



JNANADEEPA

PJRS ISSN 0972-33315

15/1-2 Jan-Dec 2012: 20-32

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4295678

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4295678>

Religious Harmony in a Multi-Religious India

VM Jose SJ

Papal Seminary, Pune 411014

Abstract: The world today witnesses a growing trend of intolerance, Lotus Temple in New Delhi, India, stands majestically as a true symbol of peace and communal harmony. The Baha'i House of Worship, built in the shape of a lotus is a witness to the religious harmony of the people who visit the place. Our country is in fact more diversified than Europe. The geographical landscape in India is such that the diversification also is vast. On the one side we have deserts and plateaus and on the other snow mountains and rain forests at very close proximity to each other. A Kerala Muslim and a Bengali Muslim do not dress in the same way and as a result it brings about a different upbringing on their identity. The author concludes his reflections by saying that Jesus the Christ revealed in the gospels is a man of tolerance, compassion and one who lived his life for others. His tolerance and compassion may be understood from the dialogues he had with Mary of Magdala and the woman of Samaria and many other people of low esteem as seen by the others. This message of Jesus poses a challenge to the church to re-think the message it preaches to propagate the gospel of Jesus the Christ and to redeem the distorted picture of Jesus.

Keywords: Dialogue, compassion, Lotus Temple, communal harmony.

Introduction

Today even as the country witnesses a growing trend of intolerance, Lotus Temple in New Delhi, India, stands majestically as a true symbol of peace and communal harmony. The Baha'i House of Worship, built in the shape of a lotus is a witness to the religious harmony of the people who visit the place. Our country is in fact more diversified than Europe. The geographical landscape in India is such that the diversification also is vast. On the one side we have deserts and plateaus and on the other snow mountains and rain forests at very close proximity to each other. A Kerala Muslim and a Bengali Muslim do not dress in the same way and as a result it brings about a different upbringing on their identity.

1. A Real Story

I once read an incident in The Times of India newspaper, October 8, 2015, about the Hindus and Sikhs helping the Muslims to repair their mosque in Nathowal village near Ludhiana. They also took care of more than 65 per cent of the repair expenses. The project cost was around Rs. 25 lakhs, of which Rs. 15 lakhs were contributed by Sikhs and Hindus. The beauty of this place is that the three communities live in peace in this village. Muslims and Hindus contribute to the gurudwara work as well. A resident of the village informed The Times of India that they celebrate all festivals like Diwali, Dusshera, Rakhi, Eid, and Gurupurab together.

Nathowal village has a population of around 7, 000 of which around 500 are Muslims. There are only around 50 members from the Hindu community. Mansa Khan, a contractor and president of Jamia Masjid at Nathowal says this,

"All three communities lived in peace here even before Partition. During Partition, 10 to 12 families migrated to Pakistan but 50 families stayed back as the Sikh brothers didn't allow them to leave." It does not mean they were forced to stay but requested them with love. Today, these people do not regret that they stayed back; in fact the relations are only stronger. The majority Sikh community takes pride in the village's communal peace. "Our village is more of a family. If a villager wants to donate money to a religious place he contributes equally to the gurdwara and the mosque. They are determined to uphold this spirit in the future too. When the work on the mosque began every villager pledged to help irrespective of his religion," says Pyara Singh, block committee member and president of Gurudwara Dharamshalla in the village.

2. The Indian Perspective

The Indian constitution supports and encourages religious harmony. According to the constitution every citizen has a right to choose and practice any religion. There are examples of Muslims and Sikhs building temples as already mentioned above. In different parts of India we can witness different religious traditions living harmoniously. We also come across several seers of religions call for religious harmony in India. According to Dalai Lama, India is a model for religious harmony. He mentions that "In the last 2000-3000 years, different religious traditions, including Buddhism, Jainism, flourished here." The ancient Indian scripture Rigveda endeavours plurality of religious thought with its mention "ekam sadvipraa bahudhaa vadanti", meaning wise people explain the same truth in different manners.

Ashoka (304–232 BCE), in his 12th edict stated, "The beloved of the gods, king Piyadasi, honours both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honours them with gifts and honours of various kinds. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought 'Let me glorify my own religion', only harms his own religion. Therefore contact between religions is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. The beloved of the gods, king Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions."

Kharavela (193 BCE – after 170 BCE) was the third and greatest emperor of the Mahameghavahana dynasty of Kaṭṭṭa (present-day Odisha). The main source of information about Khārabeḷa is his famous seventeen line rock-cut Hātigumphā inscription in a cave in the Udayagiri hills near Bhubaneswar, Odisha. The inscription states that the Emperor Kharavela had a liberal religious spirit. Kharavela describes himself as, "the worshiper of all religious orders, the restorer of shrines of all gods."

Even the simple word, Namaste, it means, "I bow to you." This gesture means, "you and I are very much alike and can be 'one'. We can find unity and accord." "Essentially the divine in you and me are alike." Unfortunately this is not always true to life. There is also a negative aspect of our Indian reality which is very painful to recall.

3. Intolerance Towards Other Religions

Religions in Conflict

What leads to conflict is one religion inclining to be exclusivist or fundamentalist because that group believes

that its view of the world represents the world as it really is. Some religions try to proselytize and they become aggressively missionary. In the process others may tend to marginalize those who differ from them. Every religion has a share in this aggressive approach. Even Hinduism that prides itself of its tolerance had actively opposed Buddhism and Jainism in the past and opposes Islam and Christianity as 'foreign' in the present. In some parts of the country the situation has become very severe and the minorities begin to feel alienated and discriminated by the ruling class. This exclusivism of religious perspective gives rise to ignorance and prejudice concerning others and consider others as untrue and immoral, of course, from one's own point of view.

If we analyse the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, sociologists point out how the Muslims recall the golden age when they were the rulers. It is not false to say that they looked down upon the Hindus as cowardly, promiscuous and weak. They may feel that their own fall from power is due to their infidelity to their religious observance. Today the situation has changed and they feel marginalized and seek to assert their identity around the shariat. On the other hand the Hindus seek to assert their majority status and their glorious historical past. The Hindus often consider the Muslims as militant and religiously intolerant and narrow.

We should understand that Hindu-Muslim relationship in the Indian history was bad. The 1202 storm campaign of Muhammad Ghorī resulted in the destruction of hundreds of Hindu temples. There is no doubt (in spite of the efforts of secular historians) that Nalanda was destroyed by the Muslim invaders. The common Hindus were forced to pay Jizya tax (Jizya is a yearly per-capita tax imposed upon non-Muslim occupants of an Islamic country by the Islamic

state itself. In India it was first introduced by Qutub-ud-din Aibak, first ruler of slave dynasty upon non-Muslim subjects under his territory). There was also forced conversions of Hindus by Muslims. An infamous example of a forcible conversion attempt was Aurangzeb's attempt to convert Kashmiri Pundits to Islam in the 1670s. Kashmiri Pundits were saved by the Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur who was executed by Aurangzeb for defending the rights of non-Muslims to live in India. Another example would be 16th century Varanasi. The Muslim clergy made it impossible for Hindus to live peacefully in Varanasi.

From the time Muslims started arriving, around 632 AD, the history of India becomes a long, monotonous series of murders, massacres, spoliations, and destructions. It is, as usual, in the name of 'a holy war' of their faith, of their sole God, that the barbarians have destroyed civilizations, wiped out entire races. Mahmoud Ghazni was an early example of Muslim ruthlessness, burning temples of Mathura, razing Kanauj to the ground and destroying the famous temple of Somnath, sacred to all Hindus. His successors were as ruthless as Ghazni; 103 temples in the holy city of Benaras were razed to the ground, its marvellous temples destroyed, its magnificent palaces wrecked. Will Durant, the famous historian summed up like this, "The Islamic conquest of India is probably the bloodiest story in history. It is a discouraging tale, for its evident moral is that civilization is a precious good, whose delicate complex of order and freedom, culture and peace, can at any moment be overthrown by barbarians invading from without or multiplying within."

4. Tolerant Religions

India is the birthplace of four of the world's major religious traditions; namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. India is a land of various religions and their sub – castes. India has been home for centuries to all great religions of the world. The Constitution of India declares the nation to be a secular republic that must uphold the right of citizens to freely worship and propagate any religion or faith.

It is known to people all over that India is the homeland of numerous religions, and we also hear many educated and uneducated people saying that the holy scriptures of all these religions preach and teach peaceful and harmonious life with one another. One religion tells us “salam alaikum”, may peace be with you, while the other religion says “love your neighbour” still another religion tells “bhavatu sabha mangalam or sarve bhavantu sukhin” may all beings be happy. Therefore we can conclude by saying whether it is Islam, Christianity or Hinduism, every religion promotes peace and amity. The promotion of love, peace and compassion are the sole objective of all religions.

5. Multi-Religious India

In this 21st century we cannot feign ignorance of the diversity of our human race. The modern technology and social media have made the world a global village and open vistas which we could never dream of earlier. As a result of religion many conflicts have also emerged in many parts of our country and the world. We cannot pretend that religion has not been a source of major conflicts in centuries past, however religious intolerance has raised its ugly head in the early part of the 21st century. The human rights situation

in the world today is a picture of stark contrast; on the one hand there is undeniable progress in technology and on the other the tragic situation of widespread cruelty and violations. Martenson opines that over the last few years amazing changes have taken place in many parts of the world. Today the question is: How do we achieve religious harmony in the 21st century? Achieving religious harmony in the 21st century is the job of all; beginning with the state, institutions and individuals.

The history of India reveals that India's ethnic composition encompasses myriad streams of culture and religious faiths. As a multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultured society, India has served as an outstanding example of unity in diversity among the fast maturing democracies across the world. In a multi-religious country, religious harmony is a must. Religious harmony is possible where there is understanding between followers of various faiths. For a country like India, as well as for whole the World, religious harmony is important as religious harmony is the need of the hour to make this world a happy place to live. In today's multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural world we need to establish harmonious relationship in order to create the world a haven of peace and harmony instead of conflict and strife.

Cultural diversity as a major component of secularism has been widely recognized and acknowledged in the recent past throughout the world when many countries have suffered ethnic violence and constant conflicts of faiths and beliefs. Unfortunately these components of Indian society have been attacked frequently, especially in recent times by divisive fascist forces, which are bent upon upsetting the social fabric of a peace loving and growing democratic so-

ciety. The young minds therefore must know that the traditions of communal harmony and tolerance and respect for diversity have always been the redeeming features of our civilization. Communal harmony is the sine qua non of a pluralistic society such as ours. Guarding and strengthening this core ideal, upon which our policy is based, requires ceaseless vigilance.

Swami Vivekananda says, “We want to lead mankind in the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this is to be done by harmonizing the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of the Religion, which is Oneness, so that each may choose that path that suits him best.”

Nearly six hundred years ago, the saint Kabir blended the mystic aspects of the various religious traditions of our country, and provided to later generations a sense of what we would today call Unity in Diversity. Among his many luminous ‘dohas’, Kabir had urged each of us to find within ourselves the spark of goodness or genius to inspire everyone.

6. Religion for Harmony

Doubtlessly we can say that religion occupies a special place in the life of human beings, so also human rights has become as accepted way of living. Sad to say that our problem has been balancing religious freedom with human rights principles. We can confidently say that Religion and Human Rights can co-exist if people will believe, accept and practice human rights principles and ideas alongside the tenets of their religion.

The primary task of religion is to contribute to the building up of a human community of freedom and fellowship, equality and justice. This may be seen from the economic, political and religious perspectives. It is expressed in terms of love, justice and care for the poor in our day to day life. The church itself is a group of people sent into the world to be the salt, light and the servant of this Kingdom. Even in this task the church is only collaborating with the spirit who is already present and active in the world carrying on God's cosmic project. Thus the mission of the Church is universal reconciliation. The disciples of Jesus are called to struggle against these forces and the oppressive structures they have created.

From the religious point of view we are now faced with two different ideologies in the country. We must consciously build up a multi-religious society, in which every religious community is recognized, accepted and respected and has an opportunity to collaborate in the building up of the national community. We have to evolve a new kind of democratic order in which numbers are not important and a majority does not impose its will on the minorities. This new order will be respectful of diversity and participative, allowing each group to contribute its riches to the good of all.

7. Inter-Religious Dialogue

The Church with Other Religion

In the earlier days the Church attitude was apologetic and missionary; she defended her uniqueness and invited other to join her, co-existence, collaboration and solidarity. The goal was to struggle against atheism and evil materialism in an effort to build a world where Christianity ruled.

The Church and other religions were pilgrims towards the future goal. Our approach to their religions has so far been negative. We took it for granted that we have the truth about God and the appropriate means to reach God and be saved. We have looked at other religions from the context of Christian Salvation.

The new starting point is the affirmation that in virtue of creation we believe that all of us are created in the image and likeness of God and God is in contact with the humans, as individuals and as groups. Our quest for the Kingdom of God therefore calls us to collaborate with the believers of other religions and all people of good will. Today the Church does affirm the need for such collaboration in the pursuit of a just society in the world. John Paul II, speaking to leaders of other religions in Chennai, in Feb.1986, said: As followers of different religions we should join together in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare and civic order. Since Kingdom is the goal of mission, then collaboration with the other religions and with all people of good will is the way of mission.

Inter- religious dialogue does not mean that it is opposed to welcoming people who wish to become disciples of Jesus Christ and collaborate with him in his mission, inspired or attracted either by the person and teachings of Jesus or by the witness of his disciples. If we join disciples in promoting social justice and equality for the downtrodden and marginalized then we may discover that people are not interested in getting converted anymore for socio-economic reasons. If our mission is genuine then automatically it is dialogical. Without witnessing there is no dialogue. It does not mean that our witnessing is aggressive; definitely not.

We have to take great care to keep it so in the pluralistic context of India. In a conflict situation dialogue is difficult and is seen as much broader than merely religious. We should keep in mind that religion is only one dimension of human life in society and it cannot be isolated.

Conclusion

We understand the fact that India is a multi-religious and pluri-cultural country. This diversity has to be viewed as divinely bestowed blessing and grace. The Church's mission in this context is to be a truly dialogical community. The dialogical mission of the Church also implies that it becomes an agent of reconciliation and peace among the multi-religious context. This mission or vocation has to be understood as being the "light of the world" and "salt of the earth." Our task thus is to create a common forum of inter-religious dialogue through which mutual misunderstanding, hatred, discord and discrimination could be opposed, and we become co-creators to build up a nation of justice, peace and harmony.

The mission of the Church is none other than that of Jesus himself. His mission comprised going about doing good and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and that God is powerfully present and is transforming this world. In the process he is caring for all and in particular the poor, oppressed, marginalized and the outcastes. We should make sure that the church takes every effort to remove every trace of triumphalism, exclusivist and any attitude of superiority in its teachings, structures, evangelizing activities and the style of the functioning of its institutions. However, it should be pointed out that the Church always defends the right of individuals to profess the religion of their choice. At

the same it denounces proselytisation using questionable means, such as, fraud, force and allurements.

I would like to conclude these reflections by saying that Jesus the Christ revealed in the gospels is a man of tolerance, compassion and one who lived his life for others. His tolerance and compassion may be understood from the dialogues he had with Mary of Magdala and the woman of Samaria and many other people of low esteem as seen by the others. This message of Jesus poses a challenge to the church to re-think the message it preaches to propagate the gospel of Jesus the Christ and to redeem the distorted picture of Jesus. In other words, we have the task to liberate Jesus the Christ who is created in our own images because of our captivity to power, corruption and misreading of scripture. Rienzie Perera writes in, *Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious Context*, Jesus the Christ has to be liberated from the false dogmas and teachings of the church in order for him to take his true identity and become the crucified and saving presence amidst crucified and broken peoples in Asia.

References

Lotus Temple, available from, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lotus_Temple, accessed on 02.09.2018.

Shariq Majeed, "Hindus And Sikhs Help Repair And Rebuild An Old Mosque In Punjab!," India Times, available from, <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/hindus-and-sikhs-help-repair-and-rebuild-an-old-mosque-in-punjab-246010.html>, October 08, 2015, accessed on 02.09.2018.

Edicts of Ashoka, available from, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edicts_of_Ashoka, accessed on 02.09.2019.

Address of John Paul II on the occasion of the meeting with the exponents of Non-Christian Religions, 5 February 1986 Madras, (India).

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Encyclical), 24 May, 2015.

Thomas Malipurathu, SVD, & L. Stanislaus, SVD, (Eds), *The Church in Mission*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 2002.

Date Received: Sept 23, 2018; Date Accepted: Nov 21, 2018

No of Words: 3370