

Unity in Diversity: Nation-building Through the Lens of Inter-religious Families

- Dr. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala

I would like to begin with a quote from Kofi Annan, the Ghanian Nobel Peace Prize winner and 7th UN Secretary General. He says¹:

“The ways in which families are formed, function and evolve vary greatly from country to country, as do perceptions of the family’s role in society. But in any culture, the family provides the natural framework in which individuals — especially children - receive the emotional, financial and material support indispensable to their development. It is within the family that children learn the values that will guide them for the rest of their lives. It is within the family that they form their earliest relationships, learn to communicate with others and interact with the world around them. It is within the family that the notion of human rights becomes a reality lived on a daily basis. If tolerance, respect and equity permeate family life, they will translate into values that shape societies, nations and the world.”

My focus will be that last sentence: “*If tolerance, respect and equity permeate family life, they will translate into values that shape societies, nations and the world,*” and I would like to draw from my experience in my inter-faith family.

I have entitled my presentation: “Unity in Diversity: Nation-building Through the Lens of Inter-religious Families” because over the decades I have come to realize that the inter-religious family is a vehicle for “Unity in diversity”, an essential element for nation building in a country like ours with its rich religious and cultural plurality.

When I mentioned the title of my presentation to my husband Dr. Kalpesh Gajiwala he said, “Why not call it “Diversity in Unity”, and I thought: That’s an interesting take. Start from the premise that we are all one. We are all Indian but we happen to have different cultural and religious identities.

Whether you are building a nation or a family, having unity as a starting point is I think critical. When Kalpesh and I decided to get married we had to struggle with many issues. How would we celebrate the wedding, his rite or mine? How would we bring up our children, his religion or mine? Which festivals would we celebrate, his or mine? How would we pray together? How would we share the same table when he was a vegetarian and I loved my fish and mutton? What would happen when extended family visited? Should they remove their footwear? Should we serve them alcohol or not? What about the calendars on the wall, the one from Don Bosco’s shrine, or the one from the Ram Krishna Mission? I could go on, the differences were so many.

The fact that we are still together after almost 29 years means we obviously found some workable answers! But the truth is we really answered only one fundamental question on which hinged all the other questions: What do we need to do to stay together as a couple?

When we focused on that, everything else just fell into place. I’m not saying it was easy. It was a struggle with much soul searching and letting go and rising above. But knowing we wanted to stay married helped us to listen to each other, to walk in each other’s shoes, to define what was negotiable and what was not, to look for what we shared in common, and to make generous choices for the other.

We learnt first of all that while we had been conditioned by our own families, faith communities and societies along different religious lines, we shared a common humanity and a common quest for the Truth. As our hearts opened up to each other we realized that while each of our religions held values and teachings that were inspirational and life giving and formed the ground of our beings, neither of our religions held the whole Truth because the immensity of God could not be contained in one single religion. And so we claimed as our own the wisdom of the *Rig Veda*: “Let noble thoughts come to us from everywhere” (*aano bhadrah kritawo yantu vishwataha*). Most important we steered

clear of the temptation to claim religious superiority. We recognized, that like children in every family, we heard the voice of our Parent-God differently, and responded differently, but both of us had an equal welcome in God's embrace. This openness to other religions is a foundation stone of inter-religious marriage and I believe it is also a foundation stone in building a nation across religious divides.

Another building block is "encounter". Not the ones that the Indian police are known for (!) but encounters that encourage dialogue and relationship. While explaining "religious pluralism" Diana Eck who has written three books on the sacred geography of India, and is Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard Divinity School says, "*...pluralism is not the sheer fact of ...plurality alone, but is active engagement with plurality. Pluralism and plurality are sometimes used as if they were synonymous. But plurality is just diversity, plain and simple – splendid, colorful, and maybe even threatening. Such diversity does not, however, have to affect me. I can observe diversity. I can even celebrate diversity, as the cliché goes. But I have to participate in pluralism...Pluralism requires the cultivation of public space where we all encounter one another.*"²

One such space of encounter is the inter-religious family. When the couple decides to get married they weave a web that draws in many who were not part of the original decision. As we all know, in India one doesn't just marry an individual, one marries a family - parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, in-laws and family friends. What holds this tenuous net together is strands of relationship? "In India the natural respect for family ties draws them into an inter-religious dialogue that brings with it an experience of a wider community and a new openness to another's culture. Invitations to a First Holy Communion, to a naming ceremony, or to a special *puja* for instance, are accepted out of respect for the family member. Inadvertently, these serve as occasions for learning and appreciating the culture of another. They also bring certain responsibilities that necessitate moving out of oneself and one's traditional culture. Simple gestures like family visits and the exchange of gifts and sweets during festivals like Diwali, Christmas and Id initiate a reflective process that brings a consciousness of a feast day and its significance. What will we give them to

eat? What greetings do we exchange? What should we take? What do we wear? These seemingly insignificant questions have a tremendous capacity to enrich and expand horizons.”

“The process starts early and is ongoing. At three my Hindu nephew knew already that he had the right to demand an Easter egg from his *kaki*. Come Good Friday and the only one to wish me is my Hindu uncle. Of course I laughed, when it first happened but I also love it. It forces me to reflect on the “goodness” of the day. More, it means that my well-wisher is conscious not only of Good Friday being a significant day for Christians but also that he has a Christian niece. A Christian label has been concretized into a person - “my niece”.”

“Birthday celebrations, marriages, naming ceremonies, deaths and other family get-togethers also serve as constant reminders of our human connectedness that goes beyond religious and cultural divides. They are, after all, rites of passage common to every human journey. At these meetings “called” by nature . . . bonds are forged that automatically stretch into the reaching out that characterizes Indian family life. Across religious boundaries, shared citizenship prompts a discussion of the latest headlines. Even potentially provocative subjects like (the RSS agenda for a Hindu nation, Christian conversions, and demonetization) are broached, the prevailing camaraderie providing a more effective setting for mutual understanding than heated debates between opponents. Gradually, communal prejudice, or at best indifference, gives way to a tolerance that is at least open to another way of life and worship. The labels are still there, but they fade into the background. . . We are family first. I do believe that the goodwill generated in these family encounters cannot be underestimated in the bridge building that is the first step in human solidarity.”³ It has the potential to lead to nation building.

And finally a word about the children of inter-religious families, the next generation who will build where we have left off. Breathing plurality every day and engaging with it as a way of life teaches them to get out of religious and cultural ghettos, to discard labels and respect the person irrespective of caste, creed, class or gender. They learn to appreciate diverse options and to question the given, searching constantly for the evolving Truth because their lives are lived within and beyond boundaries. And they come to give unity central place in a family that is defined by diversity, appreciating and seeking ways to include rather than exclude.

My three children are used to praying Sanskrit *shlokas* and the ‘Our Father’ in one breath, standing before an altar that has always celebrated the many faces of God, even over-riding their personal rebellions against religion out of respect for their parents; they are super conscious that the spoon from the chicken dish must not touch the vegetarian dish and careful to cater to the minority vegetarian in our family when choosing restaurants for an evening out; they are sensitive to the sentiments of culturally different extended family, taking pains to wear appropriate attire at family functions; and they are possessive of their double surnames that proclaim their multiple belonging which defies the census of India. Thus it comes as no surprise that as young adults they now vociferously oppose recent attempts to create a uniform “Hindu Nation” that masquerades as a call for unity in “glorious Hindustan”, which makes for animated dining table discussions, and it strikes me that by “cultivating our personal lives and setting our hearts right”⁴ we have unwittingly ended up doing right by our nation.

Footnotes

- 1 <http://www.betterworld.net/quotes/family-quotes.htm> Accessed February 10, 2017.
- 2 Diana L. Eck, “The challenge of Pluralism,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard university, at: http://pluralism.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/The-Challenge-of-Pluralism_nieman_eck.pdf
- 3 The section in quotes is taken from my article “Weaving the Human Web: Interfaith Families as Basic Human Communities” which was published in “Word & Worship” 2001, a journal of the NBCLC, Bangalore, and reprinted in “In God’s Image” 2006, a journal published by the Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology.

Endnotes

- 1 “*To put the world right in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right.*” Confucius <http://www.betterworld.net/quotes/family-quotes.htm> Accessed February 10, 2017.