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THE FUTURE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE THREATS AND PROMISES

During the past one hundred years since the meeting of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893, many events have taken place whose consequences affect human life even to this day. The two world wars, the first use of the atom bomb, the holocaust, the increasing power of technological culture on human life and the many smaller conflicts in various countries in which religions were involved in one way or another, have raised critical questions about the role of religions in history. The recent collapse of Marxism in Eastern Europe and the rise of religious Fundamentalism in many parts of the world also raise questions to which religious people do not have easy answers. It is in this context that the future of inter-religious dialogue has to be discussed, particularly because there is a discernible ferment now at the inter-section where people of different religious commitments live and work together in society.

The role of religions in history has always been ambiguous. On the one hand religions have provided values and visions, spiritual resources, ethical principles and revolutionary urges to fight against injustice and oppression in society. On the other, religious persons and institutions have often hindered scientific advance and social progress and, on many occasions, sided with the rich and the powerful over against the poor and the weak. In addition, they have also contributed to tensions and conflicts in society. This is noted here to emphasise that while recognising the need to continue inter-religious dialogues in the coming years, it is also necessary to take a critical look at the role of religions in history during this century. The centenary celebrations of the World Parliament of Religions is an appropriate occasion to do so.

One must also note that striking changes have taken place within particular religious communities as well during this century, even though the pace of change varies in tempo and intensity. Within Christianity, for example, more significant changes have taken place in the Christian

attitude towards other religions during the past thirty years than during the centuries since Vasco Da Gama landed in Calicut in 1498. "The dialogue movement," bringing together people of various religions to consider issues of importance, has grown rapidly even though some are indifferent to it and many oppose it for various reasons. But it is generally recognised that dialogue, as a search for new relationships between people of different communities of faith, based on mutual trust and respect for the integrity of partners is necessary for the well being of human community.

In the course of these years of inter-religious relationships at least three lessons have emerged. Recognising the risk of over-simplification, it is still necessary to acknowledge them because without doing so one cannot move forward in the matter of dialogue. The first is the *enduring* power of religions in history and human life. In spite of a great deal of negative criticism and the growing influence of secularisation and the power of science and technology on all areas of life, religions have persisted in history. The recent collapse of Marxism in Eastern Europe and the failure of the secular left to provide a credible alternative to religion are indications of the hold of religion on human life. Religions, in some form or other, seem to meet the hunger for transcendence in the human heart. To believe that religions will disappear from the high roads of modern life may prove to be an illusion.

A second, equally obvious lesson, is that during all these centuries, *no single religion* has been able to overcome other religions and establish itself as the *only* true religion for all people. Exclusive claims, backed by economic affluence, military strength and, more recently, technological power, have tried to overcome other religions, but have not succeeded in doing so. In an inter-religious context, the question, then, is not how to *defend* the claims of one religion against others, but how to *relate* them to each other within a structure of plurality. This point has yet to enter the agenda of inter-religious dialogues in a serious manner.

The third lesson is the result of a combination of these two if the enduring power of religions and the limitations of exclusive claims are recognised, then the *plurality* of religions, cultures, and ideologies become not an obstacle to be overcome but an opportunity to be accepted for the good of humanity. Without accepting

the plurality of religions it is hardly likely that inter-religious dialogues would have a future. Any threat to plurality would also be a threat to inter-religious dialogue. It would be a great gain if, during this centenary year of the World Parliament of Religions, this fact of the plurality of religions is openly, even joyfully accepted and affirmed.

There seems to be a double choice here. One is between exclusivism and pluralism. Exclusivism, that is, the claim that only *one* religion among the many is true is not only a threat to inter-religious dialogue, but would make it impossible. The other is the choice between a pluralism that merely affirms diversity and, because of the lack of any norm, would lead to relativism, and a pluralism which recognises the integrity and commitment of each religion within a structure of diversified unity. The contours of this "diversified unity" which can justify and make room for inter-religious dialogue cannot, and should not be predetermined. It needs to be discovered and grow in clarity and depth in a climate of trust, loyalty and the gift of human friendship in the global community.

As one ponders over the future of inter-religious dialogue, among many forces that operate in contemporary history, two in particular seem to be threats to its continuance which, however, at the same time might also provide opportunities to purify the motives, clarify the purpose and suggest new ways of continuing inter-religious dialogues in the coming years. The first is the growing power of *secularism* and the other is the rise of *religious fundamentalism*. The former is indifferent to, and even rejects all religions as being of any importance to modern life. The other, by emphasising that only one particular religious ideology is valid, makes any inter-religious dialogue based on mutual respect and trust impossible. However, while recognising these threats and taking them seriously, people committed to the inter-religious movement, can also regard them as challenges and opportunities to justify the continuation of inter-religious dialogues emphasising its positive contribution to people in a pluralist society.

A great deal is being said and written about secularism during these days particularly in connection with combating religious Fundamentalism. Very often calls are made by public figures that people should support "the forces of secularism" against the powers of religious Fundamentalism. But is secularism the only alternative to Fundamentalism?

At the moment there seems to be a good deal of difficulty and confusion over the meaning and use of terms like secularism, secularisation and the secular state. Some clarification of these terms is necessary even at the risk of oversimplification of highly complex matters because without doing so the nature and purpose of inter-religious dialogue itself will become vague and uncertain.

Secularisation is a process which has its roots in the history of the west. It is a consequence of the longdrawn struggle of Christianity with the forces unleashed by the renaissance, the enlightenment and rationalism, particularly by the rise of modern science. It has emphasised human freedom and the power of reason, and has succeeded in removing large chunks of life from the control of religious personalities and institutions, dogmas and doctrines. In this sense it has indeed been beneficial in providing more space to the human spirit.

The process of secularisation also leads to *secularism* which may be described as an *ideology* that defines life without any reference to God or Sat or the dimension of the transcendent. Secularism closes life upon itself, and imprisons it within the coils of history. While religious people can indeed recognise the benefits of secularisation, the *ideology* of secularism which leaves no room for the transcendent would be unacceptable to them. Since secularism rejects the role of religion in human life it regards inter-religious dialogue either as useless or a hindrance to social progress. Many intellectuals, influenced by the ideology of Marxism have been indifferent or blind to the "revolutionary urges" and the "regenerative forces" within religions. Is this kind of secularism an alternative to religious fundamentalism? To put forward secularism as the only alternative to religious fundamentalism is to deny that there is a *religious* alternative to religious fundamentalism *within* the resources of religion itself.

People both in the west and the east have become uneasy with the creeping consequences of secularism on human life. With the collapse of Marxism particularly, many people are becoming more sensitive to "the simmering discontents of secularism." Over the years secularism has brought about an alienation and estrangement between the scientific temper and spiritual vision, the *paramarthika* (transcendent) and the *vyavaharika* (this worldly), the moral commu-

nity and the rational society, between substantial values such as trust, loyalty, honesty and integrity and technical values such as skills, achievements and results. There is need today to recover the wholeness of all life in which nature, humanity and God or the dimension of the transcendent are held together within a diversified unity.

A great deal has been written about the *Secular State* which points out that the origin and development of the Secular State in India is very different from that in the history of the west. The secular state in India was meant to be neither hostile nor partial nor indifferent to the multi-religious and multi-cultural character of the Indian people. It was expected that the secular state would provide political space for *all* religions to make their contributions to the value basis of our nation-in-the making. Many political scientists point out that in India the secular state has *failed* to be secular. This may be one of the reasons for the rise of religious fundamentalism.

In a multi-religious and multi-cultural society a theocratic state would be more than a tragedy. It would be a disaster. A secular democratic state that would be fair to all religious communities would be the only alternative to theocracy. The present call to "delink politics from religion" should not be interpreted to mean that religious values have nothing to do with strengthening and upholding the moral basis of our political life. It should mean that political leaders should *not use* religions for narrow political ends and religious leaders should *not use* politics for narrow communal ends. Without a secular state inter-religious dialogues at present or in the future would be impossible. This is one reason why all religious communities in the country should support and safeguard the integrity of a secular democratic state in India. But the call to support the secular democratic *State* is one thing; the call to strengthen the forces of *Secularism* is another thing. To blur this distinction leads to confusion and paralysis of action.

The debate on the rise of religious fundamentalism in the world is becoming difficult and complex. In India, with the strident demand for a *Hindu Rashtra* based on the ideology of *Hindutva*, the question has become urgent for all those citizens who believe in a secular democratic state. A theocratic state in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society would hardly provide space for people of different religious

commitments and ideological convictions to make their contribution to the well being of the nation in an atmosphere of freedom and mutual respect.

Scholars and thinkers who study developments in the country have drawn attention to the mixture of various factors that have led to the rise of Hindu religious fundamentalism at this particular juncture in the history of the country. One is the failure of the secular state to be secular. If the state itself uses various religions for political ends, then, the charge of "pseudo-secularism" against the state is justified. The politicisation of religions and the communalisation of politics has been the disease of these decades.

Another is the failure of the secular left to provide "a credible alternative" to religion. The collapse of Marxism and the emergence of religions in eastern Europe may be one symptom of this. During times of confusion and uncertainty religious fundamentalism often provides a sense of certainty and direction to people bewildered by the rapid changes in society. The present talk of "delinking" religion and politics should not, however, deny that religions have a critical-prophetic function in society. Mahatma Gandhi constantly emphasised the connection between the moral values of religion and the political health of the nation.

There are others who point out that religious fundamentalism, in this instance *Hindutva*, is partly a quest for Indian identity against the invasion of alien cultural values that corrode the fabric of Indian society. In this sense, religious fundamentalism is also an attempt to defend national dignity by recovering lost values, healing past injuries, correcting what are perceived as historical wrongs and asserting the dignity and identity of the nation in the midst of threats and humiliations. Swami Vivekananda is often used, particularly at this moment, both as the defender of Indian dignity and the pioneer of Hindu renaissance.

However, if the attempt to recover the lost values of Indian culture and to affirm India's national dignity is based *only* on the resources of the majority community, and that too on the scriptures, traditions, rituals and symbols of the upper caste group, then it would lead to dangerous consequences in society. It becomes a serious challenge to the secular democratic character of the Indian state guaranteed by the Constitution. It disturbs the plurality of Indian culture to which religi-

ons other than Hinduism and communities other than the Hindu upper caste groups, have made enduring contributions over the centuries. It goes against the generally tolerant ethos of India's spirit which has accepted groups of different religious communities fleeing from persecution from their own countries and seeking shelter in India. For these and other reasons such fundamentalistic developments that seek to impose a theocratic state on a multi-religious society have to be resisted at all costs by all citizens.

But the fear of religious fundamentalism is more than the fear of political domination. Its roots are more complex and deeper, often hidden within the depths of the collective consciousness of communities shaped by long centuries of troubled experience. It is the fear of the transcendent, the return of the sacred, the entry of *Sakti* or power or energy, unpredictable, untamed and therefore uncontrollable, into the human context that becomes a threat to rational society, the moral community and the secular state. In addition to the political, these hidden fears deeply embedded in human consciousness, must be brought out and faced in the open glare of critical scrutiny. This is one of the reasons why secularism, by itself, cannot become an adequate alternative to religious fundamentalism. An authentic, critical, and prophetic *religious* alternative has to be discovered and consciously developed in order to deal with the aberrations of wild fundamentalism. At the moment, in India, the almost exclusive emphasis on *Hindu* fundamentalism and its political claims dangerously ignores the lurking or open presence of fundamentalism within Christian, Muslim, Sikh and perhaps other communities of faith as well. Merely because certain religious communities are *minorities* in a particular context does not mean that they do not harbour theocratic tendencies based on exclusive claims that are ready to emerge under favourable circumstances.

It is suggested here that interreligious dialogues could provide the living context in which these issues can be discussed openly. At the moment such questions are indeed being discussed seriously, but in the narrow context of one's own community of faith exclusive claims are often hidden or camouflaged by qualifying words and phrases which do not really hide fundamentalist attitudes. Both for the sake of fighting fundamentalism and of seeking new relationships in a pluralist society, has not the time come to discuss such issues, *openly* and

together in the climate of friendliness, trust and mutual respect which inter-religious dialogues have promoted over the years?

The seminars, conferences and celebrations held in different parts of the world in connection with the centenary of the World Parliament of Religions have drawn attention to the need to continue interreligious dialogues in the coming years. The present moment also provides an opportunity to take a critical look at the dialogue movement itself and to introduce new issues, new emphases and new ways to deepen the spirit of interreligious dialogues. A few suggestions are made here with the conviction that the rise of religious fundamentalism makes it even more important and urgent for religious people to continue these dialogues.

At the moment the response to religious fundamentalism is largely *political*, that is, to find ways to prevent the dominant religious group from capturing power to the detriment of other religious groups. The minorities have indeed reasons to be afraid of this development. The resistance to the imposition of a theocratic state must indeed go on at the political level in which all citizens have to take part. At the same time, the *religious* ideology behind political expressions of religious fundamentalism needs to be considered at the deepest level.

Behind every form of religious fundamentalism there are *exclusive* claims. These exclude each other, and therefore clash in society and in the political life of the country. Here inter-religious groups have to make a special contribution, namely, to examine the nature of exclusive claims *together*, that is, in the open context of inter-religious meetings, rather than *separately* within the confines of each religious community. Obviously each community of faith has to come to terms with its own exclusive claims in a pluralist society in so far as they are expressions of commitment *within* a particular community. If this becomes hardened it leads to "closed" communities of faith. The open context of inter-religious dialogues, by developing a climate of trust and friendship, can help to understand the nature and purpose of such claims in order to discover ways in which commitment and openness can be held together within a pluralist society.

During the past three decades the emphasis in interreligious dialogues has been largely on *ethical* issues such as peace, justice and harmony in society. The struggle against oppression and exploitation

cuts across religious or secular boundaries and brings people together for common purposes in society. It is noted that Global Ethics was a serious concern at the World Parliament of Religions held at Chicago in 1893. This is indeed urgent and necessary, and should go on. There is not the slightest hint that this should be abandoned or soft pedalled. But the matters which generally come under the term *spirituality*: prayer, meditation, contemplation, inwardness of religious life—these have not received sufficient emphasis in most interreligious meetings.

Therefore, there is a genuine need to relate the ethical, theological, philosophical and spiritual dimensions in the wholeness of life. The mood of trust and friendliness promoted by dialogue can provide the context in which such a community of discourse, even a community of shared silence, before the Mystery of Truth, might emerge and develop.

Not *all* people within a religious community can be described as fundamentalists. Among the majority community of Hindus themselves there are many people who are not fundamentalists of the type that destroyed the Babri Masjid. Therefore a spirit of *discernment* is necessary to distinguish between those who are fundamentalists and those who are liberals opposed to it *within* the same community of faith. The liberals may be described as those who believe that the spiritual resources within religions critically recovered, have a contribution to make to enhance human life and who, at the same time, are opposed to the excesses of all religious fundamentalism, including those within their own communities of faith, and so, are willing and ready to extend their hands across the border to neighbours of other faiths who also share their views in this matter. The struggle in India therefore should not be too easily described as the struggle between *Hindu* fundamentalists and *Muslim* fundamentalists but between *liberals* and *fundamentalists within* each community of faith. This is true of other communities of faith as well.

This observation has implications for the character and purpose of inter-religious dialogues in the coming years. It may be that the most urgent and important contribution the dialogue movement can make in this situation is to bring together the liberals within different communities of faith to discuss not only the roots and consequences of fundamentalism, but also to go deeper into the matter of exclusive claims which really are at the root of all fundamentalism, religious

or secular. Interreligious dialogues, carefully prepared and practised, can help people to respond to the dangers of religious fundamentalism not just on the political but on the religious level as well. Such dialogues can help to hold together relevance and depth, the immediate and the enduring, and the legitimate concerns of each religious community and the total well being of the global community.