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Inter-Religious Conflicts and Challenges of Peace
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INTRODUCTION

The topic of my speech today is “Inter-Religious Conflicts and Challenges of Peace”. This is a very relevant topic for us because we experience inter-religious conflicts in various parts of the world today especially in some countries in Asia and Africa.

In fact, in some way, the whole world experiences inter-religious conflicts in one way or other. For instance, we experience inter-religious conflicts every now and then in my country, India and in other South Asian countries.

On the other hand, we want peace. We yearn for peace. We seek peace. In this context our topic Inter-Religious Conflicts and Challenges of Peace is very appropriate. As print media persons, we need to discuss and deliberate on the topic.

I am happy to note that our topic of Inter-Religious Conflicts and Challenges to Peace is very much related to our Congress theme “Media at the Service of Justice, Peace and Good Governance in a World of Inequalities and Poverty”. We live in a world of inequalities and poverty amidst plenty which often causes inter-religious conflicts and challenges peace. The media is called and challenged to be at the service of Justice, Peace and Good Governance.

BACKGROUND AND CAUSES OF INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

In some European countries and African countries we have witnessed religious fundamentalism endorsing and justifying the “Ethnic Cleansing” of minorities of different religions.

Before speaking about our topic - Inter-Religious Conflicts and Challenges of Peace – I would like to say a few words about what leads to or what causes inter-religious conflicts.

I believe that Inter-religious conflicts often begin from or caused by religious fundamentalism of a few people. Some people feel threatened by the religious fundamentalism. So they take steps to counter it. Hence we can see religious fundamentalism as a cyclical movement causing or leading to inter-religious conflicts.

Similarly ethnic autonomy may also cause inter-religious conflicts. For instance, in a multi-ethnic country like India one ethnic group or some vociferous people in the one ethnic group may want the nation under its control. They want to rule the country according to their ethnicity subjugating other ethnic groups. Wanting to have such ethnic autonomy will certainly lead to inter-ethnic clashes and inter-religious conflicts.

INDIA – THE CRADLE OF MANY RELIGIONS

Now to speak concretely on my topic of Inter-Religious Conflicts and Challenges of Peace, let me begin with my own country India. India, as you may know, is the cradle of many religions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were born and flourished in India over the centuries in the past. India also welcomed the world religions like Christianity, Islam and also embraced the religions of the Zoroastrians and the Jews. There is a confluence of all world religions in India.

India is a great country. We Indians can be proud of many things. India is numero uno in milk production in the world! India is also numero uno in Remote Sensing Satellites! India is the second largest producer of wheat! Similarly, India is also the second largest producer of rice!

We are proud of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, whose message of Ahimsa – non-violence and peace - appeals to the whole world. Similarly we are proud and we venerate Blessed Mother Teresa of Kolkata, the saint of the poorest of the poor. This year on August 26 we have started celebrating her birth centenary.

As the former President of India Dr. Abdul Kalam says in his book “Ignited Minds” India of more than 1 billion people can boast about millions of big and small achievements. But there are also many things of which we are ashamed. The inter-religious conflicts is one such reality. Poverty, inequality, illiteracy, lack of adequate health services, communalism, fundamentalism, etc. are other such problems.

The 63 year old largest democracy in the world, India has experienced inter-religious conflicts often in its recent and no so recent past history. After Emperor Ashoka accepted Buddhism the religion spread far and wide in India and beyond. But later with Hindu-Buddhist conflicts Buddhism almost died and disappeared from India; but it had already spread to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Japan, etc.

TERRIBLE INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN INDIA

India's partition and independence in 1947 saw terrible inter-religious conflicts between the Hindus and Muslims. Thousands of people from both religions were butchered mercilessly especially those who were living in the border areas and those who were crossing the border – Hindus coming to India and Muslims going to Pakistan!

I have heard that the independence day ‘gifts’ from India to Pakistan and from Pakistan to India were train carrying not passengers but their dead bodies!

In the recent past in my own state, Gujarat, in North-West India bordering Pakistan politicized Hindu fanatics attacked the Christians and Christian institutions in 1998. Christian churches, prayer halls, schools and hostels for tribal students in Dangs district in South Gujarat were burned down or damaged.

Christians and Christian institutions were attacked with the false and baseless accusation that they were converting Hindus Adivasis (tribal people) forcefully and with allurements!

Unfortunately the local Gujarati language press spread such false rumours of forced conversions and fueled the fanatics in their anti-Christian propaganda and attacks.

The then Prime Minister, Shree Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited a few of the worst affected Christian educational institutions in Dangs in a show of solidarity. He then called for a national debate on conversions to Christianity and communal conflicts.

GUJARAT – THE LABORATORY OF FUNDAMENTALISM

More recently in 2002 Gujarat saw under Chief Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janta Party Government a large scale pogrom against the Muslim. In the inter-religious conflicts about 2000 Muslims were killed and thousands of Muslims lost their houses, shops and other means of livelihood.

I am ashamed to say that the government and government controlled law-enforcing authorities like the police either supported the pogrom siding with the Hindu fanatics and communal forces or turned a blind eye towards the frenzy and communal onslaught.

The police did not register the cases or they did a shoddy job so that the criminals got away! It was an indictment of the Gujarat police and politicians that two well known communal riot cases were ordered to be tried outside Gujarat. The criminals in both the cases were tried and punished in the neighbouring Maharashtra state.

Now, the Supreme Court has ordered a retrial and investigations of some more cases. As a result, today 18 top police officials and two former ministers of Gujarat government are in jail for their alleged crimes of commission and omission in the inter-religious conflicts and for false encounter killings and for taking bribes!

Thanks to the Chief Minister Narendra Modi's suspected involvement in the crimes related to inter-religious conflicts, the USA has refused a visa to him in spite of the sympathizers of Modi making every effort in the USA and in India to grant him a visa.

Now in India the same communal forces are fanning inter-religious conflicts in other Indian states ruled by the same Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP). In states like Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh ruled by BJP and in Orissa where BJP is a ruling partner holding Home Ministry in the PatnaK Government, the Gujarat experiment is continuing. For, the BJP in Gujarat returned to power with a thumbing majority in the state election after the anti-Muslim pogrom.

Today no one speaks of the Gujarat experiment because, thanks to the intervention of the Supreme Court, the law is catching up with the law breakers in Gujarat through the investigation and arrest of Ministers and high police officials for their alleged involvement in the crimes against humanity.

KARNATAKA EXPERIMENTS

But political observers say that the Gujarat experiment is continuing in the BJP-ruled states like Karnataka – the only BJP ruled state in South India. To describe the situation of Karnataka it is enough for me to quote an open letter by an eminent jurist, Justice Michael F. Saldanha addressed to the Home Minister of Karnataka, Mr. V. S. Acharya,

“On 26th January 2010, I undertook the painful duty of recording that during the short tenure of under two years of the BJP Government in this State, that 500 attacks on the Christian community had taken place. The State Government is acting in total violation of the Constitutional Mandate which guarantees freedom to practice and propagate one’s religion and this hate campaign has official sanction.

“There are organizations and institutions in this country which are maintaining a careful record of the increase in the number of these attacks in the State of Karnataka, as also of the fact that those involved in them are rarely arrested and even if arrested, the cases are clandestinely withdrawn. The victims are always wrongly arrested and your Government refuses to withdraw those cases and to crown it all, you have officially gone on record stating that all the attackers involved in such serious offences under the IPC are political activists according to you. This is a total aberration.

“August 15, 2010 brought the number of such attacks to exactly 1000, an increase of 500 in the last six months. The most sensational one came from you Party MLA-Prahlad Remani who is supposed to be the BJP MLA from Khanapur in Belgaum District. The attack was made by him in the course of his official address at the flag hoisting on Independence Day. I was in Pune attending a Conference on that day and the TC channels have shown his speech live.

“Among other statements, he has attacked the Christian community by stating that the British had sown the seeds of Christianity in this country (the man requires to be re-educated because this is factually false) and that Christianity and Christians have to be weeded out and thrown out of this country.

This is a serious offence of inciting communal disharmony along with several other allied offences because it immediately provoked violence and tension in the whole district. The State, in such situations is required to register an offence and immediately proceed according to Law. This was not done.

“What is most atrocious is that when several complaints were lodged with the Police Authorities and an FIR was registered that instead of upholding the Law, the State Government immediately transferred the SP who had very rightly taken action. This was done by the Chief Minister and the Home Minister.

“This shows that the Statements made by the MLA are officially supported by the State Government and that the subversion of the Law and the legal process has also come from the Vidhana Soudha. The citizens of this state are protected by the Constitution of this country and therefore, demand from the State Government that action according to Law must follow.”

ORISSA FOLLOWS GUJARAT EXPERIMENT

The anti-Christian communal attacks in Orissa described as the pogrom of Kandhamal in the state of Orissa is similar to the Gujarat pogrom. In Gujarat the pogrom was against Muslims. In the Kandhamal Districts of Orissa the pogrom was against the Christians. The Christians in Orissa were attacked in Christmas 2007 and again in August-December 2008. In a signed editorial in Indian Currents, August 23-29, 2010 the editor Dr. Jacob Kani says, “Quite often Kandhamal is referred to as a laboratory of Hindutva propagandists, after their successful experiment in Gujarat 2002...!”

According to the cover story in the same Indian Currents by Human Rights Activist and Member of the National Integration Council, Mr. John Dayal says that, in Kandhamal “Over 400 villages were purged of their Christian population, with close to 6,000 houses destroyed in mass arson and loot. As many as 295 Church buildings, big and small were destroyed, apart from dozens of Christian social centres and technical training institutions. Perhaps as many as 110 persons were brutally murdered, and we will never know the real figure because the government does not want to record and acknowledge people who were injured, crawled into the forests and succumbed to death _____ days _____ after”.

Dayal further says that, “For the 54000 persons – which is over 10,000 families – it will take years before they can say they have fully recovered from the trauma of the pogrom and one of India’s largest internal displacements after Gujarat 2002, not connected with large dams or natural disasters such as the Tsunami” (IC, 23-29, Aug. 2010).

There are such inter-religious conflicts in varying scale or as isolated cases in other parts of India like in BJP ruled Madhya Pradesh.

INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN SOUTH ASIA

I often read news about inter-religious conflicts in Pakistan. Every now and then I read about Muslims attacking Christian in Pakistan. The standard accusation against Christians in Pakistan is that Christians dishonoured Koran or Christians insulted the Prophet Mohammad. Such accusations often lead to murder or false court cases.

Of late according to a news report entitled “Rapes of Christian Girls in Pakistan Reflect a Hidden Trend” rapes of Christian girls have become frequent in Pakistan. “Light to Truth” fortnightly published from Cochin dated Sept. 1-15, 2010 speaks of several rapes of young Christian girls by Muslims including gang rapes by madressa students. The same issue of “Light of Truth” has another report entitled “Pakistan Taliban Kills 3 Foreign Christian Aid Workers”.

Once some years back the anti-Christian conflicts in Pakistan led Bishop John Joseph of Faisalabad Diocese to commit suicide in a court premises by shooting himself. The news is real but unbelievable as Christians do not approve suicide as a means to attain anything.

In recent years there have been inter-religious conflicts in Nepal. In an anti-Christian attack a bomb was thrown into the Assumption Cathedral Church in Kathmandu in which two persons died and a dozen people were injured.

In Sri Lanka the inter-religious conflicts have been between the minority Christians and the majority Buddhists.

In Bangladesh I have heard about inter-religious conflicts with the majority Muslims attacking the minorities Hindus and Christians.

SEVEN WAYS TO FACE CHALLENGES OF PEACE

While inter-religious conflicts are a reality of our times we now need to reflect on how we can face the challenges and what steps can we take to prevent inter-religious conflicts. In other words what are the challenges of peace? I suggest here seven steps to face the challenges of inter religious conflicts and establish peace.

1. Knowledge and Understanding of Religions. We need to learn well about our own religion and then the religions of all our neighbours and the country people. We are born and brought up with a lot of prejudices, ignorance and misunderstanding of our own religion and much more about the religions of our neighbours. For instance, in Gujarat many Hindus and even some Christians say that the Muslims are fanatics and accordingly these people shape their beliefs and behaviour. Some Hindus in Gujarat falsely believe that Christians convert people forcefully and with underhand allurements.

Back in Ahmedabad, I am the Director of Catholic Information Service. We conduct free correspondence courses on Jesus Christ and the Bible. Many students of our correspondence courses have transforming experience of encountering Christ through our biblical courses. They write to us how the study of the Bible and Christianity has helped them not only to remove many of the prejudices and ignorance about Jesus Christ and Christians but also they have gained true knowledge and understanding of Christian Religion.

I believe that true knowledge and understanding of one's own religion and the religions of one's neighbours bring true peace of mind and harmony in life.

2. Inter-religious Dialogue. Dialogue presumes true knowledge and appreciation of one's own religion and the religion of the other. But we should not be closed in our own religion but open to others as we are open to God.

One task of dialogue is the removal of prejudices and wrong perception of the religion of the other. The partners in dialogue need to accept and respect each other as each person is endowed with human dignity.

Mutual love and respect help the partners in dialogue to face various challenges to peace and build peace within themselves and with other people.

3. Belief in Equality of people. In Sanskrit there is a saying "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" meaning the whole world is one family. If we rally believe that as human beings we are all equal, then each one of us needs to be accepted and respected for our human dignity irrespective of our financial status or social background and faith.

I strongly believe in the universal brotherhood/sisterhood of all people. Once I wrote to a Muslim student that we Christians, Muslims and Jews have Abraham as our father in faith and that we are all children of one and the same God the Father.

The Muslim student immediately replied and corrected me according to her faith, "Father Varghese, we are not God's children; we are the creation of God." Our dialogue helped us to understand one another's religion better. This understanding certainly helps to clear prejudices and misunderstanding and have peace within us.

4. Justice and Morality. I believe that the biggest challenge to peace comes from lack of justice and ethics in personal life and public life.

If we look around us, we realize that there is no justice and morality in the world around us. We see an ever growing divide between the haves and the have-nots, between the rich and the poor. Starving to death is a reality. Malnutrition and under nourishment in India are growing steadily along with political and economic progress.

We cannot forget the reality that half of world's below poverty line people are in India running into millions men and women in dire needs.

Let me quote Fr. Anthony Charanghat's Editorial in The Examiner, "Wealth distribution in India is fairly uneven, with the top 10 per cent of income groups earning 33 per cent of the income. Despite significant economic progress, a quarter of the nation's population earns less than the government-specified poverty threshold of Rs.40 day" (That is, less than a dollar a day!) Reports indicate that 40% of population is still living below the poverty line" (The Examiner, Aug. 14, 2010).

This kind of rich-poor divide and dire poverty exist in all the counties of South Asia.

Here I am happy to note that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh led the Congress Government in India is trying to bridge the gap with the policies and programmes like Right to Information (RTI) act and National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The RTI has helped the common man to fight against corruption and assured accountability while NREGA offered assured work to adult members in every poor rural family for a minimum of 100 days a year.

Both RTI and NREGA has helped the poor to get justice and live peacefully to a certain extend. But India has still a long way to go to assure its citizens the minimum needs of food, cloths and a roof overhead. Bridging the gap between the rich and the poor people will certainly help them to face the challenges of peace.

5. Fighting a Culture of Violence, I believe, is an essential need to face the challenges of peace. Not only in Asia but around the world the culture of violence begins in the mothers womb with abortion.

In India and in some Asian countries the abortion of female fetus is wide spread as the parents want a male child as inheritor or heir to keep the family name.

6. Working for Peace. As we all know United Nations Organization (UNO) came into existence because nations were fed up with two World Wars and people all over the world wanted peace and development. But inter-religious conflicts and wars show that we are not working enough for peace.

Peace is possible only by working positively for peace. Peace begins in our hearts. So also hatred and evil designs for war originate in our hearts.

Pope John Paul II not only called the people to work for peace but he also set an example by taking concrete steps for peace like the Inter-Religious Prayer Meetings at Assisi in Italy.

The first inter-religious prayer meeting for peace was called by Pope John Paul II at Assisi in 1986. It was a great success as the leaders of most religions gathered at Assisi from around the world and expressed their solidarity and deep yearning for peace. Pope John Paul II called and hosted similar inter-religious leaders' Prayer meetings for peace in 1993 and 2002 at Assisi.

In those inter-religious meetings heads and leaders of religions around world including Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jains, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Hindus and the traditional religions in Africa participated and prayed together for peace in the world.

But I believe that the biggest obstacles and challenge for Peace is the production and the multi-billion dollar business of arms and ammunitions led by rich countries like USA and Russia and their sales around the world. Consequently many poor and developing countries buy and wage wars at the cost of the basic needs like food and medicine for their citizens.

It is high time that the concerned people and national-international organizations like UNO awake to the situation and take appropriate steps. I believe that we as media people are called to raise the consciousness of the nations and the leaders against the arms-industry.

7. Yearn for Peace. I believe that peace after all is a gift of God. We call Jesus "the Prince of peace." Jesus has assured us his followers peace. Let us face the challenges of peace with Jesus at our side. He tells us: "Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you" (John 14, 27).

Jesus gives us his peace. We can appropriate that peace by adjuring all forms of violence from our lives. Not only violence of killing like abortion and murder but also refraining from hatred and character assassination. A mind freed from hatred and all forms of violence and prejudices is certainly able to face all challenges to peace.

Finally, I believe that religion divides people as followers of different religions while spirituality can unite people of different religions. For instance, religious fundamentalism has led some people to the bombing of the World Trade Centre in USA and in India communal attacks with bombs killed and injured people in some Mosques in Rajasthan and Maharashtra States.

The bombers have been identified as Saffron Terrorists by the Home Minister of India Mr. Chidambaram giving the bombings a religious colour. But we know that terrorism has no

religion. Terrorists have only the religion of hatred. But be fair to Mr Chidambaram I must say that Hindutva (politicized Hinduism) and communalism are realities of India today.

Let me give you a concrete example of a Hindu temple Priest Jugal Kishore Shastri. As a young man he was active in Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and became a full time propagandist of Hindutva ideology holding the post of the secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) at Faizabad. In the course of time he became the manager of a temple-cum-monastery not far from the famous Barbri Masjid Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh.

Now the priest, Jugal Shastri has become an advocate of communal peace and harmony. He says as quoted in "Communalism Combat" of July-August 2010: "I came to realize that what these people (of Hindutva ideologists) were propagating in the name of religion was raw hatred, greed and caste supremacy". Genuine spirituality can help the people to fly to the moon of goodness or lead them to serve the poor crossing the boundaries religions and became a full time propagandist of Hindutva ideology.

THE PRAYER OF PEACE

Let me end this presentation with the prayer of peace. All religions earn for peace and harmony. The famous Prayer of Peace is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

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