

Prof. V. V. John
University of Jodhpur

Co-Existence and Tolerance in Multi-Religious Contexts

When I accepted the invitation to participate in this Conference on "The Role of Religion in National Integration," I had not bargained for figuring so early in the programme. Scanning the impressive roster of theologians, philosophers and social scientists invited to the conference, a layman like me could legitimately count on getting by without attracting too much attention. Not that I am dismayed or discouraged by being surrounded by so much scholarly capability. Being almost a founding member of the seminar-culture of this country, I had long ago arrived at the finding that the poet did not quite get it right when he warned us that "A little learning is a dangerous thing." Maybe it is dangerous in certain contexts, but not so in the national capital, even when we call ourselves an international conference. In other words, there is always room, in Delhi, for persons like me and our sort of learning or lack thereof.

If I am accused of being frivolous, I shall accept the charge and remain unrepentant. In fact, I would go further and suggest that at the beginning of every conference and seminar, someone should tell the participants, "Friends, the theme we shall discuss is serious, but that need not induce you to take yourself too seriously." Solemnity and self-importance are impediments to the spirit soaring to the height of any great argument. G. K. Chesterton, in his delightfully unorthodox book on *Orthodoxy*, told us years ago how wrong it was to identify lightheartedness with emptyheadedness, which functions more successfully with a grave demeanour. He even went to the extent of warning us against the perils of taking oneself too seriously; "Satan fell by the force of gravity."

I suppose I must now proceed to give some evidence of having made the right distinction between taking oneself seriously and taking the theme of the conference seriously. I shall do so by indicating

how, in my view, our deliberations could be expected to help in developing the right perspective in a matter of vital concern to all of us, namely, the integrity and unity of this nation. We shall give some thought to the contribution that the faiths that we live by, the religions we profess, have made, or could make, to this unity. We shall consider whether, as is sometimes alleged, the religions have functioned as a disruptive and disintegrating force.

The threats to the unity of India were among the principal themes discussed at the annual conference of the Citizens for Democracy (CFD), who met in Hyderabad in December 1981. I should like to cite the first and last paragraphs of a resolution that the conference adopted on this theme. The conference consisted of highly self-conscious secularists, and its resolution provides an appropriate starting point for what I shall place before you for your consideration.

The CFD resolution said :

The unity of the country is today threatened by many regional and communal forces and also by short-sighted expedients that are sometimes employed to combat them. There should be a joyous recognition of the fact that the diversity of traditions and cultures that constitute the Indian nation is a source of strength rather than of weakness, and an insurance against the menace of absolute power. The effort of the democratic system should be to instil among the people of different regions and of diverse traditions an awareness that the things in which we differ are not as vital as the things we share in common. What we share in common are the democratic values enshrined in the Indian Constitution—particularly the pursuit of the ideals of justice, freedom, equality and brotherhood, and it should be the endeavour of the political system to impart to every citizen a sense of participation in this noble pursuit.

... The institutions that symbolize unity should represent national aspirations rather than any will to political or economic power. This will help to cool regional and communal passions. It might also discourage the prevalent tendency to nurture communal and regional differences for partisan political ends.

Citizens for Democracy are resolved to fight against all efforts to dilute national aspirations and against the forces that seek to destroy the many splendoured fabric of India's cultural heritage.

Despite what these phrases implied, some who participated in the conference would have had serious reservations about acknowledging that, in 'the many-splendoured fabric of India's cultural heritage', our religious traditions were a conspicuous ingredient. That these traditions, in some of their manifestations, made everyone feel unhappy was evident from one of the other resolutions that the conference adopted. It deplored the way religious fundamentalism seemed to prevent social legislation, prescribe one law for men and another for women, and even seek to prevent women from going to the cinema. Religion gets the blame for the enormities of crafty, male chauvinism. In the process, secularism slips quietly into the place that religion should occupy in man's consciousness, and starts loudly lamenting how it has been outraged by the usurpations of religion into the secular arena.

The undefined term, "secular", has found a place in our Constitution through a 1976 amendment, without adding any new dimension to the pluralist society that the Founding Fathers of the Republic had envisaged when the Constitution was originally adopted. But it would seem that the term means different things to different people. This is brought home to me every time the Indian Secular Society's magazine *The Secularist* arrives. In a recent issue, an editorial note, while denouncing Mr. Shahabuddin's bill seeking to amend the Civil Procedure Code in respect of the rights of divorced Muslim women, takes an incidental and irrelevant swipe at what it calls "the so-called religious in junctions on the strength of which Catholics are denied the right of divorce, practice of family planning and of abortion". When Mother Teresa expressed herself strongly against abortion at a civic reception in Delhi, she was criticized by a national newspaper for airing her sectarian views in a secular forum and abusing its hospitality. If the President or the Prime Minister goes and worships at a temple, there are people who deem it a departure from strict secularism. We have also witnessed the spectacle in recent years of many so-called liberals frowning on the constitutional right to preach and propagate one's religion as amounting to licensing anti-secular activities. It is necessary now to defend our freedom against a new obscuratist orthodoxy trading under the name of secularism.

It is also necessary to be clear in our minds about the basis of our commitment to religious tolerance, which is what the secularism of the Constitution envisages. This tolerance, instead of being based on

the right of every man to choose his own faith and on a recognition of the contribution that the diverse faiths could make to the common well-being, could originate from indifferentism or a glib and unexamined assumption that all religions are different ways of pursuing the same goal. Indifferentism will not provide an adequate shield against intolerance and the urge to persecute those who do not agree with us. As for the seemingly large-hearted view that all religions are ways of pursuing the same goal, it is wise to recognize that this view, far from promoting mutual understanding might breed impatience with intelligent scrutiny of one another's faiths. Dr. R. C. Zaehner, who has written more knowledgeably about Hinduism in recent times than any other Western Scholar, has the following words of warning to offer :

To maintain that all religions are paths leading to the same goal, as is frequently done today, is to maintain something that is not true. Not only on the dogmatic, but also on the mystical plane, too, there is no agreement.

It is then only too true that the basic principles of Eastern and Western, which in practice means Indian and Semitic, thought are, I will not say irreconcilably opposed; they are simply not starting from the same premises. The only common ground is that the function of religion is to provide release; there is no agreement at all as to what it is that man must be released from. The great religions are talking at cross purposes.

It is, therefore, foolish to discuss either Hinduism or Buddhism in Christian terms; and it is atleast as foolish to try to bring the New Testament into harmony with the Vedanta. They do not deal with the same subject-matter. Even Indian theism is not comparable with Christianity in a way that, for example, Zoroastrianism and Islam are; nor are the various *avatars* of Vishnu really comparable to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

There are theologians and philosophers who take a somewhat different view from Zaehner's in regard to the points of contact between Christianity and Hinduism. I cited Zaehner particularly to stress the point that the way to promote understanding is to understand differences. To gloss them over is to promote misunderstanding, which is a perilous foundation for any edifice of tolerance.

The Kothari Commission had some valuable things to say about the need for promoting among the young a study of what it called "the eternal quest of the spirit." The Commission said :

It would not be practicable for a secular State with many religions to provide education in any one religion. It is, however, necessary for a multi-religious democratic State to promote a tolerant study of all religions so that its citizens can understand one another better and live amicably together. It must be remembered that, owing to the ban placed on religious instruction in schools and the weakening of the home influences which, in the past, often provided such instruction, children are now growing up without any clear idea of their own religion and with no chance of learning about others. In fact, the general ignorance and misunderstanding in these matters are so widespread in the younger generation as to be fraught with great danger for the development of a democracy in which tolerance is rated high as a value.

The Commission suggested the designing of a curriculum that would 'highlight the fundamental similarities in the great religions of the world and the emphasis they place on the cultivation of certain broadly comparable moral and spiritual values.' I should like to stress that as a programme for promoting an understanding of religions and the role they play in human lives, this is not ambitious enough. There is even a danger that what is offered to the young is a mishmash of pieties that might not stand up to the challenge of intellectual scrutiny. A fruitful study of religions should promote an understanding of the differences as well as the similarities among them, and such study could be intellectually stimulating and could constitute the soundest basis for religious tolerance.

The intellectual stimulation that is produced by the study of religions not only promotes tolerance, but should also bring to the earnest seeker an experience of what Wordsworth called :

That blessed mood
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and wearyweight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened.

It is interesting, for instance, and highly edifying, to watch the staunchly secularist and agnostic Jawaharlal Nehru recording certain experiences of spiritual disquiet. In a letter to Creighton Lacy (6 November 1961), he wrote :

I do not think I have undergone any sudden or abrupt change. Perhaps there is a greater emphasis on some aspects of life. I think I have always stressed the ethical and moral side of life. In my book *The Discovery of India* I referred to certain mysteries or deeper knowledge which appears to be outside the grasp of the normal mind which functions on lower planes. All I can say, therefore, is that this moral and ethical aspect of life has seemed to me more and more important in later years. The idea of God, as normally conceived, does not attract me. But the old idea of Hindu philosophy in the Vedanta that everything has some part of the divine essence appeals to me.

One word more. I started by citing the declaration by Citizens for Democracy that the threat to the unity of India should be met by the common pursuit of the democratic goals enumerated in the constitution, namely, justice, freedom, equality and brotherhood. I should like to close by affirming that these are not merely political concepts, but moral and even theological concepts. There are, for instance, scientists who have in recent years argued that the notion that all men are created equal is a biologically untenable concept. Who did not know that the equality invoked in the American Declaration of Independence and during the French Revolution, and in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution, was not a biological concept? G. K. Chesterton, in the book that I have already quoted from, tells us, "This is the first principle of democracy: that the essential things in men are the things they hold in common, not the things they hold separately." Religion helps us in our understanding of this sustaining truth.