

SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED –

AMERICA SELECTS THE CENTURY'S HUNDRED BEST BOOKS OF SPIRITUAL, DEVOTIONAL AND RELIGIOUS WRITING.

AT LEAST 10 OUT OF 100 ARE FROM INDIA OR INDIA ORIENTED. G. K. CHESTERTON'S "ORTHODOXY" IN THE TOP TEN.

What do you think of the 20th Century? Two world wars; 6th August 1945 : Hiroshima Day; trip to the moon and flight to Mars; global crimes; high pornography; environmental near-suicides; several small wars and killings see any newspaper of any day. Is there a God? Is man human? Has morality any sense? Is there anything like soul or spirit or higher consciousness? Darkness all around! Any hope of light?

Moving around in America, I was wondering: What is the use of all this material glamour? All faces have anxiety lurking in their eyes. There is no peace in the mind and bliss in the heart of the humans. Book stores do have a few shelves with the books on non-material, spiritual and religious subjects, which may perhaps console or cure the ailing humanity. But the shelves of fiction outwit them all. A novel to be read and thrown away!

As this pessimism was churning in my head, one day my friend, Philly Mehta placed in my hand a page from "The Orange Country Register" (a newspaper in California) of 6-11-99, and suddenly my optimism was a little revived. It is not that bad, after all. There is some hope. The century was not so inhuman or infidel.

The newspaper headline read: "**Writing with spirit**". It was a report on the "100 best spiritual books" of the century, selected by a Committee of diverse religious scholars, headed by Phillip Zaleski, Professor of Religion at Smith College in Massachusetts. This was a project sponsored by Harper, the well known publishers. At the start the Committee was afraid they might not come up with that many such books. The criterion was: **they must have spiritual depth and literary excellence**, a tall order indeed in the nuclear-genetic century, where spirituality was tattered and tortured. But - a big 'but' - it turned out to be a perplexing project. They were flooded with numerous contenders. It was quite a job to arrive at the semi-final of 180 books; and then, "we had to go over and over and over them deleting one here and one there until we had 100". They were not to go by the bestsellers. They were searching for depth and profundity in spiritual thought.

The result is pleasantly surprising. The final list really constitutes a wealth of Faith, Devotion, Love and genuine Religiosity. And would you believe, 10 out of 100 are from India or India oriented. Here goes:

1. Autobiography of a Yogi, by Swami Yoganand.
2. The Gospel of Ramkrishna Paramhans.
3. The Spiritual Teachings of Raman Maharshi.
4. An Autobiography: the Story of My Experiments With Truth, by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.
5. Think of These Things, by Krishnamurti,
6. Gitanjali, by Rabindranath Tagore.
7. Mystical Dimensions of Islam, by Anne Marie Schimmel.
8. A Simple Path, by Mother Teresa.
9. The Golden String, by Father Bede Griffiths.
10. My Guru and His Disciple, by Christopher Isherwood.

The list of the books from the Western Culture itself is formidable. It includes some of my long-time favorites like:

1. Orthodoxy, by G. K. Chesterton.

2. The Immense Journey, by Loren Eiseley.
3. The Varieties of Religious Experience, by William James.
4. In Search of the Miraculous, by Ouspensky.
5. The Perennial Philosophy, by Aldous Huxley.
6. Meditations and Devotions, by John Henry.
7. Mysticism, by Evelyn Underhill.

Each of these is a priceless gem. In the very nature of things many of the hundred are Christian oriented. That does not matter the least. Lord Jesus is the divine Personification of Love and Devotion, Faith and Submissiveness. Those writers whose hearts throb with the music of Jesus, would come out with powerful compositions. "The Story of a Soul" by St. Therese of Lisieux, for instance, a 19th Century Saint who inspired this Century's Therese Newmann. The Committee then chose 10 out of 100 as topmost. Amongst the top-most ten, there are classics like "Waiting for God" by Simone Weil, "Black Elk Speaks" by Black Elk, "The Four Quartets" poems of T. S. Eliot, "The Sabbath" by Abraham Herschel, "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind" by Shunryu Suzuki and **"Orthodoxy" by Chesterton.**

Spirituality is a serious affair - you may think. Can there be humour in it? Why not? **The First Messenger of Ahura, Asho Zarathushtra laughed at birth; He must have seen a lot of mirth around.** There is a laughing Buddha. Prophets and Saints emphasise on bliss, ecstasy, Ushta, Parama-Anand, which are nothing but intense humours. When you are at peace, you smile, laugh and even cry. Are tears expressions of joy or sadness? Is not sadness a mask concealing joy? **Do Saints look serious in order to restrain their laughter?** One writer said so about **Lord Jesus** :

"He concealed something..... He restrained something. I say it with reverence, there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was HIS MIRTH".

Who has written this, you know? **G. K. Chesterton!** These are the last lines of his book "Orthodoxy", which is adjudged as one of the top ten of the fading century. Mark how beautifully he presents a devotional feeling in the garb of an intellectual thought! His whole book - just a small one of 160 pages - is full of such gems of expression in which he injects literary humour in a masterly fashion. He was not a priest nor a saint, but just a very fat looking writer. He took pleasure in describing himself as an elephant, perhaps a very intelligent elephant, although he does not say so. His "Orthodoxy" was first written in 1908. When I was studying modern science and its philosophy, I wondered whether there was any literary writer who resisted the so called rationality of the 19th Century. And as usually happens to me, I got the answer when my eyes fell on the book somewhere in 1950's. I read it and danced. His theme is : rationality leads to faith, there is no escape. The subtitle of the book is **"The Romance of Faith"**. If you stick to your limited reason, you may go insane. In fact the book has Chapter II under the title "The Maniac" wherein G. K. C. sparkles :

"Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. ... Everywhere we see that men do not go mad by dreaming. Critics are much madder than poets. ... To accept everything is an exercise, to understand everything is a strain.... The poet only asks to get his head into heavens. **It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens in his head. And it is his head that splits.**"

"This chapter is purely practical and is concerned with what actually is the chief mark and element of insanity; we may say in summary that **it is reason used without root, reason in the void.** The man who begins to think without the proper first principles goes mad; he begins to think at the wrong end. And for the rest of these pages we have to try and discover what is the right end. But we may ask in conclusion, **if this be what drives men mad, what is it that keeps them sane?** By the end of this book I hope to give a definite, some will think a far too definite, answer. But for the moment it is possible in the same solely

practical manner to give a general answer touching what in actual human history keeps men sane. **Mysticism keeps men sane.** As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity. As we have taken the circle as the symbol of reason and madness, we may very well take the cross as the symbol at once of mystery and of health. For the circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is fixed for ever in its size; it can never be larger or smaller. But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its centre, it can grow without changing. The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travellers."

Pure beauty of words, thought and humour and above all a stunningly convincing argument: Do you want to be sane? Then be a worldly mystic. Believe in Cross. Do you want go mad? Then believe in the circle and bind yourself in the heavy circular chain of causation, "the worst chain that ever fettered a human being", as he puts it.

"The sane man knows that he has a touch of the beast, a touch of the devil, touch of the saint, a touch of the citizen. Nay a really sane man knows that he had the touch of the mad man. But the materialist's world is quite simple and solid, just as the mad man is quite sure he is sane..... Materialist and madmen never have doubts.

"And here is the punch line, which gave a good box on my then young head:

"It is idle to talk always of the alternative of reason and faith. REASON ITSELF IS A MATTER OF FAITH. **It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all.** If you are merely a skeptic you must sooner or later ask yourself a question. "Why should **anything** go right; even observation and deduction? **Why should not good logic be as misleading as bad logic? They are both movements in the brain of a bewildered ape."**

As the century advanced, the ape has become more and more bewildered.

I shall, some day, tell you more about G K C and his wonderfully igniting sparks, as also about the other books the West itself have declared to be the best 100 of the century's spiritual writing.

K, Book-Worm.

(Parsi Pukar – July-August '99 - Vol. 5; No.1-2)