



Blending ‘the Sacred and the Secular:’ The Sacred and the Secular in the Writings of George Soares-Prabhu

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Abstract: The sacred and the secular was envisioned by George Soares-Prabhu from an integrative point of view. He explained the gospel message through the specificities in cultural contexts, especially that of Third-World countries, and India in particular. He used examples from society, to show the presence of God and God’s action in the world. He addresses how Jesus explained a lot of what had become aberrations, taking people away from God. The writings of George Soares-Prabhu have two strong slants, liberation and poverty, which he linked. He firmly believed that liberation is the answer to oppressive situations that exist throughout India and Third-World countries and that the gospel is not the gospel if it cannot proclaim a liberating message. What is needed is an active concern, expressing itself not only in spiritual attitudes of patience, forbearance, acceptance,

Cite this article as: Noronha, Konrad. (2021). Blending ‘the Sacred and the Secular’: The Sacred and the Secular in the Writings of George Soares-Prabhu (Version 1.0). *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, Jan-June 2021(Vol 25/1-2), 194-209. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4438500>

and benevolence but also in concrete ways of caring for the material needs of the ‘neighbour.’

Keywords: Sacred and secular, Liberation and freedom, Indian Culture, Mission of the Church

Introduction

George M. Soares-Prabhu (henceforth GSP) visioned the sacred and the secular from an integrative point of view. He envisioned Jesus’ preaching, teachings, and healing using different social lenses and drew from various disciplines to explain this integrative idea. He explained the gospel message through the specificities in cultural contexts, especially that of Third World countries, and India in particular. Jesus was a teacher, a preacher, and a healer. His examples were from society, to show the presence of God and God’s action in the world.

The gospels allow us to encounter Jesus as a ‘teacher’; in the Synoptic tradition where he ‘went about among the villages (of Galilee) teaching’; that he ‘taught them as one who had authority’, and that ‘he taught everything in parables’ (*CWG* 4, 253). Similarly, there are numerous instances in the Synoptics about his healings or miracles and preaching, of which the Sermon on the Mount is his most famous. Jesus brought in understandings of the sacred while addressing structures, people, and rituals.

Jesus’ way of addressing a lot of what had become aberrations, taking people away from God, has been addressed by GSP in his writings. The writings of GSP had two strong slants, liberation and poverty, and he linked both. “Liberation for him meant two things: Liberation from poverty arising out of material want and liberation from oppression and social ostracism suffered by the untouchables and the tribals.” He firmly believed that liberation is the answer to an oppressive situation that exists throughout India and that the gospel is not the gospel if it cannot proclaim a liberating message.

This article draws from the writings of GSP, especially those from the 4 volume, *Collected Works of GSP* edited by Fr. Issac Padinjarekuttu and Fr. Francis X. D'Sa SJ. To understand GSP's lens of how the secular and sacred intersect; I have discussed the topic of this article through the following lenses - disciplines GSP used to articulate Jesus' life and ministry, culture, understandings of the poor and poverty, understandings of miracles, and his explanations for Jesus' Mission and Reign of God.

1. Various Disciplines

GSP, in his writings, used data from fields as varied as economics, hermeneutics, history, Indology, literature, politics, science, and sociology. He felt that anyone who wanted to theologize should first do studies in a nontheological field, especially in the field of the social sciences. He said that when looked at from a nontheological base, things theological are bound to look different. His approach and interpretation of scripture especially the New Testament had a clear Indian and Third-World slant.

Any verse or pericope or text that he studied was seen in its setting and context, in its immediate and mediate context. For him, a text was a complex of code-systems and every age discovers new forms of and new approaches to the code-systems that go into the making of a particular text. Also, another strong characteristic of his approach to a Third-World Theology was pluralism, seen in the basic fact of life in India. There is not only religious but also ecclesial, cultural, linguistic, and racial pluralism in India. He made sure that the questions he tackled were contemporary questions, thus situating every text in the present context. He believed that the Indian theologian should do a social reading of the Bible, in the light of liberating praxis, among the socially oppressed, without succumbing to the reductionism of a strictly Marxist approach.

1.1 Culture

God is encountered in biblical tradition in the world of matter; and, also the empirical and contingent world of human history. History is the process in and through which the liberation of humankind takes place (CWG 4, 201). Asia nurtures a variety of cultures and civilizations and spans seven major linguistic zones, each of which has its ways of describing the same reality in its distinctive way (CWG 1, 51). Therefore there are different ways of understanding and meeting God, depending on different cultures or civilizations. Despite its linguistic pluralism, many regional differences, political fragmentation, confusing cultural and technological paradoxes, India exhibits a massive and resilient unity. Therefore, for a country like India, reality should be perceived in a context-sensitive rather than in a context free-way (CWG 1, 82). There should necessarily be solidarity of the individual with the community.

In Jn 1:14 GSP opines that there is solidarity of the individual with the community to which he or she belongs. A nation is thought of as an organic whole in which parts are knit together without losing their individuality, the implication being that God creates humankind as one (CWG 2, 207). The anthropological implications of this verse are the enduring concern that the Christian churches have for the poor, the outcast, and the sick, shown in their works of social service and health care showing (CWG 2, 209). He says...

In places like India Jesus brings something radically new. A new experience of God, which allows him to rename Yhwh as ABBA. God is experienced not so much as 'holy' but as gracious and compassionate; and people are not just members of an exclusive tribe or a separated 'clean' caste, but as members of an open family, marked by freedom from consumerism and an attitude of radical service (CWG 1, 246).

GSP says that it is necessary to understand the poor and poverty from the standpoint of Jesus. This is particularly necessary when reading the bible in third-world countries, and India in particular.

Parables on poverty that cover the Synoptic gospels are examples of building the Reign of God.

2. The Poor and Poverty

The ‘poor’ for Jesus comprised the ‘peoples of the land’ that included the poor, the unschooled, the socially unacceptable, the religiously defiled, the sick. They are ‘poor’ not because they are in need, but because they have made themselves humbly dependent on God; they hunger not for bread but salvation; they are weak not on account of the deprivations and indignities they suffer but because they long for the Kingdom, especially in a country like India where there is so much discrimination (CWG 4, 92). He constantly reiterates that the word of God has to be heard in a concrete historical situation, to build the reign of God.

Jesus becomes poor like the poor; an outcast by associating with outcasts, he ate with tax collectors and sinners, and put aside the laws of ritual cleanliness to which the Pharisees attached so much importance. These casual gestures on the part of Jesus express his consistent and radical identification with the poor and the marginalized of society, announcing their liberation, by protesting on their behalf, and sharing their life and their shame (CWG 3, 94).

Jesus’ uncompromising stand against riches (but not against the rich!) – that is, against an attachment to or even the possession of the superfluous wealth as a source of comfort and power - is balanced by his equally intransigent commitment to the poor (but not to poverty!) – that is, to all those who are deprived of the material and social goods needed for an authentic human life. Such a commitment to the poor is proclaimed by Jesus as the essence of his mission in the inaugural sermon with which (in Luke’s Gospel) he begins his public ministry (Lk 4: 16-30); and its significance is spelled out with great force and clarity in the set of beatitudes with which (again in Luke’s Gospel) he opens his great public discourse, the Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6: 20-26) (CWG 2, 260).

Jesus came to bring about freedom from attachment to riches and liberation from oppressive social systems. This leads to the new humanity which is the ultimate goal of the long process of total liberation that Jesus has begun (CWG 2, 267). This stance of Jesus in favor of the poor is rooted in the biblical understanding of poverty as injustice. Poverty in the Bible is seen as injustice because every Israelite had a right to the land. If he lacked land, he is unjustly deprived and oppressed. God, therefore, intervenes to right his wrongs. The action of God is always in favor of the poor. The building of the reign of God is good news to the poor, bad news to the rich (CWG 3, 148). The miracles he performed were clear indications of the options he made for the Reign of God.

3. Miracles

Jesus proclaimed his miracles as signs of the presence and the power of God, visible to those who had eyes to see. The miracles of Jesus are might works (*dynameis* in the Synoptics) or signs (*semeia* in John), which manifest, to those with eyes to see, the saving power of God (CWG 3, 26). They should be considered actions of compassion and not just healings and controversies. Through the miracles, he combats a lot of the unjust power structures prevalent at that time. They could be considered as the subversion of a power structure and so manifestations of a structural change (CWG 3, 9).

Jesus did not come to rescue a few individuals from a condemned mass; but to open up a new future for man, thematized by him as the New Israel, this is as a universal community of love, leavened by the values of freedom fellowship, and justice. Such a community is possible only when the oppressive structures that hinder its growth are overthrown. His miracles are complemented by his controversies in which he stands up against the established structures of institutional oppression: the law, the cult, priesthood, and the Temple (CWG 3, 30).

The many miracles that Jesus performed, in many ways, were a presentation of his strong option for the poor. He made sacred many structures that were considered profane and secular, by his 'touch' and presence. Thus, taking a stand against a lot of what the society of that time stood for. This was his vision and how he wanted to present his mission.

4. Jesus' Mission and Vision

Jesus's entrepreneurial and political skills are evident from his speeches and sermons. He made it more relevant to the real-life of that time. His speeches were political like his mission manifesto in the synagogue which could be considered his inaugural speech. Jesus used analogies, parables, metaphors, symbolism, and examples from agriculture and the social conditions of that time. Where Jesus is concerned there was a genuine encounter with the scripture in all that he said (Noronha, 2018: 66-81). Jesus was a prophet and the essence of his prophetic theologizing consisted of a two-fold criticism of the religious and social fabric of the society of his time. He condemned idolatry and criticized social injustice (CWG 4, 18-19).

Prophetic theologizing is usually against the dominant assumptions of the ruling group and gives alternative visions to various aspects of living in the community and society. There are various facets to how Jesus presented his prophetic theologizing to the community. They include his authority, being unprejudiced, conflict, and radical equality.

Jesus' authority

The authority of Jesus was of a very different kind. He had no standing in his society. He did not command the power of wealth, was academically unschooled, did not belong to the priestly class, and opted out of the structures of his society by becoming a wandering preacher (CWG 1, 129). He summoned his disciples out of their parochial loyalties to family, clan, tribe, or nation and invites them to leave the security offered by wealth,

status, or achievement and to trust solely in God's providential care (CWG 1, 248).

Freedom from attachment to things, trust in the unique goodness of God, and effective concern for the poor are thus constituent elements of the calls which Jesus communicates to those who follow him (CWG 1, 251). Jesus was concerned with the transformation of society (CWG 1, 255), unfortunately, it also led to making the community of disciples into a crowd of competing churches, defining themselves in terms of doctrine, ritual, or forms of organization. In the process, they forgot the one thing necessary for Christian self-definition, which is the experience of God's love that impels every Christian to love in return and to reach out in effective compassion to those in need. Jesus' fellowship reaches out to the many (Lk 13:29) (CWG 3, 4).

The Unprejudiced Jesus

Religious group prejudices are an unwarranted generalization of particular experiences that are disseminated, and communicated to the members of the group, through its tradition. The tradition of a group is the set of shared group stereotypes, beliefs, and values that the group has made its own and which serve to distinguish it from other similar groups (CWG 3, 164). Jesus appears in the Gospels as a person remarkably free from the individual and group prejudices of his people and his times. He shows no aversion towards 'sinners', violators of the moral or ritual code; the rural masses unschooled in the Law and he shows special concern for the 'little ones' (Mk 9:42) (CWG 3, 165). The freedom of Jesus is grounded on the experience of total love which casts out all prejudice (CWG 3, 168).

In his attitude towards the religious and ethical observances of his people, Jesus shows remarkable freedom and flexibility. He associates with religious outcasts much to the scandal of the pious. For Jesus it is...

love of God showing itself in love for neighbor which, according to Matthew, is the “basis of all the law and the prophets”; and which, according to Mark, is “much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices”. Law is valid only in as much as it is an expression of God’s will which is not just ‘peace’ but our ‘wellbeing’ (CWG 3, 267).

Conflict

Conflict plays a large part in the ministry of Jesus. All four of our canonical Gospels describe conflicts Jesus generated in many ways; in conflict with Satan, with natural calamities like storms, with mental illnesses, with nature, with the religious leaders of his people, with the crowds he drew and who wanted to make him king, with his family whose preferential claims on him he firmly rejects, and with his disciples, with his own instinctive clinging to life as in the garden of Gethsemane. Conflict was an indispensable element in the ministry of Jesus (CWG 3, 136).

The ‘peace’ that Jesus brings is not the peace that most of his followers seem to have opted for. It meant identifying with a situation and confronting it. They are two ways which he showed to act on any situation which then resulted in an attitude of freedom and love. Freedom and love, leading to identification with the powerless and confrontation with those in power. They are the most significant traits, that set out for his followers the thrust of Jesus’ vision and mission suitable for those who are engaged in the struggle for the liberation of the poor and the oppressed (CWG 3, 89).

Radical Equality

Jesus treated everyone equally irrespective of sex, race, culture, class, rank, or caste. This was radical and therefore conflict-provoking. Jesus lived out such radicalism when he dined with tax-collectors and sinners; called women to be disciples; held up a Gentile as a model of faith and a Samaritan as a model of compassion; renounced domination for service; and projected

the vision of a community that would be free of all father, and to acknowledge only one Father who is in heaven, and only one Master, the Christ (CWG 3, 138). This radicalism of Jesus, who brushed aside the letter of the Law to grasp its spirit collided head-on with the rigorism of the sects (CWG 3, 138).

The pervasive law of purities, which so restricted every aspect of Jewish life, is abrogated by Jesus in the single striking observation that “nothing which enters anyone from the outside can make the person unclean; it is what comes out of the person that makes him or her unclean” (Mk 7:15). All purity laws are thus abolished at a stroke. Cleanness or uncleanness is not a matter of ritual purity, but the disposition of the heart (CWG 3, 6).

To affirm then the radical equality of all human beings beyond all differences of sex, race, culture, class, rank or caste, is a profoundly radical and therefore a conflict-provoking act. Jesus lived out such radicalism when he dined with tax-collectors and sinners, called women to be his disciples, held up a Gentile as a model of faith and a Samaritan as a model of compassion (Lk 10,29-37); renounced domination for service and projected the vision of a community that would be free of all father figures, because it would acknowledge only one Father who is in heaven, and only one Master, the Christ.

Yet it must be admitted that the Bible’s affirmation of the dignity of the human person is not consistent. It affirms and acknowledges the presence of inequality and oppression in a human history colored by sin, and at times seems to condone and even encourage it (CWG 4, 76). This was contrary to human dignity and what is explicitly defined in the first creation story by its striking pronouncement that humankind has been made in the image of God (CWG 4, 76).

5. Mission and Reign of God

Jesus teaches, preaches, heals, in word and deed. The greatest of his commandments was the love commandment. The Church

must fulfill this mission in the same ways by living visibly as Church because a community only becomes 'church' when it does as Jesus did (CWG 1, 21). Jesus also wanted his followers to let their light shine before others. They should let their light shine forth living in the world so that the world will see them and be moved to glorify God (CWG 1, 20).

This would have been shocking to Jesus' enemies in a society where love was largely restricted to the confines of a tightly-knit ethnic or religious group, and where hatred of the foreign oppressor was preached with religious fervor. Jesus asks for not just the resolution of personal antagonisms within the group, but for the acceptance of members of alien and hostile groups as well. Political and religious antagonisms as well as personal ones are the objects of his command. This was summarized in the love command of Jesus which is radical and comprehensive (CWG 4, 117).

Transformations in the Church and Society

In communities of Christians, the social concern does not get limited to privatized sharing but takes the form of justice which results in the transformation of social, economic, and political structures that hinder the emergence of a just and fraternal society. Church growth is a typically institutional preoccupation, which the Church, but which must not be allowed to become its primary concern. Like Jesus, the Church lives not for itself but others. It is the servant of God's Reign. The mission of the Church, therefore, is not service to the Church, but the Church's service of the Reign of God (CWG 1, 112).

Aware of the extent to which such structures, determine the configuration of society and even the consciousness of its members, a structural understanding realizes that the situations of poverty, unfreedom, and oppression that are so much a part of our social experience in India and elsewhere, are not just the hazards of history, not the consequences of ill-will of a few 'wicked men', who need only to be

converted for all our troubles to end. They result from the working of an impersonal system so property, power, and social relationships, which operate almost independently of the people who serve them. A change of hearts is not enough. Nothing less than a change of structures is needed if exploitation and oppression are to end (CWG 4, 119).

The Indian Church therefore must develop its understanding of mission, responsive to its post-conciliar and post-colonial situation. The biblical story tells about the meaning of the world, of human history, of personal life, because the Christian mission is part of this meaningful story. The Indian Church must be committed to the building of a genuinely fraternal community and compelled by its inner dynamism to oppose all social, economic, political, or religious structures which hinder the emergence of such a community working against legitimizing the structures of society that happened to be dominant and dominating (CWG 4, 169). The mission must be an act of service, not an exercise of institutional survival, or expansion of power (CWG 1, 17).

6. The Sacred and the Secular

When we consider the sacred and the secular as described in the various sections above, it does not mean that the sacred is reduced to the secular or the secular absorbed into the sacred. Rather what needs to be considered is how and where God can be encountered. God is to be encountered as God in nature and history, without desacralizing by the Bible or establishing the autonomy of the secular (CWG 2, 211).

The secularization of the sacred is given a special point by John's use of the word 'flesh.' Flesh (*sarx*) is used by John in a variety of ways. It defines 'plain humankind' with no negative connotation whatever in Jn 17:2, where Jesus says, He (God) has given me authority over all flesh – that is, overall human beings. It sometimes describes 'merely human nature, unenlightened by divine revelation, as in Jn 8:15, where Jesus accuses the Jews that "you judge according to the flesh" – that is, by human criteria alone (CWG 2, 203).

The Word “becomes flesh” and does not merely ‘appear as’ flesh; is not just a being, but a flesh and blood person. What is implied is the divine in human history and the real presence of God in material reality (CWG 2, 206). Therefore, life is seen as a history of salvation in which the saving actions of God are manifest in concrete socio-political events (CWG 3, 87). Jesus demonstrated this in every way. The prophet and consequently every follower summon his community to unconditional trust in, and an absolute commitment to God. This is demonstrated in inner uprightness and social concern that goes well beyond the formal pieties of ritual and law. It demands a real conversion of heart, has nothing to do with political prudence which refuses risk; it denounces every form of exploitation and demands a radical concern for the defenseless and the needy (CWG 3, 128).

This results in and a deeper understanding of the expression ‘reign of God.’ It is by exploring Jesus’ understanding of this theme, that we shall discover his vision of the new society (CWG 4, 225). Where there are genuine fellowship and concern, there will be justice, no passivity in the face of social, economic, and political structures that oppress humans and dehumanize them. The follower of Jesus cannot be content with merely rescuing the victims of these structures, or attempting to convert the exploiters who maintain them but must challenge them and work towards change (CWG 4, 241). This is true liberation.

Liberation

The Bible is the Magna Carta for movements of liberation and human rights. It demonstrates clearly how the sacred and the secular blend. It deals with issues like social class, human rights, economic liberation, etc. Its understanding of the human person implies principles that are the source of human and societal rights of which two such principles are the sacredness of the human person and responsibility for the welfare of people, especially those in need.

Conclusion

Soares-Prabhu had an integrative view of the sacred and secular, and he explained them through the specificities in cultural contexts. He blended the secular into the sacred and the sacred into the secular in his writings. His writings have two strong emphases – liberation and poverty. Liberation for him was the answer to an oppressive situation, of which poverty is one part, that exists throughout India and that the gospel can be the gospel only if it can proclaim a liberating message. He consistently states that what is needed is an active concern, expressing itself not only in spiritual attitudes of patience, forbearance, acceptance, and benevolence but in concrete ways of caring for the material needs of the ‘neighbor’. This necessarily includes forgiveness of those who have injured us and reconciliation with those whom we have injured which is laid down as an indispensable precondition for Christian prayer and worship (CWG 3, 55). For him Jesus brought in understandings of the sacred while addressing structures, people, and rituals. For Jesus, the supreme goal of life is not unconditional freedom but unconditional love. The basic religious experience that shapes his life and gives form to the movement he founded is the experience of God’s unconditional love which empowers his followers to love their fellow human beings as unconditionally as God does. The fully ‘realized’ follower of Jesus will be the person who fully loves.

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Article Received: November 4, 2020

Article Accepted: January 12, 2021

No of Words: 4, 920



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