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INTER RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE TODAY

Today, more than ever, man is in need of religion. The lack of spirituality in our lives and inter-personal relationships explain why society is being dehumanised. This dehumanization of society is to my mind the prime cause for so much of violence and bloodshed that we see all over the world. I see here scholars, theologians and philosophers assembled from all over the world who profess different faiths and beliefs. I am, myself, deeply interested in religion and humanism. Therefore, your invitation to me was god-sent.

It is a well accepted and understood fact that in spite of tremendous advances in science and technology, religion still exercises a great influence in finding solutions to our present day problems. Perhaps I shall be stressing the obvious when I say that religions have very much helped to humanize human relations and to create and sustain the higher values of human conduct. Please keep in view if hatred, violence and evil have still persisted in the world, it is a matter for contemplating as to what the situation might have been without religions influence. There is every reason to believe that great possibilities exist for religions to influence the mind positively to achieve the goal of a one world community. However, the fact remains, that for religions to effectively play this important role, it becomes necessary to ignore such dogmas, rituals and practices which obstruct the flow of ideas from different religious streams towards a new sense of harmony, goodwill and collaboration. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi's reverence for religion was much more than tolerance. This should be a pace setter for us. The upsurge of fundamentalist movements in one way or other and the cult of violence in different parts of the world are symptoms of a deep-seated social malaise threatening the very political, social and economic fabric of society across the world. As perhaps, you are all aware, India, historically, has never been a self-centred theocratic state. During the Independence struggle, Mahatma Gandhi inspired the people in his characteristic manner with the slogan 'Do or Die'. Yet he made it clear that he did not dislike foreign rulers or their religion but he hated their system.

In a plural society like ours with a multiplicity of religions, creeds and cultures, a humanistic approach was adopted for the well-being of the people. This has been well explained by Maulana Azad and I quote "The acceptance of unity in diversity has been India's motto throughout the ages. The essence of this principle is a large and wide hearted toleration in which differences are recognised that truth has many facets and conflict of truth and virtue". Great moments of history are not those when empires are built, but those when noble thoughts for the good of all gain currency. We should condemn mere lip homage to great ideals of truth and preach the law of love, purity of thought, sincere service and good-will towards all. Even in these liberal days, the scenario of religious tolerance does not present an ideal picture. However, all does not seem lost and we can correct aberrations provided we take a liberal view and avoid confrontation with a greater sense of tolerance. Patience, compassion and good-will towards those who do not agree with us will ultimately enable us to understand what and where the remedies lie. We have to make tolerance and generosity the hall mark of our thinking and action. We have to give some meaning to such concepts as compassion, truth, sincerity and service. Conflict and confrontation seems the order of the day; but confrontation and for that matter even wars have not achieved the desired solutions. For instance, in the last two World Wars 26 million armed personnel were killed and 64 million civilians lost their lives. It is also a known fact that since the last world war, 40 billion dollars have been spent on nuclear weapons, instead of using this colossal sum for improving the quality of life of people, particularly of Third World countries. What has this suicidal expenditure achieved? Basaweshwara, a saint philosopher explained the depth and dimensions of his definition of religion in these words: "what on earth was religion, if it was not based on compassion and love for living beings".

Indeed, it requires the insight of a philosopher, the boldness of a prophet, the earnestness of a reformer and the initiative of a man of action to sweep away the dust of ignorance, hatred and superstition in society. We have to bring a fresh look and new values to our thinking, belief and action. It appears that the adoption of humanism as a way of life by all the peoples of the world is the only way out of the dangerous situation. Humanism means respect for man as man and not merely because of his individual achievements. The essence of the humanist view is the importance placed on the human being, the

individual as the centre of all human activity and aspiration. We must recognise the fact that the desired universal brotherhood order of our dream cannot be achieved unless our efforts are backed by purity of purpose, thought and action. This has been elucidated in very appropriate words by one of our eminent historians, the Late Prof. Nurul Hasan and I quote "It is undoubtedly true that there had always been an under-current of fanaticism and intolerance in the course of our history. And yet notwithstanding such aberrations, India developed a culture of tolerance, of broad-mindedness and of assimilation of the contribution of various religious, ethnic, linguistic groups into the main stream of India's national life".

It is a fact that truth is the basis of all religions, although it may be described in various ways. Thus the main idea of humanism leads to the same and ultimate truth. For instance, in Hindu religious philosophy it is said that all are but a part of the Universal soul. Should we not then look on one another with the eyes of a friend? Similarly, the first Surah in Quran Al-fateha which is also mentioned as Usmmul Quran or the essence of the Quran refers to God as Rab-ul-Alasmin or Lord of Universe. It does not confine Him to Muslims alone. In the second sura "Al-Baqural" it has been impressed that it is not mere professing of one's creed, but righteous conduct, that is true religion.

Christian virtues of love and compassion are universal and not confined to Christians only. Further, the Lord's prayer says "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from all evil."

The spirit of tolerance and liberalism in Buddhism denounces social distinction between man and man. Quality, humanity and compassion are the main features of Buddhism. Similarly, Jainism places emphasis on non-violence, understanding and viewing oneness in all living beings.

We thus see the similarity as the basis of truth of all religions and by decrying the religion of another or speaking about it without reverence, one injures one's own religion and exposes his own religion to disrespect.

It will thus be seen that the very survival and well-being of the people of the world and their future basically depends on the extent

to which we can establish and sustain humanism and a spirit of compassion and tolerance. In order to achieve this, sustained efforts are necessary to create a greater sense of awareness regarding the oneness of the essential doctrine of truth in all religions. For building the desired world order of a common community, an agenda will have to be set out for all right-thinking people to make their contribution in this regard.

It was exactly a century ago that the great reformer from India, Swami Vivekananda, addressed the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. You could possibly draw inspiration from what he said at that international gathering: "Do I wish that the Christian would become a Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become a Christian? God forbid. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or Buddhist to become a Christian. But each religion must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve its individuality and grow according to its own law of growth". This, in essence, is what interreligious dialogue is all about. The words of Swami Vivekananda are extremely relevant to our times and require reiteration again and again. I am sure, your deliberations over the next few days would be conducted in a spirit of sincerity and humility and your objective would be the attainment of truth. Let me take this opportunity of congratulating the Dharmaram Vidya Kshethra for this timely conference. At the conclusion of your deliberations, do not confine yourselves to the four walls of this institution. I urge you to spread to the world the message of love and peace, which is the message of all religions. Let me conclude in the words of Kabir: "When will our race be once great brotherhood, unbroken by the fetters of caste. On this blessed land there is one great caste, one tribe and one brotherhood and one God does dwell above and He made us one in birth and frame and tongue. Hari is in the East, Allah is in the West, lookwithin your heart for there you will find both Karim and Ram."