Comment

Riddles of Religious Extremism!

Right at the beginning of the 21st century, three of the most shocking events in recent history, took place. The first was the destruction of two over 2,000 year old ancient statues of giant Buddhas – the tallest standing Buddhas in the world. The second incident was the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City of the United States of America. The third highly disturbing occurrence was in our country itself. I am referring to the burning of a bogie of Sabarmati Express in February 2002 and its aftermath. Although no lives were lost in the destruction of Buddha statues, a total of nearly 3,000 lives were lost in the second incident in New York City (Source: http://www.ourcivilisation.com/usa/toll.htm), and more than 2,000 in the third incident which took place in India in Gujarat (Source: A report by People's Union for Democratic Rights, Delhi. May 2002.) All these incidents had religious association.

A few years before these shocking incidents, the world witnessed another shocking massacre in the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where conflict between the three main ethnic groups, the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, resulted in genocide committed by the Orthodox Christian Serbs against the Muslims in Bosnia. Nearly 200,000 Muslims were killed (Source: http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/bosnia.htm). Once again in the 21st century itself, a number of terrorist incidents have taken place in our country where many lives were lost and properties were destroyed. These incidents too were associated with religion. Clashes in the name of religion occurred in Orissa, and Karnataka as late as the months of August and September this year. This trend of violent incidents in the name of religion has persisted till date. We are also reminded of the aftermath of partition and the holocaust that took place which was one of the darkest chapters of our history. The tallest figure of the 20th century, one whom the majority of our people adore as Father of the Nation, was also assassinated out of some religious motivation. The world continues to experience these traumatic happenings associated with religion now and then in different parts.

The question that occurs is about the true nature and the purpose of religion? No religion, to the best of our knowledge, supports violence. No religion tolerates inhumanity. No religion prescribes destruction of homes and hearth. And yet the sad reality is that all the destruction, killings and inhuman happenings are being carried out in the name of religion. Must this continue? Is there no way out to stop or totally eradicate for ever such mad furies in the name of religion? Let us try and see if we can find answer to these disturbing questions. There have been intense and continuous efforts on the parts of individuals and organizations to bring about harmony in religions. We may take a look into some of these noble pursuits which immediately come to mind.
There are five major religions in the world. Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Out of these five, the three religions namely, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism are highly organized religions. Hinduism is also described as a way of life or a family of religions. A special feature of Hinduism is that it is not founded by any individual or association. It has evolved in a natural and gradual manner and in spite of the fact that the Hindus practiced some of the highly unjust social practices like untouchability and casteism, it has scaled great heights in its philosophical pursuits. It also says that there are different aspects of reality or God and there are different paths to reach the Supreme Truth. Another feature of Hinduism is that it is not a proselytizing religion. In contrast, there are religions which believe that none can achieve salvation unless the individual follows the rituals, practices and the disciplines as prescribed in the religion followed by them. These religions also believe that it is the sacred duty of a follower of that religion to propagate it and also to convert as many members as possible to their faith. However, it needs to be noted that this enthusiasm to convert people to one’s faith is one of the reasons that lead to religious clashes. This insistence of following a particular path to achieve reality or salvation is not confined to one religion only. But with the advancement of human understanding, it is clear that the Supreme Reality can only be one. Once this logical and convincing fact is accepted, the differences will disappear. However, this does not appear to be an easy goal to achieve.

A mention of exploitation of religion or religious sentiments for political ends is also important. We are reminded here of the political background associated with religion which led to the division of erstwhile India. A section of Hindus believed that the country should not accommodate people belonging to a faith other than Hinduism, whereas a section of Muslims believed that the Muslims in India constituted a nation and hence they ought to be separated from the Hindu dominated India. This led to the division into India and Pakistan and it cost very heavily in terms of human lives and untold miseries. In spite of this division, the two nations have not been able to live in peaceful co-existence. Another fact worth noting is that the total number of Muslims in India today is much higher than the total population of Pakistan. India has the largest number of Muslims in the world only next to Indonesia.

We began this write-up with the mention of the miseries created in the name of religion even today. We also raised a question: should this continue? We, however, believe that the majority of Hindus, the majority of Muslims, and the majority of Christians genuinely favour living in peaceful co-existence and in promoting a climate of religious harmony. It is only a small section in each religion which hold the extreme views and who have not adequately evolved intellectually and emotionally to achieve the clarity of thought which has been pointed out to mankind by some of the outstanding world teachers. Another hurdle is that these rigid and extremist groups are well organized and they are wedded to violence. The people who hold moderate views are more in number but they are not able to assert adequately out of fear and/or indifference. The existing scenario in the world today is highly disturbing. In our own country, we are witnessing a series of bomb blasts spread over different parts of the country, leaving behind a trail of deaths, misery, and terror. Similar serious and destructive incidents are taking place in other parts of the world also. The terrorist activities are proving to be a major threat before mankind. There are highly organized terrorist groups with resources of different kinds and who also appear to recruit youths to their organizations. They also appear to have systematic training programme. We also hear apprehensions that these extremist groups may manoeuvre to acquire nuclear weapons. These apprehensions cannot be lightly brushed aside.

The non-governmental voluntary service organizations or civil society organizations need to address themselves to this frightening situation associated with religious extremism. We mentioned earlier that the majority is not with the extremists. This majority must assert itself. The same elements of each religion must come together and create pressure groups. A climate, an opinion against extremism ought to be generated. State power alone cannot achieve such a goal. Civil society can lead and ought to lead. One can also visualize all religions coming on a common platform and speak and act strongly in favour of moderation, liberalism and also complete non-violence. Violence cannot solve problems. And this needs to be vigorously explained.

The logic prompts that sooner or later the entire mankind will graduate to an understanding that there is after all one Reality, one Supreme Creator of the entire universe – animate and
inanimate. There is a need to reach such a realization early so that avoidable destruction and miseries do not take place.

Let us now return to learn from what the world teachers have themselves visualized and have preached. The outstanding world teachers we have in mind are two and both belong to India. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa in the 19th century through his mystical vision and sadhana (spiritual practice) came to realize that, “All religions are true.” He also further says, “As many faiths, so many paths.” Those who have studied his life know that he undertook to practise the rituals and the sadhanas of all the main religious denominations prevalent in India and came to the conclusion that different religions were different paths but their goal, the Supreme Reality was One. All paths led to the Supreme Reality. In fact, the biographers of Sri Ramakrishna tell us that he had distinct visions of the prophets of different faiths.

The second world teacher to whom we refer is Mahatma Gandhi. He too came to realize that all religions are worthy of equal respect and all religions lead to the same reality. The morning and the evening prayers that were conducted in his Ashramas were multi-religious prayers. These are being recited regularly in several Gandhian organizations even today. One of his major contributions in promoting equal respect for all religions is the Rama-dhun he popularized in which in the second line, it is recited as, “Ishwar Allah tere naam, sab ko sanmatti de Bhagwan.” It can be loosely translated into English as: “Ishwar and Allah, the two names are Thine alone. May Thou bless all with good intent for all times.” In the simplest possible form, the message of equality of faiths and oneness of the deities they worship is conveyed through this Rama-dhun inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. In fact, Gandhiji has written voluminously on the subject.

One of the highly respected associates of Mahatma Gandhi, Acharya Vinoba Bhave (pronounced as Bhavey) rendered great service to humanity by studying the main scripture of every religious faith and culling out the essence of each in a condensed form. These condensations also reveal the similarities in different faiths. Another of Vinoba Ji’s immortal contribution is the composition of a small hymn which is named as the Naama Mala which means ‘The Rosary of God’s Different Names.’ In this rosary, he has collected names of different deities of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Chinese religion, etc. He submits to the Supreme Creator in the end that, ‘all these names in this song are Thine only.’ Future generations will be greatly benefited by reciting this hymn.

Writing about Vinoba Ji, one is also reminded here of his prophetic utterance, “The days of religion and politics are over. Future belongs to science and spirituality.” After deep thought and study of all religions and interpreting the evolutionary march of mankind, he realized that whatever role religion played so far must lead to a higher state in which the rituals and external forms will not matter. What mankind will follow is spiritual insight of all these different faiths, and it will aspire to achieve higher spiritual understanding.

One more associate of Gandhiji and my mentor, Acharaya Kakasaheb Kalelkar fervently pleaded during later days of his life for promoting Vishwa Samanvay, which means universal harmony. In his vision, he thought of harmony of religions followed by harmony of various dimensions of human life. He coined the formulation, ‘familyhood of religions.’ What he meant was that all religions together will form a family. Differences will disappear. In Gandhiji’s Ashram 11 vows were prescribed. One of them was, ‘Sarva dharma samabhava,’ meaning equal respect for all religions. Kakasaheb used to say that we should rise a step higher and aspire to cultivate, ‘Sarva dharma mamabhava.’ In other words, one should graduate from equal respect for all religions to treating every religion as one’s own and thereby imbibe in his or her life all the good he or she finds in every religion.

To summarize the narration so far, we find a few things clearly. Firstly, peaceful co-existence of all different religions and harmonious relationship between all religions is something which is most essential for promoting enlightenment and peace in the society. We can quicken the pace of the advent of such an era, by promoting equal respect for all religions. Those who are convinced of such a belief must begin with their own lives and try to mobilize as many fellow human beings as possible to this course. In fact, it will be worthwhile to conduct a nation-wide campaign vigourously. The responsibility of promoting such a campaign naturally falls on the shoulders of those who belong to moderate sections of opinion in every religion as well as on the shoulders of all the civil society organizations.
As far as the Gandhian fraternity is concerned, it is a moral duty from which they cannot keep aloof. They may even plan a serious initiative to mobilize all like-minded individuals and organizations and seriously plan a nation-wide campaign. The major threat that has emerged for the entire mankind through terrorist violence ought to be minimized through generating awareness in favour of non-violence and liberalism. The insanity, violence, misery and destruction must be brought to an end.

Supplement to Comment

Sages and Seers speak....

“Truth is one; sages call It by various names.”

The oldest religious sentiment ever expressed is perhaps the statement on religious harmony found in the ancient Vedas: *Ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti*, “Truth is one; sages call It by various names.”

The same sentiment has since then echoed and reechoed in the corridors of time, amplified by enlightened persons of different religions in different parts of the world. As the pagan Roman thinker Quintus Aurelius Symmachus said to St. Ambrose, the dogmatic bishop of Milan: “The heart of so great a mystery cannot ever be reached by following one road only.” Ibn ‘Arabi, the great Sufi mystic of thirteenth-century Spain, wrote this in his book *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (“The Interpretation of Divine Love”):

*My heart is capable of every form,*
*A cloister of the monk, a temple for idols,*
*A pasture for gazelles, the votary’s Kaba,*
*The tables of Torah, the Koran.*

*Love is the creed I hold: wherever turn*
*His camels, love is still my creed and faith.*


Mahatma Gandhi says....

Tolerance, i.e., Equality of Religions

I do not like the word tolerance, but could not think of a better one. Tolerance may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one’s own, whereas *ahimsa* teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we accord to our own, thus admitting the imperfection of the latter. This admission will be readily made by a seeker of Truth, who follows the law of Love. If we had attained the full vision of Truth, we would no longer be mere seekers, but would have become one with God, for Truth is God. But being only seekers, we prosecute our quest, and are conscious of our imperfection. And if we are imperfect ourselves, religion as conceived by us must also be imperfect. We have not realized religion in its perfection, even as we have not realized God. Religion of our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and re-interpretation. Progress towards Truth, towards God, is possible only because of such evolution. And if all faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. *All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error. Reverence for other faiths need not blind us to their faults. We must be keenly alive to the defects of our own faith also, yet not leave it on that account, but try to overcome these defects. Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not only hesitate, but would think it our duty, to blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths.*


“I do regard Islam to be a religion of peace in the same sense as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism are. No doubt, there are differences in degree, but the object of these religions is peace”. Again he said, “I dare say with all emphasis that I can command that although the sword has been wielded in the history of Islam, Islam was not founded by the sword nor was it spread due to it”.

Naher Icham
Mahatma Gandhi had said, “An outrage committed in the name of religion is an outrage on religion”.

About Islam he wrote, “Religion binds man to God and man to man, Does Islam bind Muslim only to Muslim and antagonize the Hindu? Was the message of the Prophet and peace only for and between Muslims? Are Muslims to be fed with this, which I can only describe as poison? Those who are instilling this poison into the Muslim mind are rendering the greatest disservice to Islam”.

There is no room for GOONDAISM in any religion worth the name, be it Islam, Hinduism or any other. (Harijan, 5-1-1947, p. 478)

Each must respect the other’s religion must refrain from even secretly thinking ill of the other. (Young India, 7-5-1919)

No propaganda can be allowed which reviles other religions. (Young India, 29-5-1924, p.180)

To revile one another’s religion, to make reckless statements, to utter untruth, to break the heads of innocent men, to desecrate temples or mosques is a denial of God. (Young India, 25-9-1924, p. 313)

Islam means peace. The peace cannot be confined to the Muslims. It must mean peace for the whole world. (Harijan, 22-8-1940, p. 294)

The days of forcible conversion are gone. (Young India, 30-12-1926, p. 148)

There is nothing in the Koran to warrant the use of force for conversion. (Young India, 29-9-1921, p. 307)

(Source: http://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap85.htm)

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the Master says...

“God can be reached by different paths”

“Some people indulge in quarrels, saying, ‘One cannot attain anything unless one worships our Krishna’, or, ‘Nothing can be gained without the worship of Kali, our Divine Mother’, or, ‘One cannot be saved without accepting the Christian religion.’ This is pure dogmatism. The dogmatist says, ‘My religion alone is true, and the religions of others are false.’ This is a bad attitude. God can be reached by different paths.”

(Excerpted from the Page 191 of ‘Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna’ dt. March 11, 1883.)

“God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole."

(Excerpted from the Page 111 of ‘Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna’ dt. August 13, 1882.)

“With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions. The Vaishnavaas will realize God, so will the Shaktas, the Vedantists, and the Brahmos. The Mussalmans and Christians will realize Him too. All will certainly realize God if they are earnest and sincere.”

(Excerpted from the Page 191 of ‘Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna’ dt. March 11, 1883.)

“I had to practice each religion for a time – Hinduism, Islam, Christianity. Furthermore, I followed the paths of the Shaktas, Vaishnavas, and Vedantists. I realized that there is only one God toward whom all are travelling; but the paths are different.”

(Excerpted from the Page 129 of ‘Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna’ dt. October 22, 1882.)
“You may say that there are many errors and superstitions in another religion. I should reply: Suppose there are. Every religion has errors. Everyone thinks that his watch alone gives the correct time. It is enough to have yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attracted to Him. Don’t you know that God is the Inner Guide?”

(Excerpted from the Page 112 of ‘Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna’ dt. August 13, 1882.)

“It (the nondual state) is the last word, my child, the culmination of sadhana. At the ultimate development of love for God, this nondual experience manifests spontaneously in the life of all aspirants. Know it to be the goal of all faiths; and as many faiths, so many paths.”

(Excerpted from the page 318 of ‘Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play’ by Swami Saradananda. Translated by Swami Chetanananda.)

**Swami Vivekananda says....**

I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him.... Is God’s book finished? Or is it still a continuous revelation going on? It is a marvelous book--these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so many pages and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave it open for all of them. We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future. Salutations to all the prophets of the past, to all the great ones of the present, and to all that are to come in the future!


We may conclude here, in the words of Swami Vivekananda, one of the greatest champion of peace and understanding of religions, which Gandhi also supported: “If any one hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one religion and the destruction of the others, to him I say, ‘Brother, yours is an impossible hope.’ Do I wish that a Christian would become a Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that a Hindu or Buddhist would become a Christian? God forbid ... The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.”(13)

(Source: [http://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap85.htm](http://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap85.htm))

### ABOUT ISHANI

The Sanskrit nomenclature for the North-east direction is Ishanya or Ishan-Kon. Hence anything concerning the North-east or Ishan-Kon is ISHANI. Keeping this in view, we have selected ISHANI as the name of our journal.

ISHANI will aim at presenting developments in the North-Eastern region, which may otherwise escape notice of the national media. It will also be our effort to evolve ISHANI as a window to view the fascinating, bewildering mosaic that is the North-east India. We will carry views and reflections of the people from the North-east on various issues concerning them. It will also be our attempt to highlight the good work of different voluntary action groups in the region. The life and work of prominent personalities of the North-east will also be presented.

As ISHANI is being published as the journal of Mahatma Gandhi Ishani Foundation, we will inevitably carry articles and other materials related to the life and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi. This will be one of our highly cherished objectives. The publication of ISHANI has become possible through the generous donation of a donor group. It will continue to be published as a bimonthly journal for some time. ISHANI is a mission aimed at rendering service to the North-east and the rest of the country by being a communication bridge between the two regions. We seek goodwill, support, cooperation and blessings from our well-wishers.

— Editor