

## **Ist Prize – Essay Competition**

### **Role of Education in the Context of Religious Conflicts**

**- Arundhati Chakraborty**

St. Stephen's College

Human beings strive to receive the best education. In the midst of the fast-moving world, there has been a shift in the meaning and purpose of education. Whereas growth and academic progress is one component, the major area to focus on is the purpose of learning. The main impetus of education in our lives is to realize and understand the value of life itself. It is one's transformation from thinking subjectively to objective thinking. It is to build our character in such a way that we can reject what is disruptive and embrace what is constructive. Jim Ron said – “If someone is going down the wrong road, he doesn't need motivation to speed him up. What he needs is education to turn him around.” The purpose of education is to help the community think about, and reflect upon positive universal values and also to inspire individuals to choose their personal, social, moral and spiritual values.

Education offers a gentle introduction to the complexity of most of life's moral issues, which in turn are explored over a period of time. It provides us avenues to delight in the extraordinary nature of things. We discover in our explorations that patience is an admirable virtue but that it is not always an appropriate response for every situation. At times, patience can lead to inaction and this may not be healthy or positive and is undesirable. True education does not insist on one 'right' view point of the world but instead encourages the individual to ponder, examine and explore issues, shed light from different angles, and thereby develop an innate sense of empathy for different viewpoints and considerations. Eventually, it helps to fill the void in our collective consciousness that has been left by the widespread rejection of centuries of religion.

Religion, as per Oxford Dictionary, refers to the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or Gods. It is therefore the idea of God and our faith in God. It encompasses an ecosystem of different cultural behaviors and practices. This in turn leads to the quiddity of various types of religions. The religious landscape is

divided into five largest religious groups are recognized, which account for 5.8 billion people, i.e. 84% of the total world population. These are namely, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Folk Religion. However, the real essence of religion is lost in its man-made types. As John Lennon said – “I believe in God, but not as one thing, not as an old man in the sky. I believe that what people call God is something in all of us. I believe that what Jesus and Mohammed and Buddha and all the rest said was right. It’s just that the translations have gone wrong.” On the other hand, conflict refers to a serious disagreement or argument which is typically a protracted one. It results in a malady or something productive depends entirely on our perspective and thinking together. Conflicts, depending on its basis, can be broadly categorized into three types: relationship, task and process. While relationship conflicts pertain to interpersonal incompatibilities, task conflicts are primarily due to difference in viewpoints and opinions about a particular task whereas process conflicts occur due to the disagreements over a group’s approach to the task and its methods. Conflicts, however, no matter which type, generally seem to be a noisy affair. Thus, Ronald Reagan stated – “Peace is not absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means.”

Now, let us try to pick the nuggets and connect the dots. With reference to the previous paragraph, conflicts may be harmful. However, focusing on the task-based conflicts, an atmosphere which encourages diversity of opinions can be built. Religious tolerance alone cannot and will not reduce religion based conflict and therefore one must go beyond tolerance to tackle this problem. We must go forward by, among other things, emphasizing education in the direction of teaching the value of finding and emphasizing those common threads of similarity of religions rather than emphasizing the differences, albeit they exist. This may be something fruitful. Additionally, it is highly essential to be aware and careful of the thin boundaries that this type of task conflict shares with that of the relationship and process conflicts. Connecting the above two paragraphs, perhaps religious conflicts are good examples to study and contemplate on. The correlation between religion and conflict has been the subject of intense discussion, particularly in the current situation worldwide and the ongoing threat of terrorism. It is extremely important to understand the role of education in promoting social cohesion, enabling and exacerbating conflict between different social groups and communities that may ameliorate violent conflict.

Religious conflicts are not just based on difference in beliefs and cultural practices and are much more complex than they seem to be. However, while religion based conflict may not be the core reason for the conflicts, there is a basic influence and a major underpinning in every instance. The conflicts have various aspects that include differences in ideology, cultural practices, personality, power, place, space, group identity, among others. Religious conflicts also require an environment to propagate which are often orchestrated by political, psychological, social, economic or cultural entities. One of these needs special mention, since it formulates the base of any religious conflict.

History proves that the entire world has been greatly affected, and mankind has not only evolved but also suffered due to religious conflicts. Being born in a country with perhaps the maximum diversity, not only in terms of religion but also in its geography, we are aware of these since childhood. Here one can bring in or talk about the dire need of meaningful education in order to control such conflicts. Shaping the future requires eradication of harmful things from the existing system and incorporating either something new or an enhanced form of the pre-existing one. Certainly, it is only education that can bring about such change. At the same time, it is not the education in terms of earning degrees or being stuffed with information. It is education in terms of receiving training in thinking. It is the process of transformation that results in the arousal of the feeling of being impelled, propelled, compelled to reflect on the thoughts that come to our mind due to various things happening in our surroundings. It is then that our eyes open up; we begin to see the unseen. We long for perfection. We develop the willingness and ability to utilize our knowledge and skills to solve the problems of the society we live in. We understand the need of oneself and the other. Quoting the great German writer Goethe, "When I think of the things yet to be known, I realize how little it is that I know". This is the realization we strive for, through education.

The question arises whether religion is the major cause of conflict in the world. It is true that wars have been fought in the name of different Gods and Goddesses, and most violent conflicts contained religious elements linked up with ethno-national, inter-state, economic, territorial, and cultural issues. Religious conflicts tend to become tenacious and brutal types of wars. Invariably conflicts are triggered in religious

terms, and are transformed in value conflicts. When compared to other issues, resource conflicts which can be resolved by pragmatic and distributive means, value conflicts have a tendency to become mutually conclusive. These conflicts entail strong judgments of what is right and wrong, and warring parties believe that there cannot be a common ground to resolve their differences. In the past decades, the North-South conflicts in the Sudan have been orchestrated in religious terms that appear unresolvable except by aggressions. Religious convictions are the major source of conflict within and between communities. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that it was not only the religion that has made the 20th century as the bloodiest century. During the past centuries, several dictators and their apprentices maimed and murdered millions of people on a unprecedented scale, in the name of a policy issues which rejected religious issues for judging its purposes and practices.

Humans tend to fight over each small bits of everything and it's not just religion that causes conflicts. In the contemporary period, where multiple government heads are suffering from legitimacy-deficit, there is a new challenge of growing impact of religious discourses. It is simply because religion is a major source of soft power and a strategy to hold onto them. Obviously, this would be used or misused by religions and governmental organizations to pursue their own interests. It is understood that the major challenge of religious organizations should focus onto end existing and prevent new religious conflicts. In this context, it is paramount to develop a more profound understanding of the basic contents underlying the different religions. Furthermore, it would also be very useful to identify elements of communality between the major religious groups. Very often state-imposed ideologies cause problem. The 20th century brutalities led by Joseph V. Stalin of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia, Mao Zedong of the People's Republic of China, and Pol Pot Cambodia among others, which resulted in the suffering and murder of millions. Thousands of Russian Christians alone were executed in USSR are the prominent examples. Yet it is true, religion has been an intricate feature in many historical conflicts, and has generated the most recent wave of modern terrorism. There have been various conflicts based on religious disagreements all across the world and they have also resulted into lethal circumstances. In recent years, this issue has taken on extra global

significance because it has created new challenges. During past centuries, religious identity has not only survived, but also taken on heightened significance whenever national and political alliance breaks apart. This can perhaps be best exemplified by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it is referred to as the world's "most intractable conflict". This dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The conflict erupted among the Arabs and the Jews, in order to build up their own power in the Middle. Eventually, the power tussle experienced the emergence of Palestinian nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and consequently gave rise to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and later the Arab-Israeli conflict. While there were attempts to resolve the issue, it had long lasting consequences. The leading global community persuaded the warring parties. There was a peace proposal and even a settlement policy. Nevertheless, the peace initiative did not work out the contentious issues. During the 1948 War, more than 700,000 Jews from the region were forced flee for their lives. Their properties ransacked, and their schools, hospitals, synagogues and cemeteries expropriated or destroyed. On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced from their lands. The stubbornness towards disagreements in religious beliefs resulted in devastating outcomes. One may cite the example of religious tension in India. This has its roots in the disagreements between different religious communities. One of the most significant and sustained religious conflicts has been between Hindus and Muslims although there has been historic tension between Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Christians, and numerous other sects. This conflict has its origin since Islam spread into the region in the early 700s. In the 20th century, this tension was a major factor in pre-independence India, which led to the creation of the new states of India and Pakistan. The issue taken up was that Muslims did not have the same rights as their Hindu counterparts. Meanwhile, the British took advantage of the situation and implemented their "Divide and Rule" policy quite successfully. There was formation of the All India Muslim League (AIML) and the then Hindu-majority Indian National Congress (INC). Eventually Muslims very strongly put forward their demand of a separate nation in place of the Hindu-dominated subcontinent. This left many bitter memories, which would remain imprinted in the minds of people from both nations. The unfortunate consequences can be felt even today and will continue to have an impact for generations to come. A very small and effective example can be taken

from sporting events, particularly the India-Pakistan cricket rivalry. Politics trump cricket, and fear grip people in two huge countries. Whenever there is a cricket match between India and Pakistan, politics trump cricket, and fear grips people. Peoples, across the two nations and their natives settled anywhere in the world, are glued to the television and there is a sense of aggression of an entirely different kind. It is, therefore, not just on-field, but also off-field. There are innumerable such examples of religious conflicts that have taken place across the globe. These lead to violence as religion are either subject or object in the conflict, which is referred to as religious violence. This is something motivated by religious precepts and texts. It is a cultural process which is contact-dependent and is extremely complex. More generally, the basis originates from misguided understandings and sometimes exaggerated pasteurizations by some people or groups with either very strong beliefs or vested interests. There are of course ideological differences which come into view as we go deep into the subject.

Let us focus our attention towards the major religion in India in order to know the intricacies of the harm caused by the barrier called religion. Hinduism is perhaps the best to discuss about the existing subtle issues. It is the oldest religion in the world and many refer to it as “Sanatana Dharma” meaning “the eternal law”. It is a religion that comprises of a wide range of philosophies, linked by similar rituals, concepts, cosmology and pilgrimage to sacred sites. It is therefore an ecosystem of various beliefs. The Supreme Court of India states that – “Unlike other religions in the World, the Hindu religion does not claim any one Prophet, it does not worship any one God, it does not believe in any one philosophic concept, it does not follow any one act of religious rites or performances; in fact, it does not satisfy the traditional features of a religion or creed. It is a way of life and nothing more”. Despite of having unity in diversity, there exist conflicts based on very subtle issues. The main aspect generally lies with the purpose of upholding the “Dharma” (righteousness that brings prosperity to humanity) over “Adharma” (wickedness that causes humanity to suffer). Wars usually break-out in order to eliminate demonic beings or lords. This is opposed to the fact that Hindu teachings prescribe war as the final option, to be employed only after all peaceful methods are exhausted. The major Hindu Gods are Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti. They are believed to engage in wars through their true forms or in

the form of their “avatars”. They are believed to possess supernatural powers and use weapons called “astras”. It can therefore, bring us to the realization that no matter how closely knit, religions can take any shape, humble or violent. It needs to be understood in its depth. It is a broad concept which provides room for many perspectives. It includes a sense of something bigger than us. It involves the enthusiasm to search for meaning in life. According to sacred texts of the religions, it traditionally refers to a religious process of re-formation which aims to recover the original shape of man, oriented at “the image of God”. The meaning of the term has developed and expanded over time. However, in modern times, the emphasis is on subjective experience of a sacred dimension. It motivates us to find the deepest values and meanings by which people live. This is totally different as compared to the context of various organized religious institutions. The main beliefs that it holds are the faith in a supernatural realm, personal growth, searching one’s own “inner dimension” and of course, religious experience. Above all, the main purpose is to learn to know and to love God through methods such as prayer, reflection and being of service to humanity. If the creation or existence of religion was and is that important then perhaps this should have been the basis of all religions. The value of oneness among any species is above any barrier that we create.

We may therefore conclude that religion is certainly one of the most sensitive issues. The fact is that although, every religion encourages the idea of peace and tolerance, almost none remain at peace when it comes to their religious beliefs. Many argue that religion is the primary cause of all major wars in history. Some of these wars have been continuing since years and decades resulting in the loss of human lives in the most horrific and inhumane manner. The historian Raymond of Aguilers described as he watched Christian crusaders conquer the city of Jerusalem. “Men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins,” “Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers, since it had so long suffered from their blasphemies.” Religious organizations can influence the dynamics of conflicts as most conflicts are asymmetrical in nature and seems partial in its consequences. They have a major responsibility in creating a concerted view in which individual needs would not be met at the expense of others and the conflicts would be

resolved without aggression. Religious organizations are peace-builders and peace-makers and can function as a powerful mediator for social tolerance, democratic pluralism, and constructive conflict-management. In many instances, it follows the 'might is right' principle. The Vatican, during the World War II, adopted a neutral stand and didn't publicly disapprove of the German atrocities. Rome took this stand presumably eying on its diplomatic interests. This support or indifference based on moral or other grounds shaped the course of events. In the last phase of 20th century, religious actors have been a major force for social justice in the developing world and a movement for peace in the developed world. Education played a key role in these processes. In the midst of this conflicting era, different religious groups and communities can be empowered by offering support to such initiatives. The current generation must develop certain personal characteristics such as a pro-social value orientation and empathy. I truly believe in what I have narrated so far. Stronger is my wishes that may all human beings develop this sense of responsibility towards the other. May every human being receive education in the real sense of the term and hence develop intellectual passion in order to enhance every aspect of our lives. May everyone realize the immense potential hidden in them and make efforts to let humanity achieve greater heights. May this world be converted into a living heaven! May we be able to abolish darkness and move towards the rays of light of the scintillating sun and hope for the better survival of our species!