The author of this article, Shri Ravindra Kelekar, is an octogenarian literary giant of Konkoni language. The readers of daily papers might have come across his name as one of the recipients of the prestigious Padma Bhushan award conferred on him by the President of India on the Republic Day 2008. Though I have begun my introduction by describing Shri Kelekar as a literary figure, he is also a devoted life-long Gandhian activist. He had set before himself three main objectives. Firstly, to liberate Goa from Portuguese rule. Secondly, to develop his mother tongue Konkoni to great heights and get it adopted as the State language of Goa. His third objective but not the least important was to interpret Gandhi to his people in particular and to the entire country in general. God has been kind to him and he has been able to see the fulfilment of two of his life’s objectives during his own lifetime. The third objective is such that it has to be pursued non-stop till the last breadth of his life. It will please the readers of Ishani to know that this untiring interpreter of Gandhi and Gandhian thought is continuing in this persuasion even in his early eighties. May God grant him longevity and good health to ceaselessly pursue this objective. The article below, is in fact an abridged version of his talk on the subject, ‘Harmony of Religions’ that he had delivered at a Roman Catholic Seminary known as Pilar Seminary in Goa. A word is necessary to dwell on the spread of Christianity as it was followed in Goa. Almost the entire Christian population of Goa belongs to the Roman Catholic branch of Christianity. The background and the nature of the working of missionaries in Goa was different than the nature and background of spread of Christianity in the North-east. When the author of this article refers to Christian missionaries and their works, he refers to the working that took place in Goa. It is necessary to draw attention of the readers in the North-east to this difference. The author rightly concludes his paper by explaining the Gandhian approach to the question of harmony of religions. Mankind has reached a stage where the Gandhian approach to the coexistence of religions harmoniously seems to be unavoidable.
I wish to begin by telling you an incident narrated to me by my niece who lives in Margao. Her daughter Asawari has a friend called Jeanne, living in a flat next door to hers. Good friends as they are, they never miss an opportunity to keep chatting. On a Friday, which happened to be a holiday, Asawari found Jeanne’s house shut unusually for a long time. As Jeanne returned home with her mother and brother, she met Asawari and her mother on the stairs.

“Where had you gone?” Asawari asked Jeanne. “To the church”, Jeanne said. “Do you know what we did in the church today? We all cried because on this day, our God was crucified by the Jews”.

“Who is your God, Jeanne?” asked Asawari’s mother. “Our God is Lord Jesus Christ, the English God, you know.” “Really!” exclaimed Asawari’s mother.

Indeed Jesus was neither English nor European. But those who brought him to India were Portuguese and English, both Europeans. They ruled over this country for long years; until one fine day their rule came to an end. And foreigners as they were they had to leave this country, keeping behind Christ as English God, and Christianity as a foreign religion not only in the eyes of the Hindus, but also in the very eyes of those who claim to follow the English God and Christianity as in the case of Jeanne.

To wipe out the stigma of ‘foreign’ is the biggest challenge the church faces today. The impression that Jesus was an English God has become the greatest impediment to make Him acceptable to all Indians, especially the Hindus. The impression of Jesus being an English God is a consequence of the acts of early European missionaries. They came to India believing that they had come to a country of uncivilized people who did not know God nor did they know the way to realize him – Indians who worship idols of the monkey-like or elephant-like faces, with four hands, etc. So the missionaries felt that it was their paramount duty to convert them to Christianity. The Christianity they gave to the Indians was one that was flavoured with European culture, and those who accepted it had to change their names, surnames, food habits, undergoing a total change in their lifestyle, their customs and even their language. It was this missionary zeal that resulted into a sort of dislike for Christianity in the Hindu mind; as a result the attitude of the Hindus towards Christians to brand them as ‘foreigners’ is still sustained even after centuries of co-existence.

Centuries before the Christian missionaries set out on their mission to spread the Gospel of Christ all over the world, the followers of Buddha, born in India had gone out to spread Buddhism in the neighboring countries. They spread the teachings of Buddha throughout Asia without interfering with any of the cultural aspects of the local people; the food habits, lifestyle, dress or language. Thus the Tibetans became Buddhists, yet remained culturally Tibetans; Chinese became Buddhists, yet continued to remain culturally Chinese and Japanese became Buddhists and remained Japanese. To continue the parallel further, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Indo-China may be cited as examples of the success of Buddhist missionaries.

Christian missionaries who spread Christianity in different countries of Asia and Africa should have rather preached and put into practice the teachings of Christ first, without interfering with the local cultural ambience in the name of religion. They should have rather helped to flourish the local socio-cultural climate, whereby they could have avoided being the focus of dislike by the locals. But, it seems, missionaries were more concerned about spreading the European culture rather than the teachings of Christ. To the missionaries, Christianity was only the means to achieve the ends of European cultural expansionism. They only succeeded in converting the locals into what we call in Konkani ‘Gaunti Saib’ – neither proper Christians, nor proper Europeans, turning them into strangers in their own land.

One may see here a parallel to the art of ‘Bonsai’ that the Japanese have mastered. By chopping off the roots of a giant tree or a coconut palm they can turn it into a miniature dwarf. Such dwarfs are ditto miniature copies of the normal tree or palm. Yet they do not produce nuts however small. All the same they are useful to decorate the living room, providing thereby a topic for conversation.

Those in Asia and Africa who came under the spell of the missionaries, abandoning their culture started to imitate the Europeans. They may be regarded as ‘Bonsai Asians’ or ‘Bonsai Africans’, useful only for chairing international meetings in their countries. They contribute hardly anything for the uplift of their countries.

Hindu society does have many a custom that are useless and indeed worth eradicating. Enlightened Hindus are aware of this bitter truth; and since the time of Raja Ram Mohan Roy
upto Mahatma Gandhi, many reformers have strived to purify the Hindu society. Dr. Radhakrishnan has a piece of advice to the Christian missionaries; he says, “Help if you can help these reformists. Your task as missionaries is not so much to make Christians of Hindus but rather to Christianize Hinduism.” But to Christianize Hinduism here in India, we need to first Indianize Christianity. And if you take into account the conservative nature of an average Indian, the Church may not achieve the objective easily. However, there is another way well within the reach of the average Indian and this was put forth by Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi was the top-most leader of the freedom movement, but one must not forget that at the bottom of it all he was a religious man. “I can do without food for a number of days, but not a single moment without prayer.” This he has said more than once; and he always said what he meant.

When he launched himself into public life in South Africa he came into close contact with deeply religious Christians. Many earnest Christians went so far as to make honest attempts to induct him into their faith. As a result Gandhi had to dwell deep into the study of his own religion – Hinduism, and then the study of the religion of his Christian friends. Many of his associates in the struggle against ‘apartheid’ were Muslims. This led him to study the ‘Quran’. Thus a profound study of the three religions – Hinduism, Islam and Christianity led him to conclude that:

“When we study the mystic experiences, all these three religions speak the same language. They have had the same experience. As such on mystic experience they do not differ.” This led Mahatma Gandhi to conclude that all religions are true.

On ethical level also they speak the same language. All the three religions work hard to make their followers generous, kind, pure, honest and truthful. Here at this level too they do not differ from each other. This led him to say: “all religions are good.”

Then he asked himself “why the three religions are fighting among themselves?” He found the answer: the followers of these religions did not come closer together. They did not interact; instead they stayed distant apart from each other. As a result they failed to understand each other. Thus the three religions still remained imperfect.

Gandhi says that “...if we are imperfect ourselves, religion as we conceive cannot be perfect. Religion of our own conception being thus imperfect is subject to a process of evolution and re-interpretation. Progress towards truth, towards God is possible only because of this evolution. And if all faiths practiced by men are imperfect the question of comparative merit does not arise.... Looking at all religions with equal eye, we would think without hesitation as our duty to blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths.” * The leaders of the Catholic Church that have worked for the last few decades to open dialogue and interact with other religions would not find it hard to follow this advice of Gandhiji.

I venture to make here a suggestion. This dialogue need not be confined to the four walls of Pilar Seminary. It should be taken up by all the Churches in Goa; and lo and behold within a few years this great country of ours ridden with religious fanaticism will be free from this evil and will be enlightened with new vistas.