about material prosperity. In some Christian circles, material prosperity is spoken of as the only sign of God's blessing. Bible verses on prevailing prayer – e.g., John 14:14 - are stretched to promote theologies of the *Name and Claim* variety in which Christians looking for material prosperity are simply to name what they want and claim it from God; thus we could pressurise Him to accede to our demands. Bible verses - e.g., Mal.3:10 - that encourage cheerful tithing are converted into a Christianised stock-broking with promised yields quite disproportionate to the investment! In a not-unexpected reaction to this *prosperity Gospel*, some well-meaning Christians propound what can be called a *poverty Gospel* – the poorer you are, the more spiritual you are likely to be - and reduce the Christian faith to nothing more than mere asceticism. Because the devil sends errors in pairs (C S Lewis), the Bible rejects both positions as poor responses to God's creation of the material world and human creativity with which He has endowed us.

One of several reasons for this unbiblical dichotomy is because orthodox evangelical theology of redemption (in Christ) is not anchored in an equally strong theology of creation. Our pragmatic understanding of Biblical revelation unfortunately begins with Genesis 3 (The Fall) and ends with Revelation 20 (The Judgment). We leave out four very important chapters of God's Word – Genesis 1,2 dealing with the present creation and Revelation 21,22 that describe renewed creation. These are the book-ends that contain the drama of redemption and anchor it in material reality. While we justifiably defend the fact of creation of the material world by God against the onslaught of evolutionists, we abandon our understanding of the material creation at the end of Genesis 2 and speak of the spiritual life without any reference to material reality. I suspect that the creation-evolution debate (which has its own rightful place) has distracted us from developing a proper theology of creation. It is important for us to note that the Bible begins, not with spiritual or moral dogma, but with the creation of the

material world. God, who is Spirit, creates the heavens and the earth (which are matter) – Gen.1:1. In Gen.2:7, God takes the dust of the ground – matter – and breathes His own Breath – spirit - into it and the first human being comes into existence. Thus, humans are the only beings in God’s creation that are a unique combination of matter and spirit. The command that God gives to the first human pair – Gen.1:28 – is about responsibility for the material world and accountability to God Who is Spirit.

When we quote a verse such as Mark 8:36 – “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul” – we ought to emphasise the value of the human soul for whom Christ died, but not imply that the body is unimportant. The word *world* in the New Testament – *kosmos* in Greek - has to be understood in three distinct ways depending on the contexts in which the writers use the word: (i) The created world – Matt.5:14; (ii) the world of people – John 3:16; (iii) the fallen world-system over which Satan presides – Rom.12:2; I John 2:15-17. Even the phrase SOS – ‘Save Our Souls’ – should not be taken to mean that bodies are unimportant. In II Cor.5:1-10, Paul affirms that to be away from the body is to be present with the Lord and at the same time, expresses his longing to be clothed with the resurrection body! We need to reflect long and hard on the continuity **and** the discontinuity between the present creation and the new creation; passages such as II Pet.3:10-13, Is.65:17 and Rev.21,22 should be part of our daily delight. At the centre of the New Creation would be the slain Lamb in His glorified physical body which will still bear the marks of the cross (Rev.5:6).

In stark contrast to the Christian position, many eastern philosophies and some eastern religions deny the reality of the material world itself; they think that this is the only way to reject materialism and thus employ a popular Sanskrit word *maya* (= illusion) to connote the status of material reality. Some Christians tend to do the same and read the Bible in platonic, escapist terms! The redeemed creation in Rev. 21,22 is more concrete than the present creation under bondage (Romans 8:19-22). To illustrate how inadequate our view of the renewal of creation was, I recently asked a tongue-in-cheek question to a Church worship group in Singapore – “What do you think of the New Creation? Will we be worshipping God by floating around like *ghosts* holding *invisible* guitars with *intangible* strings producing *inaudible* music?!!”

God's invasion of this planet to redeem sinful humanity begins with the virgin birth of Jesus. When, in Luke 1:38, Mary says to Archangel Gabriel, "May it be to me as you have said!" the fullness of the Deity begins to live in bodily form (Col.2:9) as a unicellular zygote in Mary's womb. Thus, in the incarnation, the Lord Jesus Christ takes upon Himself a *material* body. He is raised from the dead in a *glorified material* body – Paul is at pains to prove this point as he devotes an entire chapter (I Corinthians 15) to it. At the right hand of the Father, there stands a Man as our intercessor (I Tim.2:5). God has therefore put his seal of approval on the material world and will be renewing the world itself to be the ambience for our glorified resurrection bodies as He brings our redemption to a grand climax. The 'arranged marriage (!)' between Christ and the Church, though mysterious (Eph.5:32), is constitutionally compatible only because the Bridegroom is God Who has forever become human and the Bride is redeemed humanity that has come to participate in the Divine nature (II Pet.1:4). One cannot believe in the true Humanity of Jesus without a Biblical view of materiality.

It is pertinent to note that our rebellion against God in Eden results in a breakdown of relationship with nature and the material world; the woman will find child-bearing painful and work will be toil for man (Gen.3:16-19). This link between human beings and nature is consistently maintained in Scripture as Moses and Isaiah call on the heavens and earth to witness – Deut.32:1,2; Is.1:2,3. God's promise to Solomon is that forgiven sin and answered prayer will result in the healing of the land (II Chr.7:14). The most explicit connection is from the passage in Romans 8:19-22 where we are told that even creation is groaning waiting for the redemption of the children of God. It is also not surprising that many of the signs accompanying the second coming of Christ have to do with nature.

When we disconnect the drama of redemption from the equally spectacular divine act of creation, our message of salvation in Christ loses its moorings in the reality of the external world. One of the reasons our message of Christ's work fails to connect with the happy pagan in the marketplace is because it uses the word spiritual in such an unnatural way. The secular atheist assumes that he alone has the last word to say on the material world and salvation in Christ is another form of *nirvana* or *yoga* where the devotee loses her (his) identity in the infinite divine. Thus Christianity for the secularist is nothing more than a Christian form of escapism.

How shall we then live in God's material world in joyful enjoyment of all that He has given us without falling into the serious error of materialism? A few Biblical pointers are suggested below:

1. The answer to the prosperity Gospel is not poverty Gospel but a Gospel of contentment – Phil. 4:12,13. Paul makes it clear in this passage that he knows how to have plenty and how to suffer a lack of things. The greatest temptation facing the Christian in our over-heated, over-valued economy is to crave for more than what one has, and not to find contented enjoyment in what God has provided. Ambition does have a legitimate place in the life of the Christian only when it is brought under the value-system of the Holy Spirit. We should reject outright all teaching that equates prosperity with God's blessing in a simplistic manner. Paul would define materialism as the love of money (I Tim. 6:10), which militates against true contentment (I Tim. 6:6-8).
2. True contentment is not possible till we learn true enjoyment. Paul's advice to young Timothy is in affirmation of all that God has materially blessed us with (I Tim. 6:17). A killjoy approach to life that is advocated in some Christian circles has no place in the Biblical economy – as a matter of fact, such an attitude could lead us into the terrible sin of ungratefulness on the one hand and hypocrisy on the other.
3. We need to take seriously the terms of discipleship that Jesus lays down in Luke 14:33. I think Mahatma Gandhi mistook this and similar statements of Jesus to be clarion calls to asceticism. But, if we study carefully the whole section from Luke 14:26 onwards, we cannot but draw the conclusion that Jesus is pointing to relationships at all levels – to others, to oneself and to the material world. Jesus prescribes one's cross as the instrument through which all relationships have to be processed and redeemed. They include our relationship to others (v.26), to oneself (v.27) and to the material world (v.33). With the help of the Holy Spirit, the cross-experiences of one's life discipline and direct us to true self-denial and thereby redeem and elevate all relationships to a Godly level – and that includes our relationship to the material world.

4. Very early in my Christian life, I was introduced to three Bible-words that should characterise the Christian in her (his) relationship to the material world: *pilgrim*, *stranger*, *steward*. Their opposites are: *settler*, *citizen*, *owner*. While the opposites are not wrong ethically or morally, they could display attitudes that are not Christian. As far as our attitude to the material world is concerned, we need to see ourselves as stewards and not owners. Paul intends this lesson for us in *1 Tim. 6:18*. A good steward is one who does not hoard things for oneself (as if he or she is the owner) but as a good manager, shares what one has with others. There is no better antidote to materialism than liberality!

5. In our evangelism, we need to bring out and emphasise the fact that our view of material reality gives us a true basis for fascination with God's created world and the appreciation of true human creativity. Alongside these, we need to point out – and it is not difficult to demonstrate the contrast – that we fallen beings are not able to handle either God's creation or our human creativity because of our innate rebellion against our Creator; the only possible way to be a responsible steward in this world is to become a true disciple of Christ. Thus, salvation in Christ is not only the right way to die – as some Christian reductionists make it out to be – but the right way to live here on earth as followers of Jesus so that we shall ultimately **come down** from heaven as the Bride of Christ to continue our stewardship of the New Creation (*Rev. 21:1,2*). It is only within this context that life is lived meaningfully and, the significance and identity of the individual person will not be lost in today's extremely competitive and materialistic world.