

CONSOLIDATING *The* RAINBOW

Independent Mauritius, 1968-1998

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CRIOS
CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON
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Religion in Mauritius: I have a vision

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*"In religion our exclusions are nearly always wrong, and
our inclusions, however inconsistent, nearly always right"*

Evelyn Underhill, spiritualist writer

Cultural Religion?

A curious feature of Mauritian society is the persistent focus of many of its diverse and partisan religious, socio-religious and socio-cultural groups - and a great number of individuals - on increasingly unifying - the word is chosen - versions of deity, grace and salvation.

This means that the Muslim divinity, for instance, is fashioned by its worshippers into a God less interested in external verities so carefully communicated to humanity and far more interested in minor prescriptions and the subtle differences between frankly undifferent believers.

This means that Hindus are often directed to focus their attention on the location, size and glamour of their 'national' "community" centre rather than on the awesome, ancient and venerable pantheon they have inherited, preserved and nurtured. By Hindu I mean all those professing Hinduism and not the curious spin on the meaning of the term in present-day Mauritius, which has taken the "ij" out of "religion", turning it into "region" and going on to get on the "pas moi ça, li ça" bandwagon. Sunil Banyamandhub pointedly noted in a December 1997 essay in *L'Express*,

* I am grateful to Marina Carter for inviting me to put these few thoughts into writing. Some of the ideas expressed here have previously appeared in *Le Mauricien* (18 January 1996) and *The Zimbabwean Review* (Oct-Dec 1997). I am grateful to the editors of those publications, Gilbert Ahnee and Carole Pearce, respectively. I also thank my parents for teaching me - and I'm still learning - that to be a good believer one has to be a good person first.

“We defend our own prejudices as being due to cultural affinities, but the other chap, oh no, he doesn't have cultural affinities”.

It utterly baffles - and irks - me, by the way, that the Board of every so-called Cultural Centre is comprised only, or largely, of members of the “interested” group. The point of a Board is to provide wisdom, experience and guidance: it is not an occasion to play out one's inter-cine rivalries and establish one's turf. Indeed the whole point of a cultural centre - I write under correction - is to foster inter-cultural links and understanding. I for one - but it may be my own narrow limitations - do not see how that can be accomplished in the current configurations.

I envision a Mauritius where those who conceive of deity, do not fashion in their own mundane image, where admittedly imperfect mortals do not humanise and trivialise that which is divine and perfect.

*“It is a mistake to suppose that God is only,
or even chiefly, concerned with religion”*

William Temple, Archbishop

Political Religion?

“God often visits us, but most of the time we are not at home”

Joseph Roux, parish priest

One evening a couple of years ago my wife and I were invited to a 7.30pm dinner in Port Louis. We had intended to perform our evening prayers (then at 7 pm) and drive down in a leisurely fashion. But earlier that day we had bought a toy plane for our daughter from a store in Phoenix and had apparently lost a piece - the pilot. As Maryam was very put out, we resolved to return to the store first and then proceed to Port Louis.

A quick calculation revealed that this would make us late for the dinner so, exceptionally, we left home before the evening prayer and headed for Phoenix. The pilot was rapidly retrieved and we were on the highway by 7 pm. Just beyond the Réduit roundabout we were overtaken by a convoy of several cars, vans and pick-ups. All had people loudly and proudly

brandishing banners that advertised their adherence to a quasi-militant religious political party. What had been a single-file convoy turned into a platoon that blocked both lanes of the highway. They slowed down and the traffic behind them built up. The hampered vehicles, ours included, resorted to some vigorous headlight flashing and honking but this was lost in the blare and glare of the phalanx.

My wife and I took this in our stride mainly because, as the sun set, we were reminded of our missed prayers. Before long it dawned on us that our road hogs were themselves missing their prayers - surely an important component of their platform It was at that point that one of us lowered our window and shouted out, “Instead of being a bloody nuisance, shouldn't you be in the mosque praying now?” The nearest vehicle, probably the only one whose occupants heard the reproach, made way for our car and I was able to drive on.

I envision a Mauritius where the faithful - of any stripe - see that the coexistence of religion and state is not predicated on, and does not necessitate, the creation of “religious” parties.

*“I know that a Community of God seekers is a great shelter
for man. But directly this grows into an Institution it is apt to
give ready access to the Devil by its back door”*

Tagore, thinker

Ethnic Religion?

During the discussion that followed a panel presentation on the role of socio-cultural organisations at a conference on multiculturalism held at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in late 1996, a visiting American academic recounted an interesting story. He had come to the conference by bus from Curepipe and taken a window seat where he quietly read his French morning paper. At one point a man - a Mauritian - sat down next to him and started making small talk in French. The man fell silent and then addressed the visitor again, this time broaching the subject of the Catholic

Church and its affairs. The American showed little interest and even less knowledge. The following exchange then took place:

Mauritian: *Vous êtes chrétien ...*

American: *Non*

(Silence. The Mauritian is at a loss: the Francophone white man is not Christian.)

He pauses then says:)

Mauritian: *Mais vous êtes croyant?*

(Silence. Now it is the American who pauses. He decides to keep it simple:)

American: *Euh... oui*

Mauritian: *Oui, bien sûr.*

The American visitor explained to the MGI audience that being Jewish is not only hard elsewhere but hard also in Mauritius where you are expected, by virtue of your colour, coiffe, clothing or (ascribed) community to be a certain thing, one thing.

I envision a Mauritius where individuals and communities are recognised and acknowledged as multiple and the sum of an unburdensome constitutive history, not monolithic and burdened by imagined pasts.

I envision a Mauritius where senior administrators and officials in government and parastatals are, like the American visitor, unattached to labels, or like the Mauritian bus passenger, (blissfully) ignorant of the gamut of labels, where they reward merit and promote quality; where they do not hesitate to recompense co-religionists instead of practising reverse discrimination for fear of being called "communalist"; where they do not threaten their paymasters and the people with leave and dereliction of duty out of superficial allegiance. Religion would then be both public and private: public in that it would be open to the view and knowledge of all, private in that it would be confined to or intended for only the persons immediately concerned.

"No one today is purely one thing"

Edward Said, thinker and critic

Communal Religion?

"It increases the value of the whole man; it deepens love, it exalts the stature, and adds force to every faculty. When (religion) ceases to make us wiser and more passionate, when it does not confer greatness, it is a mere accretion"

William Hale White, Bishop of Pennsylvania

The month of Ramadan this year (1998) was a hot one, even the nights. So it was that we had the fans turning on high in all the rooms, including the children's. This had the effect of drowning out the sound of the morning call to prayer in their room. But I remember the year our first child was born: cool evenings obviated the need for the fan. This meant that she was woken every morning a little after 4 am. Still a baby, it disturbed her.

It was then that I began to suggest to family, friends, mosque officials and mosque-goers that the call must be a real nuisance to non-believers, that there was great virtue in finding ways to practise that were less invasive of the privacy and peace of others. I received a litany of near-curses from some, accusations of unbelief from others; what I got from all, to the very last person, were the sentiments "If they can do it (ie church bells, bhajans, firecrackers), then why shouldn't we?". And, "It's our right!". I envision a Mauritius where the rights of the neighbour's infant is a source of concern for all, a Mauritius where religious holidays and their observance are voluntary and personal, where believers opt to observe without disturbing the austerity or festivity with concerns about pay cuts and equity vis-a-vis others, in short where religious holy days are not turned into public holidays. I envision alternatives.

I have only thought this through as it pertains to my own faith, Islam, but the analogies are clear. Why not, for example, continue to have the calls to prayer over the loudspeaker except for the pre-dawn call? For those interested in hearing it, it could be made available on the radio (in Singapore all five calls are broadcast on one radio station). The media is an important source and site of alternatives. In addition to radio, TV could run a leader (as is done for weather and sports announcements now)

informing worshippers of prayer-times (e.g. TV TIGA in Malaysia). Leaders have the advantage of being unobtrusive, timely, and of negligible cost to the station. Of course, I am envisaging a media where Muslims, say, can commence their broadcasts with “bonsoir” without being condemned. I envision a time when we are self-limiting, not encroaching, accommodating, not intransigent, humble, not arrogant.

Respectful Religion

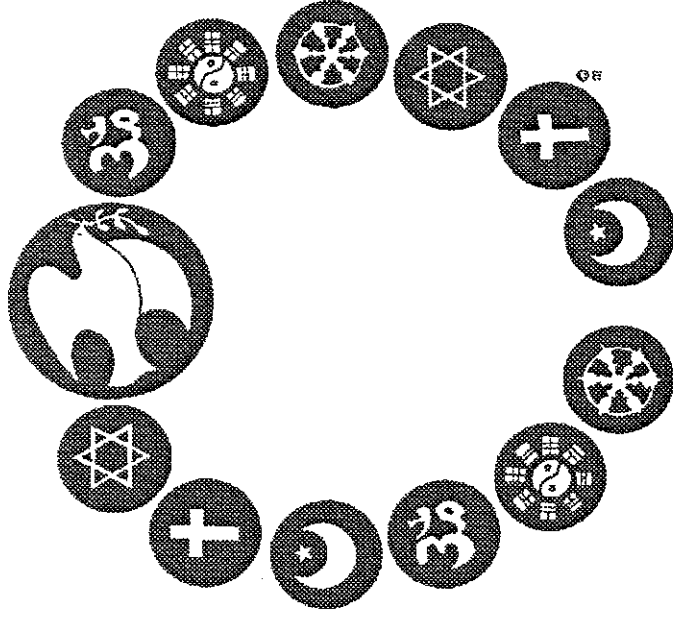
“DO - do try and be more objective in your religion. Try to see yourself less as a complex individual, and more as a quite ordinary scrap of the universe”.

Evelyn Underhill

In addition to its ecological and geographical diversity, Mauritius boasts a unique social history, at times severe and enslaving, at others peaceable and liberating. It is now a thriving mix of peoples, cultures, values and beliefs. Part of the reason for this is that though there is one identifiably dominant “group” numerically (which sustains and evolves such diktats as high level Vaish representation), there is no real majority. Essential to co-existence, therefore, is rule of law, and the formation and nurture of individuals who, whether areligious, observant or devout, are contributing members of a rainbow society.

Religious groups and individuals in Mauritius operate with a very high degree of liberty: they build places of worship willy-nilly (but I would want to see more zoning and regulation); they hold gatherings and meetings; they create political parties (in my view, regrettable); they invite overseas speakers and religious figures (some of questionable credentials and virtue); and religious education is widely and affordably available. Yet, every group suffers from a minority syndrome, feels that the other groups are gaining ground, are out to quash and prevail.

I do not foresee a time when there is no minority syndrome - I think this is part of a numerically motivated paranoia that can surely only be satisfied by resolving to have more children.



I envision a Mauritius where there is accommodation, when, to adapt a 1980 article by Syed Abedin, within the framework of the unquestioned primacy of the individual’s allegiance to her belief system, she will have determined what her proper attitude should be to the social reality. She will then see how some of the social and political effects of her stance can be softened and mitigated and *learn to live with those that cannot*.

The burden will be on leaders: on the one hand to encourage believing individuals and communities to strengthen and reinforce their cultural identities in a pluralistic environment so that they are not absorbed or assimilated; on the other hand somehow to make these same individuals, these same communities, realise that physical traits, cultural traditions, dress, food, language, regional origin, socio-economic class, customs and habits are *subordinate* and *subsidiary* to their doctrinal identity, that

true identity is determined by the manner in which a person or group of any community, ethnicity, background, political stripe, or degree of devotion, goes about the business of living, uses her faculties, and interacts with others.

"There is something in religion, which can only be expressed through conduct"

John Jay Chapman, essayist

Shared Religion

I envision much more than what I have noted but my dream is vast. It is not the modest dream that the choice of Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola be simply a matter of taste. It is that we reach deep within ourselves and learn to accept configurations of overlap and interdependence, that we accept that communities are and can be founded not on a specific difference or shared essence but on a shared power of choice, incompatible choices perhaps but always correlated ones. Only then, in my vision of a Mauritian tomorrow, can religion be embracing, enabling, and exalting. And maybe even sublime.

"What a travesty to think religion means saving my little soul through my little good deeds and the rest of the world go hang"

Gerald Vann, writer

PART TWO

VOICES