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Adventist Church Leadership and Religious Liberty in India: Impact on Mission and Ministry

Introduction

India, consisting of several diverse communities, operates on various religious sentiments, norms, expectations, cultures, and worldviews. Each culture and worldview developed, nurtured, and was organized in a community that recognized the importance of religious tolerance—tolerances that keep India united and yet diverse. Religious tolerance in India respects and allows the various religions to exist and practice within the same community.¹ However, if this norm is broken, the resulting actions can result in unexpected consequences. There are several cases where tolerance was breached due to religious standards, views, or beliefs, causing chaos in a community.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has become a center of influence for many communities around the country. The Church's outreach includes education, healthcare, and training schools, among other services. Such services respect religious sentiments and provide room for people from every religious background to be nurtured and feel accepted. However, the Seventh-day Adventist Church remains careful not to compromise its values and fundamental beliefs. In this manner, it provides education in a Christian context in hundreds of schools in India. Through its schools and medical institutions, the Church reaches out to people of other religions, offering acceptance, compassion, and love (personal communication, September 7, 2020).

This study looks at religious liberty in the outreach of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in India. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic's restriction and limitation, this study is limited to using a descriptive methodology,

exploring selected literature to discuss the norms to follow, adhering to the government's laws, and being true to the functional beliefs operative in the outreach and services of the Adventist Church.

Religious Liberty—Perspective and Importance

The usage of the term “Religious Liberty” has been widely used in the West; however, globalization has facilitated the term to have a worldwide usage. To understand religious liberty, it is important to understand what the term “secular state” means. A secular state can be a state without any official or state religion or a country that is entirely secular. For example, Afghanistan is a religious state where the official state religion is Islam with approximately 99.7% of the population as Muslim (Pew Research Center 2012). In contrast, India is a secular state due to its diverse religious beliefs and practices. The Indian constitution's preamble declares India to be a secular state, and promises to protect and secure liberty, equality, and justice for all citizens (Madan 1983:11; Legal Services India). Hence, India as a secular state, promises religious liberty to every citizen of the country.

Donald E. Smith (1963) states that the concept of the secular state itself is a Western liberal democratic tradition. He further proposes a definition for a secular state, stating, it is a state that guarantees individuals and corporate freedom of religion and considers each citizen equal irrespective of their religion. It is a state not constitutionally attached or inclined to a particular religion (1963:3, 4). Religious liberty is a practice found most often in a secular nation or state.

To create a clear and significant idea about “Secularism” and “Religious Liberty” in India, this paper briefly surveys the historical significance of secularism in the country. It is noteworthy that secularism in India does not mean the abolition of religion but only a separation of religion from state affairs (Madan 1983:11). G. M. Banatwalla states, “A pattern of religious-political relationship in a country cannot be shaped in a vacuum; it is designed by the native thoughts and woven in the total fabric of the life of the society. *Sarvadharmasamabhava* or respect for all religions in an attitude shaped by a belief in the truth of all religions, for untruth does not inspire respect” (1992:1). He further states that such ideas led the country towards the concept of equal treatment, and “no religion receives a preferential treatment” (2). Hence, the constitution of India does not favor any religious community. Instead, it expects all to abide by the constitutional laws. Milton Konvitz mentions that if the constitution is not interested in a religion's authenticity, then all must be treated equally and protected without partiality (1968:68). Prior to India's independence, prominent political personalities used religious symbols and feelings to organize the people of

India against the British East India Company² before the partition (Kumar 2019:4). After the partition, India remained a secular state, while Pakistan became a country with a state religion; however, religion continues to have a significant influence in Indian politics (Madan 1983:12).

Religious liberty or freedom of religion is the right given to a country's people, allowing them to freely practice their beliefs. Religious freedom is more than just being a believer of a religion, or following certain practices or beliefs. It also means that individuals are not forced to go against their core values and beliefs (Sharma 2011:73, 74). Religious liberty is also an essential socio-political concern that assures citizens of both major and minor religions that they can live with equal privileges without either being forced to join the predominant religion. It also means that none should feel superior to others or misuse their constitutional rights in any form. John Corvino cites several examples in stressing that religious liberty must not be misunderstood as a privilege given by the state. "Religion is not an absolute out-of-law free card: You may not slaughter infidels, throw virgins into volcanoes, or withhold life-saving medical treatment from your children, no matter what your religion teaches" (Corvino, Anderson, and Girgis 2017:24).

Religious liberty is vital for any nation as it facilitates society's primary need—freedom to live. Secular states provide the opportunity for everyone to function within their community, practice their religious beliefs, and follow their customs without any pressure to change. Thomas Farr states that in every nation with religious communities that are robust and significant, religious freedom is the cohesive source of stability, and without it, the result is religious violence and conflict (2008:19). Quoting an essay published in 2005 by Human Rights Watch (HRW), Farr mentions that any discrepancy between such freedom for religious communities leads to human rights abuses by both government and the religious groups influenced by judgemental attitudes—the very thing that handicaps the importance of religious freedom (2008:65).

The move towards religious freedom in the world did not occur in a vacuum, but out of a rich historical context. Smith briefly discusses the history of secular states and their formation. He mentions that the concept of Christendom led to major problems between church and state, with a recognition that spiritual and temporal allegiances needed to be separate (1963:9). Marsiglio of Padua became one of the most influential contributors to the idea of a secular state through his work *Defensor Pacis* in 1324. Marsiglio concluded his statement about the secular state, stating, "The right of citizens are independent of the faith they profess; and no man may be punished for his religion" (in Smith 1963:11, 12). David S. Dockery says that there was a forced religious uniformity in England between the

16th to 18th centuries with no tolerance for any sort of personal freedoms. Such religious coercion led to “the demand for freedom among people who wanted to think, speak, and believe for themselves as informed by their reading of the Word of God” (Farris 2019). Abraham V. Thomas comments that when religion is not a personal affair, it becomes social and institutional, hence, the need for religious liberty. He quotes Carrillo de Albornoz, stating, “religious liberty presupposes the exercise of other human rights” (in Thomas 1974:212). Further, he states, “Freedom of conscience is related to ‘freedom of thought,’ and freedom of religious witness to the right of ‘free expression.’ So also, Freedom of public worship is closely related to . . . ‘freedom of association.’ When the former right in each of these pairs is violated, the latter more general freedom is also in jeopardy” (212).

Indian Constitution on Religious Liberty

The history of the emergence of religious freedom and liberty in other nations provides a context for a discussion on the historical events that led India to become a secular state. Several world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, originated in India, and India is also home for Muslim, Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian communities. The nation has also faced several religious conflicts due to invaders, who also brought their religious beliefs (Sharma and Pardasani 2016:224). These events shaped India to become a culturally and religiously diverse country.

Smith quotes Panikkar stating that the modern-day secularized India is not founded on ancient India or Hindu thought. Instead, the roots of modern-India are rooted in the European traditions of about 150 years ago. Ancient India was prominently influenced by *dharma*³ and was the primary focus and concern of the state. The rulers provided aid to the religious institution, promote building temples with grand large donations (Smith 1963:57). In ancient Indian polity, the traditional societies displayed interdependency between religious and political authority, maintaining distinctive identity, respectively, even with the differences in the societies (Banatwalla 1992:25). The cultural differences transformed into political differences when the tradition was broken due to the Muslim ruler’s viewing differences between the rights and obligations of Muslim and non-Muslim subjects (Madan 1983:13). However, Emperor Akbar was an exception who, in fact, promoted equality of religion and freedom to worship during his reign. He even built several temples for the Hindus. Madan further mentions several historical events exhibiting the emergence of secularism rooted in nationalism and communalism (14).

The Constitution of India (the longest in the world) came into effect in 1950, attempting to neutralize any biases by declaring India as a secular state and promoting religious freedom as a vital ingredient of democratic India. In India's constitution, article 25-28 is entitled "Right to Freedom of Religion," assuring non-discriminatory freedom of conscience to profess, practice freely, and propagate religion (Thiruvengadam 2017:170). On the one hand, constitutional rights provide religious "freedom" not "privilege" to India's citizens. Rohit De suggests the "religious freedom" articles have been manipulated, restructured, or reinterpreted for some sort of bias towards Hinduism. It is crucial to understand that India's constitution is above and beyond any judicial or parliamentary body, and therefore, no changes can be made but only amendments are allowed. However, a visible tilt and religious privilege towards Hinduism is quite evident (2020:20).

On several occasions, the constitutional laws on freedom have been undermined due to the pre-existent Hindu mindset, which influences individuals. However, the judicial body rules out any such propaganda to maintain the community's harmony and diversity, such as the Ayodhya verdict (Padmavathi and Prasath 2020).⁴

Seventh-day Adventist Church Leadership on Religious Liberty

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was established on the foundational doctrines to prepare people for this world and the world to come. It has impacted the world with its unique approach to humankind. I use the expression "unique" because of the missional approach that the Adventist Church has manifested to reach the world through education, healthcare, literature, healthy living, Sabbath rest, and its end-time message. Since its formation as a church, it has promoted the life and teaching of Jesus Christ among communities worldwide, even though James White, in 1856 wrote "not to send the gospel to the heathens; but to extend the warning throughout the realms of corrupted Christianity" (Krause 2010:93). In 1863, a debate arose over the meaning of "Go into all the world" in Mark's gospel, believing that reaching the diverse immigrant community within America would be sufficient, as their conversion would lead their families and friends to Christ as well (see Works Cited: Ironically, Early Adventists). However, the advent movement and the end-time message has been preached to the "ends of the world."

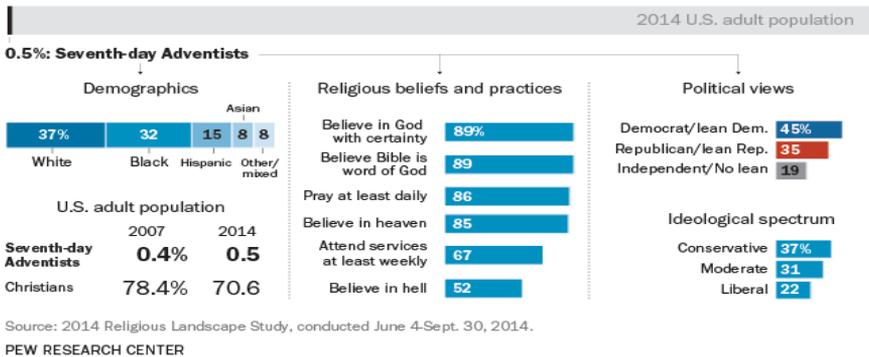
Interestingly, a few prominent early Adventist leaders helped grow and expand Adventist mission into a global enterprise. With its impact on healthcare, providing health benefits, and ministering to the sick, the

church was unique in its stress on healthy living. It also focused its ministry in the education sector. Several schools and colleges were founded to promote the Adventist philosophy of education to “educating for eternity.” Healthcare and education have been key factors allowing Adventism to expand dramatically around the world and have an influence on the masses from diverse cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds.

According to Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study, though low in percentage of the total adult population, Michael Lipka states, the SDA Church is the most racially and ethnically diverse religious group in America (Michael Lipka 2015; McChesney and Paseggi 2015).

Seventh-Day Adventists: A Small and Diverse Faith

The church traces its origins to the first half of the 19th century in the U.S.



Catalin Ionete in another study reported that the SDA Church community in Romania, while existing in an orthodox-dominated area is more active than the orthodox majority. It is seen as a hardworking and growing segment in society with their religious beliefs and practices. Despite the difference between the villagers, there are significant interactions taking place, a good illustration of religious tolerance (Simons and Westerlund 2015:203). In the past few decades, several such cases showcase the Adventist Church’s impact in religiously diverse communities, by ministering to all, respecting religious conscience, and promoting religious freedom.

In 1901, the General Conference created the Religious Liberty Department, and has actively participating in promoting non-combatancy and helping Adventist members who have lost their employment because of their refusal to work on Sabbath (Land 2005:245). In 1959 the name of the department was changed to Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department (PARL), with the following description of its purpose.

The Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department (PARL) promotes and maintains religious liberty, with particular emphasis upon the liberty of conscience. Religious liberty includes the human right to have or adopt the religion of one's choice; to change religious belief according to conscience; to manifest one's religion individually or in community with fellow believers, in worship, observance, practice, witness, and teaching, subject to respect for the equivalent rights of others. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2005:129, 130)

It further states that every church member is a member of the association, maintaining and safeguarding religious liberty, encouraging the separation of church and state, where possible (130). The religious liberty leader's duties are to interact with PARL officials, promote religious liberty magazines, and organize meetings, seminars, programs, and activities depending on the situation (144).

SDA Mission Leadership in India

The Seventh-day Adventist mission in India started a century ago, with a few visionary missionaries who desired to spread the Adventist message. Early mission work among the socially oppressed, women, and children were the most crucial initiatives. Early outreach included schools and training centers throughout the country. Georgia Burrus came to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1895 as a self-supporting missionary, and later, Doris A. Robinson and Martha May Taylor joined the mission field in India. In 1896, Burrus and Taylor opened a school for Hindu girls. Soon, many other missionaries joined and establishing a Sanitarium, an orphanage, and another school (Horro and Kara 2014:207; Land 2005, 142). Later, the Adventists moved to various parts of the country, establishing schools, colleges, and hospitals. At present, the Southern Asia Division of Seventh-day Adventists in India has 12 hospitals, 118 secondary schools, nine colleges, and a university.

Adventist mission has developed a remarkable reputation among the non-Christians. In a conversation with Irene Moses (personal communication September 6, 2020) a former school principal's wife, she expressed how their absence is felt at their previous mission field. On almost every school occasion or festival, the couples are loaded with wishes, messages, and emails expressing their impact on their lives (I had the opportunity to read a few messages of the students who had different religious backgrounds). My experience working in a secondary school confirms the same level of appreciation as I had similar experiences with the students. Similarly, the hospitals, university, and colleges provided service to all regardless of religious differences.

Potential Impact of Religious Liberty on Mission and Ministry

A church amidst a diverse community stands as a “light of the world” (Matt 5:14). Light illuminates a path forward and encourages people to move in a certain direction. In India, Seventh-day Adventist mission has been a light that has inspired communities to work together regardless of religious affiliation. Adventist education has prepared thousands of young men and women without discrimination to contribute to the country’s development. In doing so, the church leaders often faced challenges that have impacted both those within and without the Adventist faith community. Two cases of rather “challenging situations” are discussed to illustrate India’s present leadership challenges and provide the basis for recommendations to overcome those challenges.

Case Study 1

Unlike western countries such as the USA, India has a firm approach towards their views about the Indian flag. At any point, in any situation, every citizen of India must strictly abide by the laws to respect, salute, and honor the flag. In India, the country flag cannot and should not be seen outside a residential home, especially in the government sector. The Indian flag must not be replicated and used for garments, decoration, etc. Such is the view of Indians towards their flag, which is strictly taught both at home and at school, teaching deep respect for the flag. In India, flags are mainly hoisted on two occasions—on Republic Day (January 26) and Independence Day (August 15). On those two occasions, educational institutions, the working sector (government or private), and hospitals are obliged to hoist the flag. Everyone working in the organization is expected to attend the flag-raising ceremony, to show reverence and respect to the flag and the national anthem. There have been some cases when intentional or unintentional disrespect towards the national flag has resulted in prosecution and severe punishment, with those involved labeled as anti-nationals. The respect for the national flag is described under Act no. 69, 1971, as “Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971” (archive.org 2017). Several cases have been registered against those who, in any way, disrespected the flag. Such incidents are heavily politicized and receive negative press in the media (*The Times of India* 2020). A recent incident took place in Coimbatore, a city in south India, where a ruling government political leader has been booked on charges for disrespecting the national flag (PTI 2020). Such is the position of flag in India, which cannot and

should not be criticized because respect for the nation and national honor is a fundamental duty of every citizen of India, as the constitution directs.

However, such constitutional laws have also challenged various denominations, especially the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which has strong Sabbath-keeping traditions, which avoids work and other secular activities on that day. There have been incidences when both Republic Day and Independence Day fall on the Sabbath, creating an issue of consciences on whether to follow the state or the church. The Adventist leaders are placed in a dilemma, whether to abide by God's laws or follow the state's laws. In such situations, there have been instructions to attend the flag hoisting ceremony before attending the church for Sabbath worship, especially in Adventist educational institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities.

Recommendation

To deal with such a situation and stand firm in faith in God and respect for the nation, Adventist leaders need to develop a sense of responsibility towards both the church and the state. Sabbath activities must follow biblical principles and Scripture teaches to follow the state's laws and requirements as long as they are not counter to God's Word. Romans 13:1-2 advises, "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves." In Matthew 22:40, Jesus says, "And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Hence, it is evident that God instructs us to balance our approach to both state and church. It is essential that as leaders in a diverse community, one must exemplify their faith by obeying the laws of the land while also obeying God's law. Church leaders, on the other hand, must also respect believers' conscience who may or may not want to attend such ceremonies on the Sabbath. It is noteworthy that India's Constitution gives freedom of conscience to its citizen, and therefore, there is no room for any compulsive force against an individual's conscience. In a situation where flag raising falls on Sabbath, Adventist leaders must encourage its members and employees to understand the biblical approach towards the nation and the community. The Bible clearly states in Mark 12:31, "And the second, like it, is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." There needs to be a consensual agreement that the flag raising ceremony must be held during the early hours on the Sabbath day, followed by the regular church activities.

For example, in such situations, Spicer Adventist University conducted the required ceremony early Sabbath morning to allow for the normal Sabbath activities of Sabbath School and church. Doing so demonstrates commitment to biblical principles of Sabbath keeping and respect for the nation. This balanced approach also has a positive impact on the hearts and minds of those in the community who do not share an understanding of biblical principles for God's holy Sabbath day.

Case Study 2

Yoga is a new lifestyle that is extremely popular in almost every part of the world. From celebrities to sports personalities, they are seen practicing it to prolong aging and improving health benefits. *Yoga se hi Hoga* (it will only happen with Yoga) is a new slogan in present-day India. Although Yoga is not new to the people as it originated in India, it has gained popularity in the country's modern and educated communities. Yoga's origin and root can be traced back to the Indic religions, way before the formation of present-day Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Geoffrey Samuel states that the modern western term does not relate closely to the indigenous term. However, the practices that involve mental and physical cultivation towards some sort of liberating insights are found in the major religions of the sub-continent (2008:1). Elizabeth De Michelis suggests that the roots of Yoga is found in Hinduism influenced by esoteric philosophies (2005:40).⁵ Because of this religious background, many Christians have a negative and skeptical view of Yoga. However, not all Christians care about its root or prior existence; instead, the term "Christian Yoga" has gained popularity in modern times "in the church." Edwin Noyes (2018) describes several author's perspectives on the definition of Yoga. He defines Yoga is a physical practice to establish a union between the mind, body, and spirit (2018:121). Since yoga's roots are in Hindu scriptures—*Veda* and *Bhagwat Gita*—the Adventist Church believes that yoga and Christianity are diametrically opposed to each other (*Adventist Voice* 2013). Adventists believe they must give undivided allegiance to their Creator God and not participate in practices that might compromise their faith.

June 21 is celebrated as the International Day of Yoga after it was so honored in the United Nations General Assembly in 2014. India's government (both national and state governments) advocated the day to be observed in every institution, schools, and colleges (Borwankar 2015; *India Today* Web 2016; *ThePrint* 2019). Due to this recent ruling, Adventist institutions across India face a dilemma of whether and how to observe the day.

Recommendation

It is noteworthy that yoga's popularity is unstoppable, especially in the present-day world, where life is stressful and constrained with life-threatening situations. Yoga has been hyped to be ideal for such situations to avoid health risks and provide a better quality of life. It is arguable whether there are health benefits are found only in yoga. This is one area where the Adventist Church needs to stand for its values without compromising biblical and religious principles.

India's constitution gives its Christian minority the privilege to exercise their fundamental rights. Since yoga is associated with Hinduism, Adventist members have the right to practice "freedom of conscience" when deciding whether or not to participate in yoga day activities. The bigger challenge comes for Adventist educational institutions. Some aspects of yoga emphasize relaxing and breathing exercises that have no religious connotation; however, yoga also has very definite spiritual aspects that go against biblical principles. Adventist schools are challenged to balance respect for the government and the non-Christian community who would be interested in having their children participate in Yoga Day activities. This is where serious discussions among Adventist educational leaders are needed to develop biblically appropriate functional substitutes for mandated government activities.

Conclusion

Adventist leaders in India must be complimented. Unlike in many other countries, the Indian church is established in a religion-sensitive community. A balanced approach to matters of conscience protects religious liberty not only for the Adventist community but also for adherents of other religions. Interestingly, the Adventist Church has never been charged with breaking the laws in the areas discussed above. By practicing and allowing others to practice freedom of religion and conscience, the Adventist Church has enhanced God's mission in India. I conclude with a few suggestions that would add values to the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church based on this study.

1. *Establish a Department of Religious Liberty.* As per the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, it is recommended that every local church have a Department of Religious Liberty (PARL). Every church must be well-informed of the duties and responsibilities of PARL and render services towards the betterment of church and society. This is especially important for churches in communities where Adventist educational institutions are located. PARL departments at the local church and institutional level can assess and identify issues and challenges that need to be dealt with.

2. *Engage in Research Related to Religious Liberty.* A well-known phrase, “Action speaks louder than words,” is commonly used. Action is required in the present context of religious liberty in India. Adventist mission can benefit from church and school leaders interacting with scholars, who working together can contribute towards developing and proposing quality approaches to church and society problems in the area of religious liberty.

3. *Develop Statements Clarifying Adventist Positions.* Publishing statements that clarify the church’s stand on issues dealing with religious liberty is crucial. A well-researched statement dealing with issues of conscience and religion would be extremely important for educating church members. Since India’s constitution provides fundamental rights to protect religious sentiments, it is prudent to utilize those guaranteed rights for the church’s benefits and protection.

4. *Hold Leadership workshops to Address Religious Liberty Issues.* Many workshops have been held to strengthen leadership in the churches of India; however, more emphasis must be given to religious liberty and the rights of minorities. Annual or bi-annual workshops could be conducted at the local and national levels to broaden the exposure to SUD leaders to the challenges and possible solutions to religious liberty issues.

5. *Maintain Balance in Religious Liberty Areas.* The Adventist Church in India must work hard to strike a balance between obedience to the state and obedience to God. Such a balance is biblical and needs to be practiced.⁶ Practicing love, compassion, and acceptance to all in the community also provides opportunity to exemplify the true God.

Endnotes

¹One example is the existence of two religious centers (Temple and a Mosque) side by side with one wall separating them in the city of Patna, Bihar. I grew up seeing these two religious community worshipping in harmony. On several occasions they even help each other in successfully conducting special services or festivals.

²The British East India Company (EIC) founded by an English merchant John Watts, was a trading company formed to trade in the Indian Ocean region. The company ended up conquering a large part of the Indian subcontinent. See, Chaudhuri 2006. *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company: 1660-1760.*

³*Dharma* is an important concept in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. The concept is originally rooted in traditional Hindu doctrines, but largely accepted by other religions of Indian-origin due to their connection with Hinduism. The basic understanding of *dharmā* is law, duty, morality, and religion. While its interpretation varies in some Indian religions, its central theme is the “right way of living.”

⁴One such example is the “2019 Supreme Court Verdict on Ayodhya dispute” where a disputed land was in controversy due to its proprietorial right among Hindus and Muslims in India. This dispute caused a lot of chaos to the community among both religious groups. Finally, the verdict was given to rebuilt the Ram temple on 2.77 acres of the disputed land and provide 5 acres of land in another place for the Muslims to build another mosque. Such verdict may not be acceptable for some but it was an intentional decision to benefit both parties to settle the dispute and maintain the unity and integrity of the country.

⁵Elizabeth quotes Wouter J. Hanegraaff defining the characteristics in western worldviews (Michelis 2005, 40). Also, See, Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 1996. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press

⁶The story of Naaman and his final conversation with Elisha is an example of respecting religious sentiments and allowing some space for personal conscience issues. Elisha response—“Go in peace.” Similar balance can be seen in the life of Jesus Christ who on several occasions did not rebuke people, but showed compassion and love.

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