

## The Need to Foster Inter-Religious Tolerance among Youth

**Dr. Marie Fernandes**

Multicultural concerns have long informed India's history and traditions, constitution and political arrangements. Different parts of India have different histories and legends. Indian history has a past of over thousands of years. The first known invaders of India were Aryans. It is believed that the Aryans arrived in north India somewhere from Iran and southern Russia at around 1500 B. C. They fought and pushed the local people called Dravidians southwards. The Aryans are referred to as fair skinned people who pushed the dark skinned Dravidians southwards.

After the Aryans many others invaded India. Alexander the Great and other Greeks arrived in India. The ancient Persian Empire expanded its boundaries up to India. Others to arrive in ancient India were Scythians, Kushans and Huns. These invaders also established some kingdoms in India. At a much later period there were Muslim invaders - Turks, Arabs, Afghans and others. Later of course were the Europeans - Portuguese, Danish, Dutch, French and English. Many Indians also established their own kingdoms and empires. These different kingdoms fought among themselves to expand their kingdom boundaries and these created different aspects of Indian history for different regions of India.<sup>1</sup> During India's independence in 1947 there were 562 Princely States and 11 Provinces. India now has 28 states and 7 union territories and it would not be very wrong to say that each is very distinct from the other, with regard to language, dress and religion.

Indian history right from the time of Independence has been chequered by large scale clashes between different religious groups, fundamentally of course between the Hindus and Muslims. The world over too, religious wars have caused loss of precious human lives. The worst killing however, according to Prof. Pat Johnson, was done in the name of secular ideologies. The worst offender being Mao who starts with an estimated 40 million killed, next is Stalin with an estimate of 20 million killed and the third is Hitler. The top two were Communists and Hitler was a radical proponent of Social Darwinism. All of these ideologies are based on atheistic systems.<sup>2</sup>

In no period of recorded history have human beings known about different religions and cultures as much as we do today. There are about fourteen major religions. These include: Bahai, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, Wicca, Zoroastrianism, and Druidism. Our global public space is so powerful yet so elusive that it leads many to believe that more information brings more understanding.

Getting to know others from close up, however, is not always a smooth and easy experience. It may result in some pleasant surprises and enriching experiences. Yet it may also result in disappointment, frustration and mistrust. We also face tremendous difficulties when we show the courage and honesty of getting to know each other closely, for there is too long a history of doubt, mistrust and a refusal to accept the other.

Intercultural dialogue is one of the key missions of the Council of Europe, along with fostering democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Young people are crucial actors in that process as the main stakeholders of societies who are freer from the prejudice, discrimination and segregation that have characterized most of Europe for the past decades.

In today's increasingly globalised world, we cannot remain indifferent to the concerns of young people and the threats posed to our societies by extremism, racism, Islam phobia, social exclusion or anti-Semitism, to name but a few of the many evils we ought to address. All different — all equal, but not indifferent! We need to address the causes of polarized perceptions of each other, collective phobias and frustrations, and put into practice, activities that help re-affirm the fundamental equality in dignity of every human being and the respect among peoples of different cultural and religious traditions.

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”

This fundamental human right, proclaimed and protected by the Universal Declaration and by the European Convention on Human Rights, provides, together with the other human rights, the framework under which interreligious and intercultural dialogue can be held. Human rights, however, require the commitment of all, young people included, to uphold them.

Intercultural dialogue appears as an essential approach to counter and overcome mutual prejudices and the self-fulfilling prophecy of the ‘war of civilisations’. If the purpose of intercultural dialogue is ‘to learn to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging’, it is clear that it can only work if it involves everyone, young people included, and that it is not reduced to ‘culture’ but encompasses all the social manifestations and expressions of ‘culture’ including religion.

We know that diversity is not always accompanied by social cohesion and cooperation. Situations of discrimination remain problematic to many societies, sometimes being expressed in violent forms, from hate speech to armed conflict.

Young people, especially those from minority groups and those living in highly multicultural environments, can be found among the victims and among the perpetrators; they are, in any case, important actors in promoting social change.<sup>3</sup>

The teachings and messages of the founders of world religions were primarily aimed at alleviating sufferings and bringing peace and happiness to mankind through the application of moral and ethical conduct and righteous living. However, world religions today have developed into massive organised impersonal institutions with the result that the original teachings of their respective founders have been so eroded or neglected that hardly any influence is left over their followers particularly in the field of simplicity, restraint, truthfulness and selflessness.

The moral content of religion and its peace-promoting spiritual values are clouded by the more attractive materialistic values. Many followers of world religions have ignored or slighted the injunctions of their religious teachers in order to seek power, fame and other material gains for their personal aggrandisement. That tends to pollute the minds of modern religionists and cause unhealthy competitions and barriers amongst different religious groups as well as within the same religious community.

### **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

To co-exist in peace and harmony in a multi-religious society, one should have a sound religious education with strong emphasis on moral and ethical values as the first positive step towards better understanding and mutual co-operation among people of all religions. All religionists should unite and co-operate with one another to promote and institute a proper and systematic religious education, not only of a particular religion, but on the essentials of all religious teachings that would enlighten as well as give an insight into the nature of higher spiritual values of life, particularly its moral and ethical values. Such a step would be of definite assistance in reducing if not wiping off hard-core religious fanaticisms and traditional prejudices, which have been the bane of inter-religious strife.

### **WELFARE ACTIVITIES**

The holding of fellowship meetings, the institution of community service programmes and other social and welfare activities where members of all religions work hand-in-hand for a common humanitarian cause, to uplift the lot of the more unfortunate ones in society would serve as a mean for a common bond of friendship leading to inter-religious peace and harmony.

### **YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS**

Another important area where religionists should seriously address themselves is in the field of youth organisations and related activities. The youth of today are the adults of tomorrow. They should not be allowed to stray into pitfalls of the present age. All the youthful energies and resources should be properly harnessed

and directed towards constructive purposes. They should be apprised of all the fundamental teachings of religion in promoting a peaceful and harmonious society and not fed with venom decrying one faith against another. If properly guided through religious principles such as patience, tolerance and understanding, the youth of today would be the greatest promoters of religious tolerance in the days to come.

### **TOLERANCE AND RESPECT**

Tolerance and respect are two vital words that should be borne in mind in a multi-religious society. One should not only preach tolerance but try, on every possible occasion, to put into practice the benign spirit of tolerance as this spirit would go a long way in creating an atmosphere leading to peace and harmony. We may not understand or appreciate the intrinsic values of certain religious rituals or practices carried out by certain co-religionists. Similarly, others may not be in a position to understand or appreciate our own rituals or practices. If we do not want others to ridicule our actions, we should not ridicule others. We should try to fathom or understand the practices which are foreign to us as it will help to create a better understanding, thus enhancing the spirit of tolerance amongst the followers of the multi-religious denominations.

### **SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF LIFE**

Life in this world is a short span in the space of time. We crave for material gain but we should not neglect the spiritual aspects of life as taught to us by our religious forbears. We should enrich our lives by putting into practice the pristine and noble teachings of our religious teachers to lead a respectable and useful life shunning evil at all times. The common denomination propounded by religious teachers of all world religions is for all humanity to lead a humane existence and to uphold the spiritual aspects of their respective teachings, thus contributing to peace and harmony.

### **PROPAGANDA OF RELIGION**

In order to propagate a particular religion it is necessary that the best or the most important aspects of the religion be propounded to gain attention. To put the best foot forward is a fair enough proposition as all religionists, in trying to sell their religious wares, would invariably do so. However, in a multi-religious society where there is keen competition to solicit devotees and or converts, there should be a mutual understanding amongst the religious leaders to refrain from belittling, criticizing or speaking ill on the beliefs and practices of another religion.

### **BE CONSIDERATE**

Whilst appreciating the fact that in this country we are privileged to carry out our respective religious rites and practices without any hindrance, we must realize that we are living in a multi-religious society and as such, try to be considerate at all times in whatever we do. We may feel that because of a certain special occasion

or happening in our home, sad or otherwise, we must perform certain religious rites and rituals in accordance with our tradition and cultural background; even so we must be fair and considerate in that we do not overdo things causing hardship and annoyance to our neighbours. Whatever religious practices performed by us must be done within reasonable limits and within the confines of our homes without causing undue disturbances to the peace and serenity of our neighbourhood.

### **POLITICS AND RELIGION**

Another aspect to be considered in the search for peace and tranquillity in a multi-religious society is that political and racial issues should not be introduced into a religious forum. It is appreciated that in present day politics and even those of yesteryears, politicians would like to influence all institutions including religious institutions to further their political ends. All means are fair game for politicians, but religion should fight shy of politics and politicians. Spiritual platforms cater for the spiritual needs of religious-minded people, but such platforms should not be opened for politicians who might wreck the religious peace and serenity of a place of worship through their political affiliations. Religion is all-embracing – hence there should be no racial barriers whatsoever.<sup>44</sup>

Each one of us, whilst respecting and upholding our respective religions, must not, under any circumstances, decry or look down upon the teachings of other religionists. We should try to study and understand the basics of all religions, picking up what is good and common in practice and discarding those which are controversial in character. In short, uphold your religion but respect the beliefs of others. This will definitely help in the maintenance of peace and harmony in a multi-religious society.

It is against this background the Chair for Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue was established, at St. Andrew's College, Mumbai, by his Eminence Cardinal Paul Poupard from Rome to promote a culture of peace and harmony. The college will conduct several short and long term certificate courses for students and other interested people to arrive at a better understanding of the different faiths and work hand in hand for humanitarian projects to improve the lot of the downtrodden and marginalized.

### **(Endnotes)**

1. Nicki Grihault, *Culture Smart: India: A Quick Guide to Custom* (Portland: Kuperard, 2005)23.
2. Grantley Morris, *Issues That Make Christians Squirm* ([net.burst.net / hot / index.htm](http://net.burst.net/hot/index.htm))
3. Ibrahim Kahn, "Turkey and Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue from Indifferent Tolerance to Critical Engagement", *Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Youth Work - Symposium Report*. (Hungary: Council of Europe, 2007)
4. K. Sri Dhammananda, *Religion in a Multi-Religious Society* (<http://www.what-buddha-taught.net>)