

Inter-Religious Friendship and Peace **Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

Someone has said that, if you want peace, then speak not with your friends but speak with your enemies. In our contemporary India we see enmity and conflict between the followers of different religions. True religions or the followers of different religions do not make war. But in the name of religion the politicians and self-seekers make people fight one-another and kill the genuine followers of true religions!

The politicians not as politicians but as (pseudo) protectors of religion make people fight. If we exclude their religious rituals these politicians have no religion. They are really pseudo-religious and not genuine followers.

Reaping political mileage in the name of protecting one's religion started in Gujarat. From December 1998 Gujarat has created history in becoming number one in inter-religious conflict for political gain through stealthy planned attacks against Christians!

The pseudo-religious politicians got partial success in reaping political mileage from those attacks against Christians. So the pseudo protectors of the Hindu religion gave a free reign in inter-religious communal clash against the Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. The 'success' of the pogrom against Muslims led to a series of inter-religious communal clashes in other states like Rajasthan, Orissa, Karanataka and Kerala. The 'Gujarat experiment' is still continuing!

Today all people of good will need to recognize the true colours of these self seeking politicians and their political games. A few things specially need to be noted. First, these self-seeking politicians are in all religions. Second, they are not only in politics but they are also in many other fields. Third, they exert undue influence in many areas of our lives. And finally they are able to 'convert' by hook or crook some true religious leaders to their side!

In these situations what can we do? Here Lord Jesus' message given in the Bible can give us guidelines. Jesus says, "If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God" (Mt. 5, 23-24).

Here Jesus points to a royal path for establishing peace between those who perpetuate communal clash and the victims of inter-religious conflict. The royal path is to bring about peace between the warring parties. This is a royal path for establishing friendship between the attackers and the victims of inter-religious clashes.

As I see, the way to peace is the way of dialogue between the two parties. But in dialogue certain things need to be observed. First of all, the attackers need to create an appropriate ambient for dialogue. In the situation of continuing attacks and communal conflicts no dialogue is possible. Calling for dialogue while the attackers continue their nefarious activities no dialogue is possible. Such attempt at dialogue is a mockery and not a genuine effort to establish peace. Similarly without having recourse to truth and justice the attackers calling the victims for

dialogue is not genuine but a mere show for unity and peace. So the attackers need to stop their nefarious activities and make sincere effort for dialogue with the victims on the path of truth and justice.

The dialogue is always between two parties. But it is also important who takes the initiative or the first step in a dialogue. In my view the victims of the communal class can take the initiative. Jesus says in his message, if you remember that your brother has something against you, then you go at once and get reconciled with your brother. The attackers will always have some true or false complaints against their opponents - the victims. To engage in a dialogue anyone of the opposing parties can take the initiative. All the same it is desirable that the victims of the attack take the initiative to start the dialogue.

The parties wanting to dialogue may not be equals. Dialogue can be held between the authorities and the workers. Dialogue can be between the factory owners and the labourers. But both the parties come forward in the way of truth and justice without any prejudice or misunderstanding. Dialogue is not possible for self gain while keeping truth and justice away from it. Many a times the attackers call their victims to establish peace and reconciliation without justice and recompense. Such dialogues achieve nothing.

Take the example of the communal attacks by the politicized Hindus against the Christians in Orissa. The politicized Hindus attacked the poor Adivasi Tribals for welcoming the missionaries and converting to Christian religion. Thousands of tribal houses, many schools, hostels and Churches were destroyed. About 60 Christians were killed for refusing to reconvert to Hinduism. There were instances of heinous crimes against Christian nuns and priests. The atrocious case of raping a Christian nun by a group of fanatic politicized Hindus is well known in the whole world. Lakhs of Christians fled to the jungles to save their lives leaving everything behind for the looters and the arsonists. Thousands of Christians were still living in camps fearing for their dear lives even after a year!

In such situation dialogue can not bring the killed people back to life. Still without the readiness to give justice to the victims of the attacks no dialogue is possible. Justice demands that those who have lost their houses in communal attacks should get sufficient help to build their houses. There should be the readiness to rebuild the destroyed schools, boardings and Churches, etc. There should be the readiness to compensate adequately the surviving relatives of the families of those who were killed in the communal attacks. In such readiness and concrete steps to alleviate the situation there can be meaningful dialogue and peace can be established.

Besides, there is great need to make all the efforts through dialogue to establish inter-religious amity and communal harmony so that such communal conflicts may not occur again. We can achieve this goal by bringing people together and establishing friendly relationship among the people of different religions through social, cultural, educational and economic programmes and activities. Thus through the path of dialogue enmity and conflicts can be overcome and we can experience friendship and peace among conflicting parties. This is certainly the way of dialogue enjoying life to the full. (contact the author: ciss@satyam.net.in)

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