

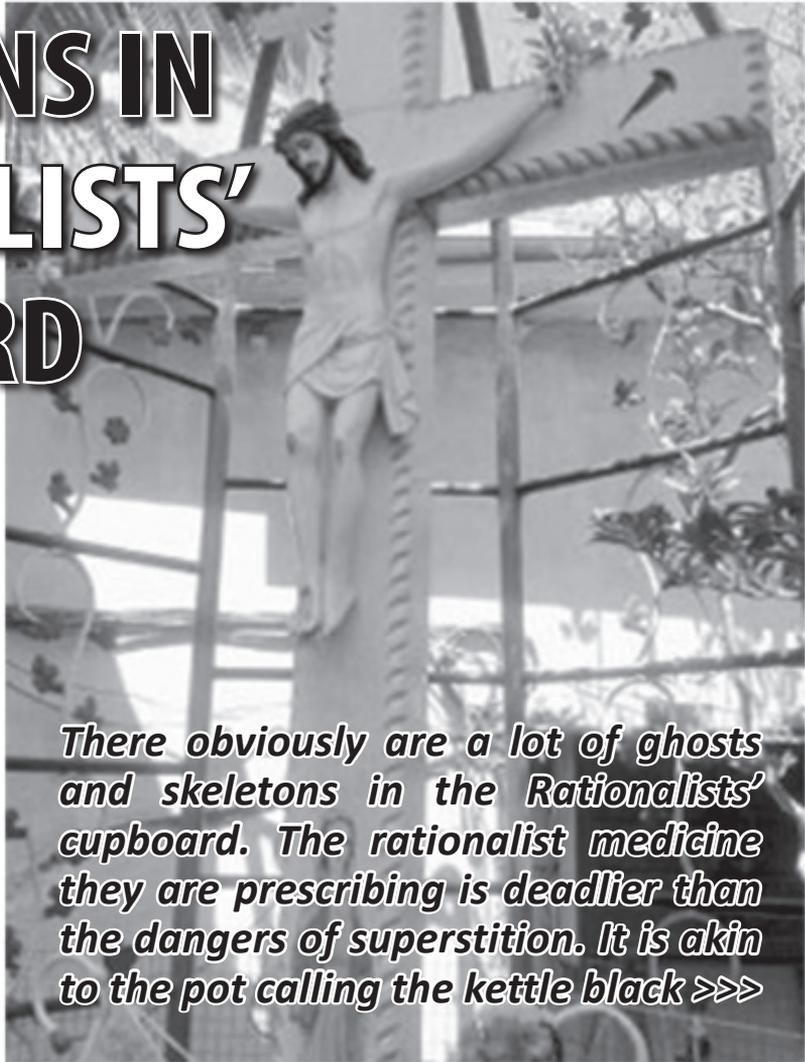
# SKELETONS IN RATIONALISTS' CUPBOARD



BY GEORGE PLATHOTTAM SDB

A few days ago a journalist friend called me up with a request to speak to a Bishop in Mumbai on behalf of a rationalist, against whom a group of Christians there had filed a defamation case. Curiosity got the better of me to understand to learn more about the issue. I was surprised to learn that a small incident was blown out of proportion, and in the process lies, deception and misinformation were being freely used.

The issue relates to an incident of 'miracle' in a Mumbai church and the charges against Sanal Edamaruku, a Delhi-based self-proclaimed rationalist. Sanal is the son of veteran rationalist leader and author late Joseph Edamaruku. Sanal is a proponent of rationalism and is known for his efforts to bust myths and miracles. But I discovered that besides this he also indulges in opposing religious beliefs and poking fun at and denigrating religious leaders like Mother Teresa. Sanal and his rationalist



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colleagues chose a minor incident in suburban Mumbai to whip up publicity for his rationalist movement and for himself, and even to make money out of the incident -- the very thing which he accuses the priests in Mumbai of doing.

The incident relates to a church in Irla close to Vile Parle in Mumbai where some people witnessed water dripping from a Cross and claimed it is a miracle. They began to collect the water, and pray there. Soon word got around that miraculously water was dripping from the Cross. The Church authorities, however, did not proclaim it as a miracle or make any publicity or

invite pilgrims to come and visit the place; neither were there any requests to people to contribute money.

Sanal proclaimed that the water dripping from the Cross in the Our Lady of Velankanni Church in Irla was not miracle, but it was caused by a leak in the sewage system. He blamed the Church authorities and priests alleging that the whole issue was concocted to make money. On a TV-9 debate in Mumbai he claimed that the miracle was false, and that the priest of the Church was distributing the dirty drainage water dripping from the Cross to hundreds of gullible people. He demanded that the



Church authorities apologize for advertising a natural phenomenon as a “miracle” to attract devotees and promoting them to drink unchecked dirty water claiming it had curative properties. He also accused the Catholics of promoting worship of images and stated that the Pope is against science.

Sanal’s statements infuriated a Mumbai-based lay Christian group called the Association of Concerned Catholics (AOCC). It demanded that Sanal publicly apologize for his offensive remarks hurting the religious sentiments of the Catholics. They objected to his assertions that the Irla incident was created by priests to make money; that Catholics worship images; and that the Pope is against science. AOCC asked Sanal to withdraw these three statements, failing which it would file a case against him. He challenged them to do so. He even threatened that he would take the Bishops to the court. He not only refused to apologize but hurled abuses and threatened the Bishop, priests and lay leaders. The AOCC went ahead and filed an FIR for hurting religious sentiments and causing disharmony. Sanal was issued an arrest warrant.

Auxiliary Bishop of Bombay, Bishop Agnelo Gracias, was on the TV-9 show, categorically stating that the Church has not declared the incident as a miracle and that the Church is cautious and goes through a careful process before declaring a phenomenon miracle. He denied other allegations of Sanal as unfounded. The Bishop also issued a written clarification:

“The official church has always been slow to attribute supernatural causes to ‘extraordinary’ phenomena we observe in life. As far as possible, the Church tries to see if such phenomena can be explained by natural causes. She does not pay too much attention to these extraordinary phenomena, even though she accepts the possibility that God may intervene in human life in an extraordinary way – what we often term a ‘miraculous’ way.” Regarding the Irla incident, he said, one can doubt if this water dripping has a supernatural cause. The church has NOT made any pronouncement on it. One should not be in a hurry to make a pronouncement unless one has investigated the matter. It is quite possible that the happening may have a totally natural explanation.

He, however, objected to the statements made by ‘the so-called member of the Rationalist Association’. He strongly denied the allegation that this phenomenon has been created by priests who are out to make money. The Cross, the Bishop clarified, is not on Church property and the one who is reported to have first noticed the dripping water was not even a Catholic. No money has been collected by any priest. And surely, we do not build churches with such money, as is claimed.

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The Bishop also said there is absolutely no point in bringing in the Pope into such events. The Pope has certainly more matters to attend to than a dripping Cross! The Bishop expressed surprise at the irrationality of the claims and allegations made by Sanal. He wrote: “What is amazing is that such loose statements are made by a member of the Rationalist Association. It would be good if the Rationalist Association would look into the matter and see whether a man who makes such “irrational” statements should continue as a member of such a respectable body!”

Then began a publicity campaign and efforts to win sympathy and even collect funds for Sanal Edamaruku and the Rationalist International of which he is the founder president. Anyone who cares to look deeper into the issue will note that the small Irla incident was used to trump up support for him, have him declared a hero, a



victim, and the Church a villain and an intolerant organization. The issue was made out to show that the Church was dragging him to court on the basis of some archaic blasphemy law.

Unfortunately, several newspapers and magazines as well as the internet blindly followed this line without verifying the contents of the FIR, which included Sanal ridiculing the Pope, challenging the Bishops and insulting the tenets of the Catholic faith and making false allegations. He castigated the Church as intolerant. His language was arrogant and provocative. In short, the case filed against Sanal was not for challenging a miracle, but insulting religious leaders, provoking hatred and ridiculing the believers and their religious faith.

One of India's most reputed newspapers The Hindu, carried an article by Praveen Swami on May 7, on its editorial page: "India's god laws fail the test of reason". The sarcasm in Swami's article was evident in the opening paragraph itself: "Early in March, little drops of water began to drip from the feet of the statue of Jesus nailed to the cross on the church of Our Lady of Velankanni, down on to Mumbai's unlovely Irla Road. Hundreds began to flock to the church to collect the holy water in little plastic bottles, hoping the tears of the son of god would

sanctify their homes and heal their beloved." According to the article, "It took him (Sanal) less than half an hour to discover the source of the divine tears: a filthy puddle formed by a blocked drain, from where water was being pushed up through a phenomenon all high-school physics students are familiar with, called capillary action."

The bias in Swami's article was further obvious when he called Sanal Edamaruku, "the eminent rationalist thinker". Little did the senior journalist writing in a reputed newspaper do to apply his journalistic instincts and discretion to verify the facts before writing these words: "For his discovery, Mr. Edamaruku now faces the prospect of three years in prison -- and the absolute certainty that he will spend several more years hopping between lawyers' offices and courtrooms. In the wake of Mr. Edamaruku's miracle-busting Mumbai visit three police stations in the Capital received complaints against him for inciting religious hatred. First Information Reports were filed, and investigations initiated with exemplary -- if unusual -- alacrity."

I invite Swami as well as the editors of The Hindu to re-examine the charge against Sanal Edamaruku before crying wolf. Though Swami has propounded many valid arguments about the need to avoid fanaticism, and the importance of reviewing archaic laws that might lead to misuse, one must be careful to endorse his advocacy for 'right to insult' others. For he writes: "If Indians wish to avoid the fate of the dystopia to the country's west, its citizens desperately need to accept the right of critics to attack, even insult, what they

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hold dear."

To indulge in unlawful acts that can affect the welfare of others is not a right. The laws are to safeguard the individuals and society from wanton and indiscriminate acts which affect law and order. There are too many people hurling abuse, ridiculing and insulting others. What kind of right is Swami demanding? Where are the boundaries of such wanton rights? I wish the author devotes his attention to promote tolerance and respect rather than demand the right to insult. The Hindu in its opinion page stated, "Police investigation of Sanal Edamaruku for debunking a 'miracle' at a church is a crime against the Indian Constitution." Again, the case is not for 'debunking' a miracle. Sanal is welcome to 'debunk' any amount of miracles. He has the wholehearted support of the Church if this is done without prejudice, arrogance and ill will.

Investigation into the case revealed certain truths. Though not a rationalist myself, I engaged

## CONTROVERSY

my own reason and some tools of investigation to conclude the following: The Rationalists and friends of Sanal have certain vested interests and are using lies to garner support for him. A section of the media, knowingly or unwittingly, is acting as his agents. Here are some facts: Sanal, who does not have a valid doctorate, is frequently being referred to as "Dr. Sanal Edamaruku." His actual bio-data says: "Sanal Edamaruku was born in 1955 in Kerala, as son of the veteran rationalist leader and author Joseph Edamaruku and his wife Soley. He studied Political Science and International Relations at the University of Kerala and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, and got his M. Phil degree from the Centre for South Asian Studies of JNU." So, does the M. Phil degree make him a 'Doctor'? Then, there were the screaming headlines in newspapers, magazines and internet stories, saying he is in danger. Here are some samples:

'Batting for reason in a land of faith'

'India's god laws fail the test of reason'

'Blind faith: bizarre babas and their followers'

'Reason under Fire in India'

'FIR against rationalist, cops call him for questioning'

'Christian forums file FIRs after IRA chief calls 'miracle water' a scam'

'Freedom of Expression Under Attack In India'

'TRUTH AS BLASPHEMY'

The event was also used to garner international support and to collect donations through the internet campaign to "Save Sanal". One can view the message posted on the net: "Although he has not been arrested yet, the

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Indian Rationalists fear it could happen at any time.

Sanal can be arrested any moment. In every single place where a petition is filed against him he could be forced to appear in person to answer them. If his answer is not found satisfactory, he could be arrested. He could be forced to fight a multitude of criminal cases in different places. This is not only immensely time and money consuming. Given the fanaticism of some Catholic believers, it can be a danger for his life."

"A very important and outrageous story that as yet has barely made the news. Sanal Edamaruku faces arrest simply for being right."

"If you are interested in helping out with Edamaruku's Defense Fund", you can donate here.

"Support the Sanal Edamaruku Defence Fund with your donation." What follows is the details and mode of payment etc.

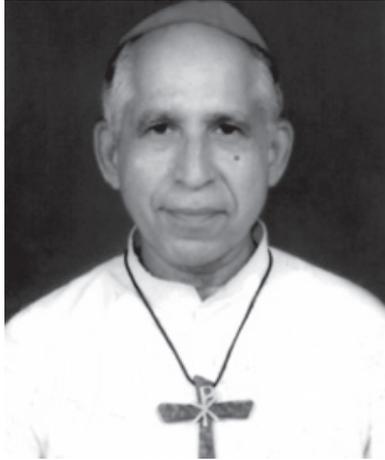
"We request you to support Sanal Edamaruku's campaigns and to help defending him against all legal and extra legal attacks. You can support Sanal in two ways. Spread the videos and the information about the cases



where ever you can. Support the Sanal Edamaruku Defence Fund with a donation [Click here]." Thus goes the campaign.

Reading between the lines one can understand the motives of the campaign being orchestrated by Sanal and friends: get him publicity, get funds, get support and win more followers. But why did the so-called rationalists try to fool the public with a campaign to 'Save Sanal' by trying to collect funds to save him? It may be noted that the Rationalist International Bulletin (<http://www.rationalistinternational.net/>) referring to the Mumbai case says that he has not even been issued any documents about the case: "On 11th of April, charges under Section 295 A, Indian Penal Code, have been filed against Sanal Edamaruku in at least three Mumbai police stations: in Juhu, in MIDC and in Andheri. Strangely, he did not receive any official document about these cases up to now. The Mumbai police refuse flatly to send copies of the complaints to Delhi – an unusual violation of the standard procedure. Sanal did not receive any summons either. Till today, there is nothing official about it -- except the phone calls of an inspector from Juhu police station, who urges Sanal to come and get arrested."

The moot question is: why



is the group appealing for donation to 'save Sanal'? To save him from whom, and what? Why are the so-called 'rationalists' not applying their investigative instincts when it comes to their own interest? Why do they try to mislead the public with cries of imminent danger and threat to Sanal? The rationalist supporters of Sanal have concealed from the public and media the fact that the FIR is not against his "miracle busting" as trumpeted about, but for insulting the Pope and other offenses.

Read the intemperate language and baseless accusations against the Church the rationalists have posted on the internet:

"It is more than three weeks now that agents of the Catholic Church pressed multiple blasphemy charges against Sanal Edamaruku to avenge him for exposing their "miracle" of the water-dripping cross as a job for the plumber. While the threat of arrest keeps looming over Sanal's head, ready to hit anytime, the Catholic Church is unleashing the "dogs of the Lord". In a widely circulated public statement, a fanatic Catholic group tries to invoke fatwa power and calls Sanal a case for mental asylum."

While the whole incident is

a non-issue for most people, the Rationalists continued their attempt to blow it up as an event of global proportions. For any average person who is willing to scrutinize their various comments and responses, the lack of consistency and logic in their argument is evident.

Under a headline "Enormous worldwide response", the Rationalists wrote on the internet: "Sanal's harassment for exposing a Catholic wannabe miracle has caused an enormous worldwide response. It is reported and discussed in many newspapers, TV and radio programs in India and abroad. It keeps snowballing through thousands of blogs in various languages around the globe. People in USA, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy, Poland, Russia, Brazil, Japan and even Vietnam are expressing their solidarity with Sanal's courageous position in the controversial TV discussion that followed his exposure of the dripping cross. In the light of this great public attention, Sanal's detractors may have considered it advisable to slow down their moves for a while. But now, things are warming up."

"The Catholic Church is orchestrating the background music for the countdown. It's the rather nasty noise of the "dogs of the Lord" yapping themselves hoarse. With a great smear campaign, a fanatic Catholic group tries to stir up hatred against Sanal, branding his arguments in the TV-9 debate as "anti-Catholic venom". They try to invoke fatwa power: Kindling the imagination how fanatic Islamists might deal with such a blasphemer, they leave the decision if Sanal "should be allowed to go scot free" to the mob. Finally they propose that

"one needn't send such a person to jail, but rather to a mental asylum..."

The fact is that there isn't such worldwide support and thousands of blogs. These are big lies. But what is obvious is the attempt to propel Sanal Edamaruku to national and international limelight. The rationalists boasted: "Various Catholic organizations are stepping up efforts to stop Sanal's hugely influential national campaigns against miracle mongering. They want to silence him and to bankrupt the Indian Rationalist Association with multiple cases."

The article goes on: "When Sanal Edamaruku started exposing Paul Dinakaran on one of the big national Hindi channels, a live program scheduled for thirty minutes was extended to three hours as the viewership numbers hit record heights. The discussion was watched by millions, when Sanal draw the line to Dinakaran's Vatican backed competitors in the Divine Retreat Centre at Muringoor in Kerala and to the Catholic Church's unparalleled track record of miracle mongering throughout history." Again tall claims and a travesty of truth!

There obviously are a lot of ghosts and skeletons in the Rationalists' cupboard. The rationalist medicine they are prescribing is deadlier than the dangers of superstition. It is akin to the pot calling the kettle black. Let us hope Sanal Edamaruku and his friends will have the sense, if not the courtesy, to apply the tools of rational investigation and truthful conduct to themselves. After all, like charity, rationalism must also begin at home. **IC**