

Ethics of Spiritual Professionals!

Ethics of Spirituality

Ram S. Ramanathan*

The word ethics is derived etymologically from the Greek word 'ethos'. This word has multiple connotations of character, customs, or spirit of a culture.

A recently disgraced, but brilliant, spiritual celebrity provided this pithy explanation, as a far better definition of ethics, culture or cult than any anthropologist could. He opined, 'Cults become culture. When a small group of people follows someone, we call it a cult. When the majority of people follow the same person, we call it culture'.

So, that is what ethics is all about. It is about what you, I and we believe in, the more the merrier. It is ethical even to kill people if most agree. Ethics and societal politics are inextricably intertwined.

Dan Brown in his book 'Lost Symbol' talks about a ritual conducted in front of an ancient torture instrument where people indulge in a symbolically cannibalistic ritual of consuming flesh and blood of another human. Billions of people around the world not only believe in this ritual but also practice it every week.

Dan Brown is referring merely to the Holy Sacrament offered to and consumed by the faithful in every Church across the globe, in front of the Cross.

What is faith to one religion is pagan to another. Many do not like the belief

encapsulated in a form, such as an idol or even a picture. But, they have no issues praying to a particular direction where the object of worship is in form. The Buddha forbade any worship of his image. For the first 500 years after his death, the banyan tree alone was the symbol of worship for those who believed in him. What would he say to the thousands of pagodas that honor him around the world, with his idol as their centerpiece?

Hindus are probably the largest idol worshippers on the globe today. While the average Hindu would be more than happy to empty his wallet in front of a well-known image with an established reputation, he would look askance at the multicolored warrior figures with upraised swords that dot the South Indian village landscape. 'Such foolishness', he would mutter, 'these villagers are pagan!'

Every belief we consider irrational is a cult. Whether it is religious, political or social, when one starts believing in something based on emotion, without logic, it is called a cult. When the object of belief is still living, it would be a celebrity cult of a politician, a film star or a sports hero or even an author, though rarely. Even today, several people commit suicide when the object of their adoration passes on. A much larger number leave such cults when they discover, all too often, that the object of their veneration has feet of clay.

* Ram S. Ramanathan has travelled the long path of a maverick in both corporate and spiritual enterprises. Both have been adventurous, with ups and downs, and both fraught with the risk of fraudulent leaders and foolish followers.

When the object of veneration is no longer alive, especially in cases where belong to distant history of thousand years or more, we believe in stories about them. They sound more respectable when they are called Scriptures. This is why every religion must have a scripture, invariably called the Holy Scripture, which all faithful should blindly believe. In some cults or cultures, those who do not implicitly believe, the unfaithful, deserve to be eliminated. This is when the cults turn terrorists.

Every devout Hindu swears by the Vedas and Upanishads. Many believe these Scriptures originated 5000 years ago. All believe that these Scriptures were divine in origin, heard by the specially gifted faithful. For centuries, perhaps millennia, these Scriptures were taught by word of mouth within limited communities, never written down. It is more or less the same with all other Scriptures of all other religions.

A large part of the Bible, the Old Testament, does not even belong to that religion. It belongs to the Judaic faith, originating perhaps 3500 years ago. The Roman Emperor Constantine compiled The Bible, as it exists today, around 4th Century CE. Most historians, even staunch Christian believers, agree that what the Christian faith universally accepts today as the Holy Scripture by is only a partial compilation, perhaps a selective compilation, of what Jesus and his apostles preached.

So it is with the Koran. Prophet Mohamed is generally considered to be illiterate and what was heard or experienced by him in 7th Century CE was conveyed by word of mouth to his followers, who wrote them down. Yet, it is believed to be divine in origin. Das Capita, in its own inimitable way, became the Scripture for billions of Marxists and continues to till this date.

At its core, all these are beliefs, not truths. The truth is that human beings live and die by beliefs. More people have died in the world through religious wars and skirmishes than any other cause. Every one of us wants to believe in something outside of us, because we do not believe in ourselves. If we did not have such Scriptures to believe in, we would have invented them.

The need to believe engenders the need to belong. Humans have always been tribals. Each tribe had its totem pole. Now they have Scriptures.

There is hardly any difference between a societal cult, a political cult, a celebrity cult and a religious or spiritual cult. All of them have a defined dogma, which you blindly believe if you wish to be in. All of them have a charismatic leader who gives the follower an identity, to whom the follower swears eternal loyalty. In turns the leader assures the follower of affection, protection and salvation. Look at every belief system you have around you. You will see that each one demands unswerving loyalty to the dogma and the leader.

People have died for such beliefs since ancient times. The Jim Jones cult suicide of nearly a thousand followers thirty years ago was just one more repetition of people willing to die for the leader. 'Don't drink the Kool-Aid' became a memorable warning. But, those who used this warning also quoted the Bible. Why should anyone believe the Bible, or for that matter the Vedas or Koran, any more than Jim Jones?

Why believe in a cult or culture? What is wrong in believing in one's own intelligence? What is wrong in saying that if what these Scriptures say is not in line with how you wish to lead your life today you are not willing to follow them? What business has a religion to interfere in your personal beliefs about your sexuality or the right to bear children?

Why should a religion pretend to be a moral or ethical guide to a society? When a religion oversteps its limits of suggesting some beliefs for its adherents to follow and turns into a legal and political entity, what results is enslavement. Such a religious approach assumes that people cannot think for themselves, or far worse, they should not think for themselves. Such logic should be abhorrent to all thinking people.

The divine energy that created us and sustains us has also provided us with intelligence to lead our lives. It is our lack of belief in that intelligence within us that drives us into the addiction of cults and religions. All we need to do is to wake up to that inner intelligence instead of lending our mind to others.

The ethics of Charity

Religious, spiritual and cultural enterprises are often classified as charitable organizations. Who are they charitable to?

When an enterprise is called a charitable trust, foundation or society, many people automatically assume that such entities do not make profits. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Some even call themselves non-profit organizations. In terms of what the term conveys, this terminology is misleading.

Not for profit or charitable organizations do make profits. It is just that stakeholders in these organizations have agreed not to share the profits amongst themselves, as they would have in a commercial enterprise. It is not that the purpose of these organizations is to make losses. In such a case, year after year they would need to depend on handouts from others. In today's context, professional managers run many non-profits or charities with a view to make money. The profits go to charitable purposes. That is the law.

But then, charity always begins at home. It is well known that in many global not-for-profit organizations, the cost of running the organization or the corporate overheads can be as high as 80% of the revenues received. The average is over 50%. In a commercial organization such an overhead cost of over 15% would ring alarm bells. This means that out of every dollar you give to your favorite charity, 20 cents reach the intended recipients.

I have traveled business and first class in air with the worthies who run such not-for-profit enterprises. They stay in 5 star hotels, eat expensive business lunches and dinners and drive around in expensive limos. Not so long ago, the Chief Executive of a national charity, in a country I worked in, was caught with gold plated taps in his bathrooms and owning Mercedes Benzes. When exposed, such people ask, what is wrong? We work as hard as any corporate executive. Aren't we entitled to similar perquisites? Unfortunately, general public as well as legal framework do not think so.

A Trust is the favorite vehicle for many 'charity' entrepreneurs. It is easy and inexpensive to setup. One can designate it as a not for profit enterprise legally and the charity entrepreneur can appoint himself as the Trustee, often as the sole Trustee. He does not own the monies accrued by the Trust, but he has the legal authority to spend it as he wishes. This is favored by most religious enterprises since the philosophy is beautifully in line with the concept of renunciation as enunciated by all global religions. Therefore, the Trust is the favorite vehicle for all spiritual wannabe leaders, be they Christians, Hindus or Buddhists.

Once the Trust is set up, all the trustee needs to do is to run it for a few years sensibly without attracting the unwelcome attention of the taxman before the trust can qualify for

additional benefits. Soon, people who donate to the Trust can claim the donations as tax-deductible expenses. Some countries allow deduction of multiples of amounts donated. Any profits left over after all expenses can also be tax-free. One can really eat the cake and have it too.

A Trust can be an excellent money laundering operation. Especially when it is spiritually inclined, a Trust can set up mechanisms to receive donations anonymously. Once declared as revenues in the Trust, voila, the money becomes clean. It is almost that simple.

Take the instance of a temple. Every one of us knows that major temples, as would places of worship of other denominations, receive large sums of money in their hundis or similar collection boxes. All of it is anonymous from people who are not looking for tax deductions. In simple terms, the money received is unaccounted and once received is legal. I presume this is what tax authorities deem as money laundering.

By law, these monies are to be counted in front of witnesses. One assumes that in some large enterprises this rule is followed. When it is not, the potential for misuse is high. A Trust can work both ways. It can absorb unaccounted money to be laundered and also create unaccounted money. Apart from legal and tax implications, the moral implications of handling large quantities of such money can be dangerous. The temptation can be overwhelming.

Places of worship for many of us are deeply emotional. Do we really think that all the temples, churches and mosques that come up in our street corners are established to fulfill our spiritual needs? If we truly believe in God, we can worship at home. But again, as I said before, we have the need to believe and belong.

We need to gather in a temple, church or a mosque. Often, religions demand this.

These days, places of worship are created and operated as commercial entities by many unscrupulous people. There are spiritual organizations that have established chains of such places of worship. Some are global in their reach. Antics of the much reviled pandas in North Indian temples pale in comparison to the sophisticated wallet opening techniques of manager priests who run these establishments.

Places of worship are only a part of a larger menu of wealth creation opportunities for the charity entrepreneur. Spiritual enterprises these days are more business savvy. Building of the places of worship and the supply of idols and other items of worship can be and is big bucks. There can be profitable brand extensions covering every aspect of consumerism.

If the leader is articulate and presentable, the media in the form of books, videos, CDs and other publications offer huge opportunities. Once a core cadre of believers, the inner circle, umbra and penumbra have been created carefully and selectively, these cadres can be used to create material on behalf of the leader from existing works. After all, copyright exists only for 70 years. In any case, of what relevance is copyright in India?

The leader can franchise teaching operations. Some leaders are skinflints using free slave labor to organize and teach. Others are more participative, sharing the profits with those who market, organize and conduct these courses. Several are global franchises and very profitable.

The key is to brand and build credibility around the leader entrepreneur. These days, spiritual leaders use better technology than corporate honchos in creating the right PR and

brand image. They get far more public mileage than business leaders through talks, television, radio, Internet and print media. The successful ones create and maintain an excellent relationship with the media. They also work on creating powerful political friends.

I see tremendous consulting opportunities for young people in spiritual enterprises. Base salaries, bonuses and commissions can be as high as in corporate careers. In addition, it can be soul fulfilling! The day cannot be far off when the IIMs offer courses on spiritual enterprise management.

Reforming ethics of spiritual enterprises

What is wrong with a spiritual enterprise? What is wrong if a spiritual enterprise is run on the profit motives of a commercial business organization?

This article does not pretend to be Management or Business Review material. That is only because I would like people to understand what I write. But, make no mistake, every word has been researched and can be documented. A spiritual enterprise can be created and operated in real life using these principles. All one needs is an unscrupulous leader with a thick hide.

There is no issue at all if a spiritual enterprise is run commercially without hiding behind the façade of a charitable institution. The entire legal and tax structure of charitable and not for profit organizations has been created by countries all over the world to support philanthropic activities. Tax deductions are given to donors and tax exemptions are given to the enterprises in the belief that no one involved in these enterprises would benefit from their operations.

I personally believe that tax laws should be far more stringent with these spiritual and charitable organizations. All they have to do is to insert a clause claiming to do public

charitable work to obtain tax exemption. Their object clauses must be specific rather than general, as of now. Many of them employ the services of lobbyists to secure donations in return for sizeable commissions. There should be greater control on receipts to eliminate laundering possibilities. There should be far greater control on expenses to ensure that operational costs are a small fraction of the receipts. As it is now, it is a free ride for the people who run these charities. Why should a guruji ride in a Mercedes or fly first class?

Far more importantly, such organizations ought to truly be not for profit. What they earn in a year must be spent in that year. There should be no carried over profits. There should be no assets held by any individual behind the mask of a Trustee. Assets should be held by a much larger group of people, who cannot be influenced easily. All this may seem unrealistic, but possible. As the rules stand today, one spiritual entrepreneur can control billions of dollars of assets and revenues without being accountable to anyone. What price spirituality?

Every spiritual enterprise worth its name claims to do charitable work benefiting the general public. They say that they run schools and hospitals and fund infrastructure development projects. Since most of their funds are from donations by their own admission, why do they name these schools and hospitals after the leader? Why don't they help finance government run schools and hospitals, which in any case form the vast majority? By definition, charity is what the right hand gives that the left does not know. Is establishing a brand image charity? It is a means to an end.

Not so long ago, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi bought an island off Nova Scotia intending to establish an independent kingdom! Since then every self-styled guru dreams of owning an

island and printing his own currency, of course with his photo prominently displayed. These guys talk about the no mind state. It is all about reducing your mind to zero, while imprinting their name, fame and power on your mind.

Spiritual entrepreneurship is the starting point of a power game. Some may exploit it openly, as did a saffron clad worthy recently announcing that he is setting up a political party. At least, this guy had the guts, if not the intelligence. Others do it behind closed doors and use their wealth to peddle influence. From time immemorial, in this Vedic tradition, spirituality was the occupation of the brahmana, money creation the occupation of the vaisya and power broking the preserve of the kshatriya.

Enter the new breed of spiritual entrepreneurs who are all in one. If they wish to be that, it is their prerogative. But, they should not pretend to follow the Vedic or yogic traditions. They should not look for government handouts. They should have the courage to become new age entrepreneurs marketing spirituality as yet another business. This would be the honest path to follow, instead of the hypocritical diversion of riding the spiritual scenic road while enjoying all the benefits of the material highway.

When I worked in some of the seamier parts of India, I had the opportunity to work closely with politicians, police and other administrators, and because of the nature of my jobs also criminals. There was undoubtedly a nexus between these groups. There was an implicit understanding of how far each can go in their spheres without affecting others. The unfortunate part was that the common man was not part of this power equation.

With the assumed multiple role of the spiritual entrepreneurs, they too seem to be entering this nexus *mélange*. The entrepreneurs may see nothing wrong with

what they do, but I see plenty wrong. So, I assume would a lot of right thinking people.

In this country, in our Vedic tradition, spirituality was the core of one's life. Hinduism has never been an organized religion like all others. It survived because of its loose and flexible structure. Sanatana Dharma was an individual belief, not an organized enterprise. By converting it into a branded commercial entity, fraudulent spiritual entrepreneurs are digging the grave of Sanatana Dharma.

It is all very well to talk about building ashrams and gurukulam schools to inspire and create a spiritually enlightened generation. This would be fine if there was moral and emotional maturity to ensure spiritual discipline. Otherwise mixed gender communes, by whatever name they may be called, would end up as dens of vice. When yoga gets mixed up with tantra, catalyzed by immaturity, the results can be traumatic.

Do all spiritual enterprises have to end up this way? The painful and realistic answer is yes. In all my knowledge, the only being I can truly accept as enlightened in recent memory is Ramana Maharishi. The very atmosphere of his *jiva samadhi* in Thiruvannamalai energizes me. Ramana was never a spiritual entrepreneur. In fact, there are no Ramana ashrams outside of where he lived and died. Yet, his name resonates through out the world.

The other extreme I respect is the controversial Osho. Whatever one may malign him for, he was an honest man. He seemed to destroy his own organization for the sheer pleasure of proving a point.

Spirituality does not require enterprises. Sanatana Dharma does not need entrepreneurs to nurture it. Spirituality, in its essence, is about the individual. It is a path of aloneness to tread. Therein lies its strength. _____●