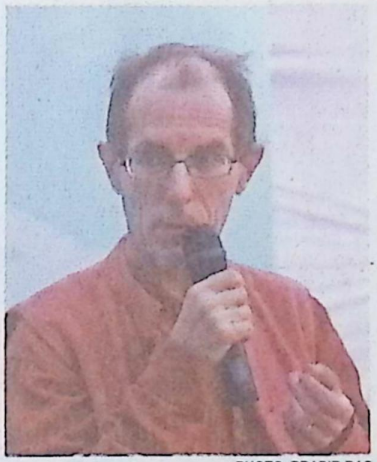
steps towards integrating spirituality into your life.

The norm in every tradition is - of course, there are always exceptions to the rule – to be able to find a guru and find that unique place within yourself. We are all different so our spiritual journeys will also be different. You can see the acceptance of that difference in the Hindu culture – each person has different combinations, so what might be suitable for one might not work for another person. The basic duties in Islam are the same but when you look at Sufism, there are different paths and methods that need to be followed. Some paths might be more intellectual, others could be more action centric and so forth. Not everything fits everybody.

When religion was first introduced, prayers probably were seen as the way to reach spirituality within oneself. But at present there's a tendency to take it more as a didactic ritual that you "have" to follow. Do you agree?

There is this formalism nowadays that is a creation of human beings. That's a danger and a problem but ideally, every person would look at spirituality from an individual point of view rather than following others. Initially, the purpose of prayers was, as you said, to reach spirituality within yourself. A hadith by Prophet Mohammad which when roughly paraphrased means that your prayer is the spiritual ascension of the believer. In principle, the prayer should be a means for spiritual ascension for any being. Of course it is very far from happening in practice (smiles). But in essence, any form of prayer is a return to God. In Sufism, the prayer is just not enough. There is more emphasis on what we call the 'inner prayer' that is considered to be the main way of accessing God or spirituality.



Patrick Laude PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

In your book 'Divine Play, Sacred Laughter and Spiritual Understanding', you say that laughter can be a way to understand spirituality. Could you please elaborate on this?

Laughter can play an important role in some traditions, circumstances and for some individuals. In a number of traditions, creation is seen as a kind of play of the supreme being, an illusion. If you free yourself from the illusion of the world and become aware of its spells, that results in a freedom within yourself. This freedom can sometimes be facilitated or expressed through laughter. Generally you laugh at yourself or at something or someone, and that comes when you suddenly feel free of some constraints and constrictions. Laughter is an explosion through which you realize that all of this is illusion. In Zen Buddhism, there are examples of many masters who've reached enlightenment through laughing because laughter expunges the negativity and opens the many knots of the soul.

A common perception is that when one is talking about spirituality, one is actually referring to religion. So the thought here is that religion and spirituality is interchangeable. Do you agree?

Many people today all over the world would want to be spiritual but not religious. What they mean generally is that they aspire some sort of inner peace or inner freedom but they are not interested or even reject the so-called institutional religions for various reasons. The modern world's conception of religion is very geography centric. Whether its Hindu nationalism, Islamism, Jihadism, Christianity, Zionism, you can find a kind of formalism and politicisation of ideology. That's why some people turn down the concept of religion.

That being said, the ideal situation should be very different from this. Ideally, religion and spirituality should go hand in hand because there's no true religion without spirituality and there's no spirituality without an anchoring in religion. There are always exceptions to the rule but in the immense majority of cases, spirituality requires the channels of grace that can be found in religion. And religion, if it were to live sincerely, requires some form of spirituality. A Muslim or Chiristian woman, who prays to please God, would be an example of an elementary form of spirituality.

Does proper, informed writing about religions like Islam, which is sometimes negatively targeted by the Western media, help to combat any discrimination against any particular religious group?

One can hope that it does. Anything that is written to unveil, so to speak, dimensions of any topic, here let's speak of religion, in a deeper, more spiritual, more intellectual, more ethical manner can in itself potentially contribute to combating the discrimination. The problem is that very often you find yourself preaching to the convert. People who read these kinds of books or articles are already predisposed to swing this way. Those who have a kind of prejudice will not normally read such literature. I believe in the Bhagvad Gita's philosophy that you need to do what you have to do without thinking of the fruit of the action and that holds true in this case as well. ■