

RELIGION AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION

John Rose*

1. Introduction

Nation-building in India can be achieved only when the bricks constituted by our 100 crore people become joined to each other by the cement of renunciation, love and service¹.—Swami Rangathananda.

India is a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual nation. Although she is defined in terms of “unity in diversity”, it is not an easy task to hold her together as a united *Bharat*. National integration or unity comes as a great challenge to all citizens to discover the authentic religious spirit inherent in every human heart, the root of nationalism and patriotism.

As our motherland is a land of religions, her greatest strength is not proved by Kargil or Pokhran but by the moral and spiritual strength of all her religions. Using this strength, all religions can join hands to build a great and united *Bharat*, a *Dharma Rajya*, “with an Islamic ‘body’ of fellowship, prayerfulness and discipline, a Hindu-Bahai ‘mind’ of universal vision, a Sikh-Buddhist-Jain ‘herar’ of courage, compassion and non-violence, a Parsi ‘intellect’ of ingenuity and enterprise, the indomitable ‘will’ of the Jews and the ‘spirit’ of forgiveness and self-sacrificing love of the Christians. A Mother India with such a body, mind, heart, intellect, will and spirit will be a ‘Queen Mother’ in the world family of nations.”²

Today India is the largest democracy – a matter of pride for all of us. It is an amazing fact that India is “one” despite its tremendous diversity. The cultural, religious, and social differences between states in India are greater than those of the countries in Europe. This multiplicity and these differences

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¹As quoted by T.G.L. Iyer, “Seven Stages to God-realization,” *The Times of India*, April 14, 2000, 12.

²Acharya John Sachidanand, “A New Way of Living One’s Religious Faith in the Context of Religious Pluralism in India: Christian Perspective,” *Sarva-Dharma-Sammelana* 1998 (Henceforth SDS 1998) Rev. Dr. A. Suresh (ed.), (New Delhi: CBCI Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue, 1998), 103.

are to be accepted as the basic fact of life, and the issue of identity is to be understood as a social democratic issue for a nation to be integrated. These diversities enrich, enlighten, and energize the unity, if "religion" is understood rightly.

2. Religious Unity and Disunity in India

True religion is like a gigantic Banyan tree with its refreshing, ever ramifying growth, change and variegation. Pluralism means freedom. It means that we should accept religious differences as a fact of life, like other natural variations. The pursuit of *dharma*, the urge for self-realization and desire for liberation are common to all paths. Rather than as a cause for confusion, I see Indian pluralism as constructively facilitating an individual's spiritual quest.

The Indian tradition is pluralistic and has always offered freedom of worshipping the Divine in the name and form of one's choice and according to one's individual *samskaras*. It is pluralistic both at the level of religious practices as well as philosophical teachings. For this reason we find more religions inside Hinduism than among all of the world's religions put together.

Religion and culture are linked closely together. Religion is the deepest element in culture, giving it meaning and system in the context of ultimate perspectives.³ No religion propagates hatred, war and vengeance. All religions basically teach us the principles of kindness, love, compassion and forgiveness. Religions, therefore, have the power and potential to unite people of different faiths. The when do they divide us? "Religion has two aspects internal, spiritual and physical, faith and behaviour. When religious people forget their goal, and emphasize the externals, religion loses its true spirit and becomes merely institutional. It is the narrow vision that proclaims Krishna the greatest, or Jesus or Muhammad".⁴

H.G. Suryanarayana Rao sums up, "When men with narrow vision speak, they cut the Divine to their own size. Their attitude that their

³See Amaladoss M, *Making all Things New* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1990), 32.

⁴Kali Prasanna Das, "Interreligious Cooperation in a Pluralistic Society", in *World Religions in Dialogue: Co-operating to Transform Society*, Henry O. Thompson (ed.), (Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 153.

experience is the only path to salvation, that their God is superior to others, leads to conflict and damages the harmony of religions."⁵ The major differences among religions are merely socio-religious customs. When the followers are not aware of the distinction between internal and external or behavioural aspects, they end in conflict and disunity, as Ven. Geshe Damdul Namgyal explains.

...if one's faith or practice of religion remains only at the intellectual level of knowledge, such as being familiar with certain doctrines without translating them into one's behaviour or conduct, then that is a grave mistake...this could be quite destructive. It could lead to a situation in which the persons, because of having the knowledge of the religious beliefs, could use the religion for the purpose of exploitation and manipulation.⁶

This is exactly happening in India. The "Hindutva brigades"⁷ can be just the case in point. Politicians with vested interests are using religion to divide and get votes. They have no national interests, say, to solve the problems of illiteracy, poverty, malnutrition, or the vital issues that concern the people of India as a whole.

3. The Last Hope of National Integration

...the religion are many but the theme is one. Fountains are many but the fountain's head is one. The branches are many but the tree is one. We are like the trees of one orchard and fruits of one tree and flowers of one garden. Let us forget, forgive and ring out all kinds of prejudices in the name of religion as if you boil down all the religions the residue will be the same...⁸

Given the situation of India like religious fundamentalism,⁹ massive poverty, illiteracy, coca-colonization and caste-politics, the power of

⁵H.G. Suryanarayana Rao, "Interreligious Understanding", 198 in *Ramkrishna Math and Ramkrishna Mission Conversion 1980 Report*; Howrah, West Bengal, India: Belur Math, 1980. As quoted in *World Religions in Dialogue*, 153.

⁶Ven. Geshe Damdul Namgyal, "Harmony Among Religions-Challenges Today: in Religious Life," SDS 1998, 119.

⁷Hindutva Brigades = Vishva Hindu Parishad, Rastriya Swayam Sevak, Bajrag Dal, Siva Sena, Hindu Jargan Monch, Hindu Munnani, etc.

⁸Ven. Bhikku Kashyap, "Message from Ven. Bhikku Kashyap", SDS 1998, 22

⁹Religious Fundamentalism could be defined as an unowned ideology which supports the tendency of a minority in a given organized religion to exploit for its own politico-economic gains, the religiosity of the majority by claiming to be among the

religions seems to be the last hope for the unity of our nation. National integration has become a linguistic chewing gum for the politicians of vested interests, very specially for those who exploit the innocent masses in the name of 'religion' sans its rich content. No thinking Indian, however, can fail to see its importance for the very survival of our Mother India, as essential as the respiratory or circulatory system for an organism.¹⁰

As very fully aware how in our own country religions have been the cause of so much animosity, social discrimination, injustice,, hatred, and blood-shed. Religious dialogue, therefore, should stir the conscience of the nation. Keeping these in mind, this paper attempts deeper understanding of the duty of religions, seeks awareness of certain religious and political structures that could destroy national unity, and proposes religious dialogue as the most effective solution to national disintegration.

The topic, "Religion and National Integration" is the need of the hour to be pondered over, as religions in India appear to divide communities, cause communalism and threaten National Integration. In this context, religions are called to self-examine their activities and goal, and to play a creative role in promoting and safeguarding patriotism and fellowship among all citizens.

4. The Duty of Religion

Religion is not merely a creed; it gives rise to a body of moral principles of behaviour. This morality is not merely for the individual, but for the community.¹¹ It must, hence, guide politics, economics, science and technology. In this context, Gandhiji rightly said, "Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means."¹²

They (other social systems) are not adequately meaningful in themselves. Left to themselves, economy will be governed by the profit

authentic interpreters of the Scriptures and traditions of a bygone past and by nurturing a culture of mutual intolerance that exalts the 'religious' above the human The Gujarat Province Summelan -99 (Ahmedabad: Premal Jyoti, 1999), 12].needs and values. ["Towards Tomorrow Together," *The Gujarat Province Summelan -99* (Ahmedabad: Premal Jyoti, 1999), 12].

¹⁰Vempeny Ishanand, *Christmas and National Integration* (Unpublished Monograph) (Ahmedabad: Premal Jyoti, 1994), 2.

¹¹See Amaladoss, M. *Making all things New*, 136, 231-232.

¹²M.K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan, 1945), 615.

motive, politics will be guided by the race for power, science will pursue knowledge for its own sake without worrying, will forget that they are at the service of the human community. It is the task of religion to keep this perspective alive in terms of ultimacy and transcendence, and to keep challenging the limited autonomies of the other social institutions, just as the other institutions will keep challenging religion so that it does not become alienating and otherworldly.¹³

John Sachidanand enunciates that the duty of religion should primarily be that of union and integration, not division and disintegration. In his own words. "Tue religion is that which helps to unite us to the source of our being. It should help us root ourselves firmly in the deepest ground of our existence. It should also help us discover the truth about life and the world... Thus an authentic religion should help us discover our roots and unite ourselves to it".¹⁴

Hence, the followers of any religion in India have no option but to foster a United *Bharat* that is characterized by freedom and fellowship, justice and harmony.

The Council of the People's Deliberation has decided religious harmony is one of the goals of National Development.¹⁵ Harmony is not just the absence of conflict but positive relations in life with fellow citizens. We Indians are characteristically tolerant and harmony conscious, which helps the development of religious harmony as well. Harmony of religions is based on tolerance and love realized in the form of

- (i) Mutual **recognition** of the existence of other religious adherents with all their rights
- (ii) Mutual **respect** and trust among various religious adherents who are responsible for the development of their habitat.
- (iii) Mutual **tolerance** so that in the preaching of religion no one is directly harmed.¹⁶

¹³Amaladoss M, *Making the Things New*, 136,

¹⁴John Sachidanand, "A Universal Religion", in *Religion and National Integration* (Henceforth RNI) ed. Xavier Irudayaraj and Sebastia Raj (Bangalore: Infant Jesus Agencies, 1991), 48.

¹⁵See Mikti Ali, H.A. "The Development of Religious Harmony in Indonesia" *World Religions in Dialogue*, 104.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 104.

- (iv) The development of religious harmony is directed toward:
- (v) Realizing and maintaining harmony among adherents of various religions.
- (vi) Promoting the faith and religiosity of the adherents of each religion
- (vii) Fostering responsibility in defending the country against religious fundamentalism.
- (ix) Maintaining and strengthening national feeling and solidarity
- (x) Supporting inter-religious dialogue and cooperation

All religions express belief in one God, lead us towards salvation as the ultimate goal of life, and accept basic principles like helping the needy, being truthful, and being compassionate. The differences lie with regard to doctrines and practices based on one's culture. Religion is like a vehicle to achieve the goal of reaching the Divine, the Almighty. It is to establish harmony in society. If it doesn't, something is basically wrong in the understanding of religion. We need to understand the relevance of religion rightly.

5. The Relevance of Religion

I have always said that there is only one religion in the world: The Love of God. Wherever we find real love, we find God. And in order to love God, we have to love others by learning to live peacefully together respecting each other's religious traditions, hopes and ambitions. We believe in the principle of "unity in diversity". After all, we are brothers and sisters under one God, yet we are enlivened by different expression in the love for God. In our present circumstances, it is time we put this principle into practice. It is time to build interfaith communities with the love of God as the central theme.¹⁷

Religion is not univocal. There may be almost as many interpretations of the relevance of religion as there are human beings. For religion is basically a personal relationship to God and one's own understanding of that relationship. Here are some ways of viewing religion that can lead to bonds of integration.

- (i) Religion is a theistic world-view (*darsana*), that is., the way a community or a person in the community views the reality from a faith perspective.¹⁸

¹⁷Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, "Religion in the Year 2000: Interfaith Cooperation Towards the City of God," in *World Religions in Dialogue: Co-operating to Transform Society*, 111.

¹⁸ See Gujjula Kishore, *The Mission of the Church in India in Relation to other Religious Missions* (Unpublished monograph) (Delhi: Vidyajyoti, 1997), 11

- (ii) Religion, primarily and normatively, but not exclusively, points to an Absolute Future, which is anticipated in this worldly life not only by individual spiritual practices but also in and through the visible structures within the community. It has, hence, a programme of action, dealing with the **here and now** life of the community.
- (iii) Religion is a communitarian affair. It is based on God-experience, which could be a Revealed Truth, or a human response to a life situation, or a mixture of these two. This experience is transmitted through oral and/or written traditions of scripture, dogmatic formulations, and religious and cultural festivals.
- (iv) Religion, as it entwines this worldly reality with the otherworldly dimensions, has a symbolic nature. Since a symbol does not and cannot represent the whole Reality, no religion can claim to possess the **WHOLE TRUTH**. Further, its symbolic nature has the revealing and concealing potentialities. The revealing potentiality could be identified as the **liberating face** of religion and the concealing potentiality could be recognized as the **enslaving face** of religion. Both these faces have individual and socio-political aspects. The individual aspect of the liberative face of religion deals with the interior liberation from *kama* (desire), *krodha* (anger), *moha* (attachment), *lobha* (greed), *mada* (vanity), *matsarya* (jealousy), and the social aspect deals with the organization and commitment for social change as a community. The individual aspect of the enslaving face of religion consist of superstition, communalism, and religious fundamentalism that can turn out to be limitations of religion.

6. Limitations of Religion

"...no religion possesses the truth totally and exhaustively, that every religion has enough wealth to enrich other religions..."¹⁹

Religions are basically relative in relation to the Absolute.²⁰ We must not absolutize any religion. Absolutization breeds fanaticism, fundamentalism and communalism.

Every religion, while it is different from the others, is limited; not because the Reality that it mediates and makes present is in any way

¹⁹Vempeny Ishanand, *Krshan and Christ* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash and Pune: Ishvani Kendra, 1998,) xxxviii.

²⁰See Amaladoss, M., "A Christian Perspective" in RNI, 91-92.

limited, but because its capacity to experience and to express that experience is limited. With regard to the experience we can go one step further and say that the capacity is not only limited, but also ambiguous. The human person or community is not only historically, culturally and humanly limited; it is also sinful. This will not only limit its capacity to experience God; it could make the experience itself ambiguous... This double limitation at the level of experience and of expression... makes every religion relative.²¹

Religion misconstrued is worse than "lifeless mockery", as Swami Vivekananda had pointed out. It is mere 'husk' from which the 'precious grain' of spirituality has been removed and which gives rise to bigotry, fanaticism, or just plain 'religiosity masquerading as religion' "Religious quarrels", avers Swamiji, "are always over the husks. When purity spirituality go, leaving the soul dry, do quarrels begin, and not before. For him **"religion is realization: not talk nor doctrines, not theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging, it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes...it should have no place for persecution or intolerance** –should recognize divinity in every man and woman, and its whole scope, whole force, should be centred in aiding humanity to realize its own true divine nature."²²

7. National Integration

7.1. Factors that Cause Disintegration

If we sincerely wish to meet this challenge of building among religions, then there are enough grounds on which we can build it and develop a genuine respect towards each other. Besides, through a united stand we can collectively avert all kinds of injustice inflicted all over the world in the name of religion....²³

National Integration is based on the national spirit and is marked by a dialogical relationship among believers of diverse religions and *Sarva-*

²¹Amaladoss, M, *Making all Things New*, 229-230.

²²As quoted by Om Prakash Sharma, "Beyond Communalism and Secularism," *The Times of India*, July 26, 1999, 10.

²³Ven Geshe Damdul Namgyal, "Harmony among Religions - Challenges Today: in Religious Life," in SDS 1998, 123.

dharma-samabhavana.²⁴ Perhaps we may go as far as to say - '*Sarva-dharma-mama-bhavana*'. S. Arokiasamy defines the national integration as "the concrete historical process by which the citizens of a country become a people, conscious of their humanity, the rights and duties flowing from it, and build a solidarity in freedom, justice, prosperity and shape a fraternal harmony inspired and nourished by their religious world-views."²⁵

Today, our country's unity is threatened by 'forces of death' raised in the name of religion, customs, community, or language; disputes about territorial extension and demands for separate states; disputes about the distribution of the waters of rivers between one state another.

(i) Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is the reaction of a person whose (religious) securities are threatened. It is one way of fighting alienation and loss of meaning. One holds on fanatically to the truths one has. One does not want to question them for fear of losing them and with them one's bearings in the moral world.²⁶

- (a) It is the consequence of absolutizing one's own experience.
- (b) Some religious groups think that merely working together with other groups means that they are in agreement with their doctrines/faiths and what they stand for.
- (c) Some groups want to be seen as being superior to the others and hence they are not prepared to sit down and share ideas
- (d) Sometimes there are suspicions about the intentions of other groups like 'conversion'. Fundamental groups are found in all religions today. They tend to be aggressive proselytizers and intolerant even of their own co-religionists.²⁷

(ii) Communalism

Communalists think that because they share the same religious belief they have the same economic and political interest. Communalism uses religious sentiment and emotion for political and economic ends.²⁸

²⁴ *Sarva-dharma-sambhavana* does not mean that all religions are equal. It rather means reverence and respect for all religions.

²⁵ Arokiasamy, S., "Plural Religiousness", in RNI, 21.

²⁶ Amaladoss, M., *Making all Things New*, 278.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Communalism or religious nationalism is like a deadly poison. It makes people narrow-minded and creates deadly divisive forces in society. It is not an exaggeration to say that it is the most dangerous factor that obstructs national unity. Indian society is divided into different communities of people belonging to different religious or sects. It is natural for a person to have a special affinity for his own community. But the national spirit receives a fatal blow when people belonging to one community harbour feelings of hatred for and are revengeful towards other communities. Religious fanatics and anti-social elements very often become tools of political parties and add fuel to the fire of communalism. A defiled cow in a temple or a piglet in a mosque can spark a chain of violent communal clashes. Innocent citizens become victims of the violence. Because of communalism, internecine wars burn our own homes. Mutual trust turns into mutual hatred, suspicion, and perpetual thirst for revenge. "In one sense, fundamentalism and communalism are not really religious problems. They have to be tackled at the social and political levels. But we could also attack them by the promotion of authentic religion, open to the world and to history, in dialogue with other believers..."²⁹

(iii) Regionalism

It is very natural for a person to identify himself/herself with the people of the region in which he/she is born and brought up and where he/she has lived for a long time. But when one's love of one's region makes one to look down upon other regions and to believe strongly that one's region is unique and superior to other regions in the country, it assumes dangerous proportions. This kind of excessive love for one's region destroys the nationalist spirit and becomes an impediment to national integration.

(iv) Linguisticism

Language is the channel of human expression. But linguistic disputes cause great harm to the spirit of nationalism. The violent agitation that took place after Independence for the reconstruction of states on the basis of language proved to be very harmful to national unity. The disregard of Southern sentiments in making Hindi the national language has often been a bone of contention. Yet all of us must forget out linguistic disputes for the growth of national integration and development.

²⁹Amaladoss, M., *Making All Things New*, 278

(v) Structural Injustices

In India caste system, massive poverty, illiteracy, nuclearization, globalization, and violence against dalits, tribals, women and children threaten the very existence of our Nation.

Casteism: The caste system imposed on India by the early Aryan invaders is perhaps the greatest structural injustice ever inflicted on people. It dehumanizes human beings and violates basic human dignity. In the name of the One Creator based on inevitable birth, some are said to be "high caste" and others "low caste". This kind of bitter discrimination permeates society and kills the creativity of the people. Freedom is lost, as every choice, including an election, is caste coloured and determined, and unity has no value whatever.

Massive Poverty: The reality of poverty haunts the life of the poor, the dalits, the tribals and women. "Nearly 43,000 babies are born daily. Even after 50 years of Independence still 50% children continued to be malnourished. Nearly 30% of all have low birth weight (less than 2.5kg) which perpetuates an inter-generational cycle of malnutrition. Some of India's 1000 million consider themselves lucky just to get a glass of water everyday. 400 million are illiterate and poor, 40% villages do not even have access to potable water."³⁰ Our country has the dubious distinction of being the mother of the world's largest population of the blind, the deaf, the leper and the mentally retarded.³¹ And in today's liberalized economy, health too has become a profit-oriented industry that caters mainly to the well-to-do. Corruption at every level enhances the powerlessness of the poor and totally disqualifies them from participation in any process of national progress or integration.

Illiteracy: Illiteracy invites disunity, disintegration and exploitation. Indian politicians willfully desire to keep the people illiterate. The illiterate cannot read their rights nor demand their due and are pliable for exploitation, cheap labour, and ready votes. According to a report in *The Asian Age* on September 9, 1999, the official sources claim the "almost one third of our population is illiterate", "the number of illiterates has gone up to 300 million in 1996 from 231 million in 1995" and "more than 60% of our women are illiterate." And it is painful to see the successive Five-year Plans giving less

³⁰Outlook, "Post Independence India", August 24-30, 1998, 4.

³¹Chandra Mitra, "Diary", *The Pioneer*, New Delhi, August 11, 1998, 9.

and less priority to primary education, resulting in more and more exclusion from public life and social participation.

Nuclearization: Atomic Audit, the result of a four-year study by the Washington-based Brookings Institution, recently estimated that between 1940 and 1996 the U.S. spent as much as \$5.5 trillion (1996 prices) on nuclearisation.³² This outlay is equivalent to 20 times the G.D.P (Gross Domestic Product) of India in 1997-98. The cost of creating a minimal deterrent of 10 to 20 fission weapons will cost India 20,000 crore rupees³³. The cheapness of nuclear power is a myth and, if we may say so, a deliberate distortion by the nuclear lobby. The clandestine dumping of nuclear wastes and the inestimable leakage of nuclear fallout hit the poor and homeless the most. When the government has failed to provide the basic necessities of life, it has no moral right to spend jumbo amounts in the name of "so-called" security, depriving and denying basic facilities of food, shelter and clothing to its children, besides alienating them further from the national stream.

Globalization: Globalization and liberalization will lead to more foreign investment, the introduction of high technology at the cost of small and domestic industries, deregulation and emphasis on export-oriented cash crops. The consequences of these are shocking. India is forced to agree to a reduction of 55% on raw materials. Patenting indigenous agricultural and plant resources, and forcing on India and developing countries biotechnologies and their products with patent rights destroy the indigenous resources. These finally result in a reduction of essential goods for the basic needs of the people. As we see, *Coco-colonization* has take over the country, while providing drinking water, in rural and urban areas, remains a distant dream for the government. In short, globalization in an unequal world means more and more well being and prosperity for the powerful and prosperous, and less and less well being for the poor of the world.³⁴

We can no longer ignore the impact of globalization of the **economy on the environment and the earth**. In this process everything is "commoditized", including the earth. As result there is a paradigm shift from the protection of the indigenous knowledge of people to the protection of the

³²Parthasarathy, "The Wages of Armageddon", *The Hindu*, New Delhi: August 31, 1998, 11.

³³Data as quoted in "Peace and Disarmament" *Jivan*, August, 1999, 22.

³⁴See Arokiasamy, S. *FABC Papers. Sixth Plenary Assembly: Position Paper, Asia: The Struggle for Life in the Midst of Death and Destruction*, no. 70, 2-3.

intellectual property rights of MNCs (Multi National Companies). The threat to bio-diversity is a major ecological concern in our ecosystem. Ozone layer depletion and the greenhouse effect can cause a greater danger to the interdependence and interconnectedness of life.

Women as Victims of Patriarchal Society: Patriarchy in society and its reflections in the major religions of India keep the status quo of women's subordinate position. Muslim women are prevented to pray the Mosque, Christian women cannot hold clerical posts and *Sati* is justified in the name of *Sati Mata*. We have, in this way, become deeply impoverished with half of humanity dehumanized. We have lost out on the contribution of these women-their affective, beautiful, harmonizing, peaceful and creative capacities to promote national integration.

The discrimination against women begins right in the womb to end only in the tomb. There are 190.8 million girls under 17 years of age but more girls than boys dies in the first years of their life. Every year 25 millions girls are born, of whom 25% do not live to reach 15. Early marriage of girls between 15 and 19 (44.2%) causes death in child birth twice greater than in the age group above 19.³⁵ Not only have the traditional forms of oppression such as female infanticide, denial of education, and dowry deaths got reinforced but fresh forms of oppression such as the abortion of the female fetus, sexual harassment in the work places, trafficking of women, and eve-teasing have become common.

Violence against Children: "Children are the future of the nation," said our first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. But the plight of our children reveals that nearly 10 million child workers work at an average for 12 hours every day. The areas of engagement and employment range from selling bottles on the railway stations, sweeping railway compartments, moving with tea kettles and selling tea, to making wooden idols, working in farms, doing diamond-cutting, making plastic ropes, selling flowers, working in salt mines, collecting garbage from the roads, shoe-polishing, making *bidis* and *agarbattis*, and doing domestic work. These children contribute 20% of Indian's GNP. In return, the children receive an average salary of Rs. 90 a

³⁵*The Asian Age*, New Delhi, April 28, 1999,1.

month. They are faced with incalculable damage to their health before they are even 14 years old, often with physical and emotional abuse.³⁶

(vi) History

Today people are killing each other in the name of religion. In this crisis, promoting national integration and harmony should be the chief function of all religions in India; else we will be facing a situation like that of Serbia and Yugoslavia. Mother India would be torn into pieces as was done by the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English who followed the "divide and rule" policy, making the Indian princes fight among themselves. We seem to have not learnt from history, but rather succumb to history.

The nation has not been healed from the mnemonic wounds of partition. After every communal clash new wounds are opened calling out for further revenge. "We have lost in communal riots many times the number of lives lost in the 150 years when the British ruled us. In the 13 years from 1968 to 1980 alone, no less than 2,289 Indians fell in these clashes. Ranchi, Ahmedabad, Meerut, Jabalpur, Bhiwandi and Moradabad have made notable contributions to this disgusting story. In 1984, Sikhs were massacred..."³⁷ However what followed the 1992, December 6 Babri Masjid demolition and the subsequent Bombay-Ahmedabad riots have surpassed most of these and still remain a nightmarish experience to all. After BJP (*Bharatiya Janata Party*) has come to power at the centre, the crimes, which include burning of missionaries, Churches and Bibles, forcible re-conversions, molestation and rapes of nuns, murders, attacks on persons and institutions, exhuming of a dead body, manhandling and telephonic threats, have shot up sharply and reached up to 152 in which Gujarat alone witnessed 58 incidents.³⁸

Our country has not progressed, after independence, to the extent it should have been, because of continuous Caste and Religious wars. Though saints and social reformers like Kabir, Guru Nanak, Sri Narayana Guru, Jnandevna, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma

³⁶ See Deepa Sonpal, "The Child Labour Judgement, Perspectives and Practices Essays on Grassroot Development," UNNATI-Organization for Development Education, Ahmedabad, 1998, 124.

³⁷J.B. D'Souza, "Religion and Politics" *The Times of India*, September 8, 1998, 10.

³⁸See "Attacks on Christians" (Unpublished monograph), The United Christian Forum for Human Rights, Delhi, 1-13.

Gandhi made considerable efforts to bring about social equality and communal unity, their efforts have been counterbalanced by Godse, Golwalker, Bal Thackeray, L.K. Advani, and other communalists. It is time to seek healing for the past and offer our hands for the future.

Now we are in a new day. Religionists have begun to re-read their Scriptures. They have realized an old truth: Doctrine divides while service unites. As a result, religious dialogue has become inevitable to actualize the potentialities of religious, that is, to transform society, to bring about social justice and to attain National Integration. To resist such a dialogue is to resist God's plan for India.

(vii) Politics

The most dangerous game of our leaders play is to act upon the religious sentiments of innocent people. Sacrificing our national unity for momentary benefits of an electoral success is an unforgivable betrayal of our country. Their tactics essentially include courting fanatic groups, and branding the fanatic groups as "cultural groups". Their real colours are revealed when they selectively target minority institutions, especially those dedicated to the welfare and uplift of the poor, of dalits, or tribals and the exploited.

7.2. India's Religions for India's Integration

If religions cannot go into the question of the welfare of humanity, those great values to which they bear witness will not make much sense to vast millions of the people of this world...all religions have to develop a deep spiritual commitment...But equally important is...the commitment to the welfare of humanity, the commitment to justice, the commitment to peace, the commitment to an environment that promotes life....³⁹

If we are really interested in promoting national integration, we have no other option but to know the liberative elements in the doctrines and scriptures of other religions, so that people of all religions can enter into dialogue with each other. If we consider that the mission of every Indians is national integration, then it should be a joint venture of all religions.

³⁹Joel Bevers Luis (Ed.), *A Source Book for the Community of Religions* (Chicago, 1993), 16.

(i) **Hinduism**

If any one accepts a form of religion and disparages another man's (human's) religion, he (she) does harm to his (her) own religion for, in religion, harmony or concord is alone right and proper.⁴⁰

'Unity in Diversity' has always been a unique characteristic of *Sanatana Dharma*⁴¹. Wisdom lies in developing the spirit of tolerance. It is the spirit of tolerance in the votaries of Vedic *Sanatana Dharma* which gives life to Buddhism and Jainism.⁴²

Hindu doctrine of *daya, dana, seva, loksangraha, dharma*, are nothing but kingdom-ideals to preserve life and establish a human society. A *Rigvedic* hymn (10:117) in fact teaches only *daya* and *dana*. The sixth verse of the hymn, *Kevalagho bhavati kevaladi* stresses how one is guilty when he/she does not share his/her meal with others. Working for *loksangraha* (the total welfare of all) irrespective of any castes, creed and religion is to establish Dharma (righteousness) in society. The *Gita* says, "*lokasangraham evapi sampasyan kartum arhasi*" (3:20). One's action, which leads to salvation, has to be for *loksangraha*.

There is a beautiful expression on *Dharma* in *Mahabharata*: "*Vedo'ham jajale dharmam sarahasyam sanatanam, sarvabhutahitam maitrim puranam yam janah viduh*". 'Oh, Jajali, I know eternal *dharmam* with its mysteries. The time old concept of Dharma is that we should have concern for the good of all and friendship with one and all'. Hindu doctrines like the doctrines of other religions speak about compassion, service, mercy, etc., extensively.⁴³

For Gandhi, service of others is a way to God-*Prabhu Seva* is *Manav Seva*. Gandhi believed very deeply in the unity of all things in God, which is based on the first verse of *Isa Upanishad*, "Behold everything in the form of God". This basic affirmation is also at the root of the "Advaitic Tradition." This means, respect for all forms of life and preserving them and equality of

⁴⁰This message was inscribed on Mouryan emperor Ashoka's rock in 3rd century B.C.E., and visible even today on the way to Jungadh, Saurashtra, Gujarat, India.

⁴¹The *Sanatana Dharma* way of life seeks the welfare of all the people - *lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu* and accepts all as God's children.

⁴²See SDS 1998. 16.

⁴³See Vempeny, *Conversion: National Debate or Dialogue?* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash and Delhi: Media House, 1999), VII-XII.

all human beings should be our way of life. This helped Gandhi to realize that the service of the distressed constitutes worship of God. "I do believe that there is only one religion in the world, but I also believe that although it is one mighty tree, it has many branches....And even as all branches take their sap from one source, even so all the religions derive their essence from one fountain source...if we are children of the same creator, naturally there cannot be any caste among us".⁴⁴

Speaking of his dream for India, Gandhi says: "I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country in whose making they have an effective voice; an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people; an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such an India for the curse of untouchability ... Women will enjoy the same rights as men".⁴⁵

Gandhi called this ideal society/community which is at the service of national unity as "*Ramrajya*" which could be considered as the equivalent of the Reign of God in Christianity of *Allah Rajya* in Islam.

Swami Agnivesh is a *sannyasi* of the Arya Samaj, that seeks to restore Hinduism to its pristine purity in accordance with the Vedas. He rejects superstitions, fatalism and caste-system as later accretions of Hinduism. Agnivesh himself is leading a movement for the liberation of about 5 million bonded labourers and giving them a new life, a new purpose in life, with human dignity and self-esteem.

Agnivesh accepts "Vedic Socialism" which proposes a two dimensional process of change. The individual has to be changed through the "*Yoga*", while through a class struggle a society based on the "*Varna-ashramas*" has to be established. "It is unthinkable to attain truth within, without fighting the forces of untruth outside. Therefore, the fight against untruth, bondage, and an unjust social order based on violence and greed becomes part and parcel of one's spiritual pursuit."⁴⁶

⁴⁴As quoted by Ignatius Jesudasan in *A Gandhian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 77-78.

⁴⁵As quoted by Kamla Chowdhry in "What are we celebrating Today?" *The Hindustan Times*, 15 August 1998. 11.

⁴⁶Swami Agnivesh, "Vedic Socialism," *Seminar* 339, November 1987, 21.

For Agnivesh, only a family spirit 'from each according to one's capacity, to each according to one's need' can promote life in the community'. As he sees, there is no birthright in the Vedic society and none can claim any right or privilege because of one's birth into a family. "There's nothing menial or derogatory in the words *shudra*. It is only through action that he or she qualifies for twice-born".⁴⁷

The *Varna* theory, Agnivesh claims, has nothing to do with colour, caste or racial superiority. For him the theory of *karma* is diametrically opposite to fatalism that leads to resignation. He says, "The *karma* exhortation in essence is for action, for liberation with the assured result of social change"⁴⁸. Thus, Agnivesh shows how the traditional Vedic texts stress upon establishing *Dharma* in society.

In the Hindu view, the various religions are understood as different and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the one Divine reality. In fact, the divinity is sometimes described as "that in which opposites co-exist."⁴⁹ This proves why Hinduism is tolerant and open to other religions. The more aspects of the divine we can perceive the more complete our understanding will be. "The real is one. The learned call it by various names - *Agni*, *Varuna*, *Matarisvan*."⁵⁰ The Upanishads give further development to the same view. 'Brahman is one . The different deities are merely manifestations of the various aspects of Brahman'.⁵¹

For classical Hinduism, other religions could be understood as visions of the same divine reality. New *Rsis* such as Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha, and so on could be seen as describing new and varying perspectives of the one Divine. Since all paths are different views of the divine, it would not seem to matter which path is selected. Hinduism has practiced what it has preached. Christians, Jains, Parsees, Buddhists and Muslims have all lived in India for centuries in an atmosphere of tolerance and religious freedom. "Creeds and dogmas, words and symbols have only instrumental value...The

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁹ Alain Danielou, *Hindu Polytheism* (New York: Pantheon, 1962), 5.

⁵⁰ *Rig-Veda* 1:164-46.

⁵¹ Radhakrishnan, S., *Eastern Religion and Western Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 308.

name by which we call God and rite by which we approach him do not matter much.⁵²

(ii) Islam

The popular impression about the Islam is that it is fundamentalistic, intolerant and primitive, putting to death the adulterers and blasphemers and cutting off the hands of thieves. However, it has also inspired many leaders such as Ashgar Ali Engineer to reinterpret its traditions and fight for the liberation of the downtrodden. According to Engineer, the Prophet Muhammad was sent by God to liberate people from oppression and ignorance; and Islam was born as a liberative movement with a liberative message. "O Humankind! We have created you all out of a male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you recognize one another."⁵³

Such social unity is based on '*Tawhid*' or the Unity of God and is not limited to the racial and ethnic dimension only, but includes also the abolition of economic disparity. The words '*adl*' and '*qist*' in the Quran mean not only justice but also equalizing and equal distribution of resources. The Quran argues for the defense of the poor. "Why should you not fight for the cause of Allah and the weak...who are saying: O Lord! bring us forth from out of this town of which the people are oppressors!" (4:75). Further it says "And we desired to show favour unto those who were oppressed in the earth and make them the inheritors" (28:5)

The Quran levies '*Zakat*', a form of wealth/income tax, on all the faithful, to give life to the widows and orphans, and to pay off the debts of the indebted and to free the enslaved. Land is Allah's and retention of land by those who do not cultivate it is prohibited. The Quran is also against usury, which could be taken as a symbol of other forms of exploitation (2:278-279).

The Quran affirms that with regard to rights and obligations women are equal to men (2:228). A Woman is a legal entity in her own right. She could contact marriage or divorce freely. She could inherit and own property and could have the custody of children. The Quran's permission to marry many women is to be seen as an exception to protect many war widows and

⁵²*Ibid.*, 316-317.

⁵³Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology* (New York, Sterling Publishers, 1990), 32.

orphans of that time and this is not needed any more in our times. Neither polygamy for pleasure nor large harems have Quranic sanctions.

Openness, tolerance and respect for other religions are important characteristics of the Quran, "If Allah had pleased, He should have made you a single community, but that He might try you in what He gave you (He hath made you as you are). So vie with one another in virtuous deeds" (5:48). "Unto you your religion and unto me my religion" (2:109). "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256).

The Quran justifies '*Jihad*' or 'Holy War', only for the defense and propagation of God's realm, that is, a war against anti-life, anti-human, anti-poor agents in order to create more life and free the oppressed, not for territorial or political gain.⁵⁴ It is clear that Islam, contrary to a few negative perceptions, has numerous life-giving and liberative aspects.

(iii) Christianity

He sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour (LK 4:18-22).

Christianity is a religion of love and peace initiated by God in, with and through Jesus. The angels announced the birth of Jesus with a message of peace to all people of goodwill on earth. The New Testament, which talks about Jesus and the first Christian community, stands as a symbol of peace and unity. (Eph. 2:14-17). The mission which God entrusted to Jesus, that is, to build a community of self-giving and forgiving love, has been carried out since then by different Churches all over the world.

Christianity has not always been a tolerant religion. Wherever it was dominant it was strongly allied to the State and Politics. But after the Second Vatican Council, there are three important developments in the consciousness of the Church. First, there is a positive attitude to other religions. This was evident when the Pope joined the leaders of various religions to pray for world peace in Assisi, in October 1986. Secondly, there is a strong affirmation of religious freedom. Thirdly, the autonomy of the secular in its own sphere is recognized.⁵⁵

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁵Amaladoss M., "A Christian Perspective" in RNI, 92-93.

Given the context of India, the Indian Churches have a specific mission to fulfil. That is to enter into Triple Dialogue⁵⁶ with the people of other faiths. When Pope John Paul II came to India on February, 1986, he stressed how dialogue could promote union with God and fellowship with the people of other faiths. "As followers of different religions we should join together in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare and civic order".⁵⁷

The Pope stressed the importance of Dialogue in the countries where there is a Christian minority⁵⁸, and particularly to Indian Bishops, "The Lord calls you...to do everything possible to promote Dialogue according to the commandments of the Church."⁵⁹ Keeping this in mind, the Bishops of Asia, speak of "a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the live realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own".⁶⁰

Vatican Council II has exhorted all Catholics to a dialogue which will 'acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found in other religions...' in order to "join hands with them to work towards a word peace, liberty, social justice and moral values"⁶¹ (*Nostra Aetate*, nos. 2 and 3).

Michael Amaladoss, an Indian theologian, while speaking of the paradigm shift of mission says, "Under the impact of a positive experience of other religions the centre of the framework is shifting from the Church to the Kingdom."⁶² This means that the mission of the Church is not to increase the

⁵⁶Triple dialogue means dialogue with the poor, cultures and religions, See GC 34, 47-48.

⁵⁷Origins 15, 36 (Feb 20, 1986), 598. As quoted by Amaladoss M, in *Making all things New*, 226.

⁵⁸Vatican Secretariat Bulletin, Nos. 41 & 42, *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 28, 1979.

⁵⁹"Pope Speaks to India: Addresses and Homilies of the Holy Father" (Mumbai, St. Paul's Publication, 1986).

⁶⁰Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences, *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia*, Taipei, April, 1974, No.12.

⁶¹GC 34, no. 130.

⁶²Amaladoss M, "The Kingdom, Mission and Conversion," in *Mission and Conversion: A Reappraisal*, eds. Joseph Mattam and Sebastian Kim (Mumbai, St. Paul's, 1995), 40.

membership in the institutional church, but to establish *Dharma Rajya* in this land by awakening and empowering out Mother India.⁶³

Jesus championed the cause of the oppressed, the outcastes and the marginalized of the society of his day. He criticized the religious leaders of the Jews, the Pharisees and the Scribes, for burdening the poor people with their excessive legalism, fanaticism and fundamentalism. Indian Christianity with other religions must likewise be bold to criticize social injustices and speak out fearlessly in the face of flagrant violations of human rights. The voices of protest must be heard no matter the identity or religious affiliation of the persons who are the victims of the violation of human rights.⁶⁴

(iv) Buddhism

What doctrine you shall hear, bearing upon what is good, to all of that doctrine you should listen with an attentive ear, digesting it, pondering on it, gathering it all up with your will.⁶⁵

These words of the Buddha are pertinent today to overcome sectarianism and work together for the cause of National Integration. We know Buddhism, in this century, as an emancipatory and liberative religion. Since 1956, an estimated three and a half million of the so-called 'untouchables' have become Buddhists. Shortly before his death, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the great leader of the Scheduled Castes who belonged to the *Mahar* Community, publicly adopted Buddhism at a *Diksha* ceremony in Nagpur. What attracted Ambedkar and his followers was the Buddha's insistence on love, equality, and freedom. Dr. Ambedkar chose to embrace Buddhism, not Christianity, nor Jainism, nor Islam, nor Sikhism. Why? He said once on the B.B.C. (British Broadcasting Corporation), "I prefer Buddhism, because...Buddhism teaches *prajna* (understanding against superstition and supernaturalism), *karuna* (compassions, love), and *samata* (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life".⁶⁶ On 15, October 1956, the eve of the great mass conversion of the *Mahars*, he said: "The fundamental principle of Buddhism is equality. Buddhism is the only

⁶³See Acharya John Sachidanand, "A New Way of Living One's Religious Faith in the Context of Religious Pluralism in India: Christian Perspective" SDS 1998, 100-102.

⁶⁴See Joseph Osei-Bonsu, "God and Humanity", in *World Religions in Dialogue*, 56-59.

⁶⁵Kindred Sayings, Vol. II (London: Pali Text Society (PTS), 1952), 134.

⁶⁶As quoted by D.R. Jatava, in *The Social Philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar*, 37.

religion, which does not recognize caste and affords full scope for progress Buddhism...affords hope to the downtrodden..."⁶⁷

Emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism. We can see today in Saurashtra, Gujarat his famous Rock Edicts pronouncing his attitude of generous openness towards other religions:

King Priyadarsi (Asoka), the beloved of the gods, shows reverence to people of all (religions) sects, whether ascetics or house-holders with gifts and various kinds of reverence. But (the King) the beloved of the gods, does not give so much importance to such reverence and to gifts but rather to grow in the essence of all sects...That there should not be reverence (be overrating) to one's own sect and disparagement (by underrating) of other's sect when a topic or occasion arises, as all the other sects deserve reverence for this or that reason. By doing this one promotes one's own sect and at the same time does good to other sects.⁶⁸

At the time of Independence Indians chose the *cakra* of Asoka as the national symbol. It is displayed over the chair of the President of India and flies on the Indian flag. It proclaims the *dharmavijaya* (the conquest by Dharma) of Asoka and its message is the turning of the Wheel of Dharma. Where there is *dharm*a, there is justice and peace, liberty and equality, and **unity and integration**.

(v) Jainism

Jainism, one of the oldest indigenous religions of India, developed and flourished in East India, in Rajasthan, Bihar and Gujarat. Jaina tradition records that there have been twenty-four *Tirthankaras*, and Vardhamana Mahavira was the last one who was the contemporary of Lord Buddha and the Ajivika leader, Gosalaka. He had great compassion for living beings (*sarva jiva karunya*) and preached *ahimsa* for thirty years.

Lord Mahavira went about on foot, curing the people of their dogmatic and superstitious beliefs and winning them over to the path of knowledge. He rubbed out **caste and sex differences** for he was convinced that such

⁶⁷ As quoted by Wilkinson and Thomas, *Speeches*, Vol. XXV, II, 115-161.

⁶⁸ Rock Edict XII. As quoted by Pandith Medagama Vajiranana, "Buddhist Perspectives Working Together", in *World Religions in Dialogue*, 88.

difference are inhuman and sinful and curtails the growth of being fully human. He also moved among the tribals and sought to win them over to the path of liberation. His impartiality and mercy were boundless.⁶⁹

The following poem by Tara Singh summarizes how Mahavira respected 'life' and desired life at the service of liberation.⁷⁰

If Mahavira had not shown the way of Truth,
 everyone would be fighting the other, ...
 world would be a slaughter-house,
 daggers would be swimming the blood of innocence,
 had he not caused bloom in life ...
 gandhi would not have seen his way of life,
 but for Mahavira's teachings ...
 had he not delivered his message of life to world
 had not songs of Love echoed,
 neither life nor happiness would have smiled, ...
 life's aim is service and assistance.

(vi) **Sikhism**

One of the reasons for founding Sikhism was to bring about peace between Hinduism and Islam as the following words of Guru Govind Singh found in the *Akal Ustat* indicate:

The temple and the mosque are the same,
Puja and *namaz* are the same,
 All men are one, it is through error
 That they appear different.⁷¹

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, was deeply saturated with the love of God and the love of Humanity. He envisioned a society wherein, imbued with the love of the Lord, every individual member is committed to cultivate moral and spiritual values.

Guru Nanak's social commitment stems from his undiluted monotheism – God as both transcendent and immanent. He reminded them of their social

⁶⁹K.M. Patel, "Lord Mahavira and His Teachings" in *Mahavira and His Teachings*, Ed. Dr. A.N. Upadhye and et al (Bombay: Bhagavan Mahavira, 2500th Nirvan Mahotsava Samiti, 1977), 217.

⁷⁰Tara Sing Komal, *Lord Mahavira*, 223.

⁷¹See Vempeny Ishanand, *Krsna and Christ*, xxxvi.

obligations saying "If there is sin and falsehood in society, how is your escape from it going to help?"⁷² Guru Nanak called callous rulers "man-eating tigers," their greedy officials "hounds"⁷³. He castigated the corrupt judiciary in no uncertain terms.⁷⁴ He condemned the all powerful Mughal invader Babur, holding him guilty of untold atrocities on the helpless.

The Gurus consider human birth as a great blessing, a grace from God. Everyone, irrespective of caste or gender, can attain liberation. He condemned the caste system saying, "They alone are of low birth, who forget the true Master."⁷⁵ **Gender and caste have no religious or salvific significance.** The Guru Granth declares:

Of woman are we conceived
 Of woman are we born
 To woman are we betrothed and married
 It is woman, who is a friend and partner for life,
 It is woman, who keeps the race going
 How may we think low of her, of whom are born the greatest.⁷⁶

The *Langars* (community kitchens) which Guru Nanak began were a practical step towards abolishing casteist thinking among his followers. In the *Langar* the rich and the poor, the big and the small, people drawn from all cultures and religions sit together in neat rows and partake of the same food. It inculcates in a very practical way the ideas of equality, service and a sense of belonging to Bharat

Guru Nanak taught:

- a. Sikhism has a strong sense of community. The Sikhs are a community of brothers and sisters. They (are called to) live as equals with a fraternal spirit.
- b. Casteistic thoughts are repugnant to the Gurus. Gurus speak about women with great esteem and condemn discriminations against them in society. Sikhism affirms the good of this world and life here. Liberation touches us even in this life.

⁷²Varan Bhai Gurdas, I, 29-5,6.

⁷³Malar, Mahallah I, *Guru Granth Sahib*, 1288.

⁷⁴Var Ramkali, *Guru Granth Sahib*, 951.

⁷⁵Asa, Mahallah I, *Guru Granth Sahib*, 349.

⁷⁶Asa Var Mahallah I, *Guru Granth Sahib*, 473.

- c. Sikhism promotes in the believers a sense of solidarity with people in need. All are expected to contribute a share of their income for helping the needy.
- d. The ideal person (*gurmukh*) is not only devoted to the name of the Lord but also socially committed.

Whether we call upon God as Jesus Christ, Krishna, Ram, Allah, Jehovah, the Buddha, Guru Nanak or hundreds of millions of other Divine Names, the Lord our God is One. And all religions accept that there is only one God⁷⁷ who is the origin and end of everything. "*ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*". There is no such thing like Christian love or Muslim love or Hindu love. God is always one and belongs to all indiscriminately. When we call ourselves brothers and sisters, we see our roots in the same God.

Genuine respect for other religions can be generated only if the truth about other faiths is well known. Hence the comparative study of religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism should be an elective subject both at the high school and college levels. Religions should be presented as unifying forces and as complementary to each other, and not conflicting.

8. Factors that Favour Integration

In India to be religions means to be inter-religious.⁷⁸ Our nation can become a world power if we remain united. We have an incredible asset of 'human resources' which other countries lack. In the field of science and technology, especially in computer software and Information Technology, our progress is enormous. What we need is inter-religious collaboration wherein people of all religions come together to work towards National Interests. "Religions can be very effective instruments and catalysts of change to usher in such an 'Integrated Order' in the Indian sub-continent if only they can discover and put into practice the universal and liberative elements already embedded in them".⁷⁹ Dr. Ishanand puts it succinctly:

⁷⁷I am aware that there are religions, which do not speak of a personal God. See Aloysius Pieris, "The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the Evolution of a Third-World Theology", *East Asian Pastoral Review* 19 (1982), 26-27.

⁷⁸Vempeny, *Conversion: National Debate or Dialogue*, 87.

⁷⁹John Sachidanand, "A Universal Religion", RNI, 87.

True, every nation is unique, but India is uniquely unique...In India practically all the world-religions are represented. The worshippers of cows and the slaughterers of cows, the worshippers of the conquer-deity Ram and the worshippers of the conquered-deity Ravan, the devotees of God as one and the devotees of God as many, and the adorers of the deity as male and the adorers of the deity as female live in the same localities in India and work together in the same office. Though the majority of Indians are work together in the same offices. Though the majority of Indians are neither black nor white but brown ("wheat-coloured") there are millions with African blackness, Chinese yellowness and European whiteness.⁸⁰

Culture is the deepest element in religion.⁸¹ Cultural unity has been an important actor leading to National Integration. The Indian culture is a synthesis of many cultures and a combination of the special features of various cultures, religious festivals, songs and dances, literature and arts. This 'unity in diversity' has fostered the feeling of National Unity and the feeling of our being one nation.

We can enjoy our differences. We can relish the variety. We can promote religious freedom. By focusing on the things religions have in common and respecting the differences, we can deepen our understanding and appreciation.

On one hand all religions preach love and forgiveness and on the other they take divergent positions in talking about God. But these varied positions should not divide us. Rather, they should bind us together in our common quest for higher truth and common mission of serving the humanity, and are to be looked as different pathways leading to the same goal. "...there are definitely stronger grounds for appreciating pluralism in religion and culture, particularly in a religion... The greater the diversity of religious traditions that are available, the greater their capacity to meet the need of different people. Based on these facts, harmony, rather than dissension, among different religions is the only option to further our original objective of promoting local and global peace".⁸²

⁸⁰Vempeny Ishanand, *Krsna and Christ*, 453-454.

⁸¹See Amaladoss M, *Making all Things New*, 132.

⁸²Cf. Ven. Geshe Damdul Namgyal, SDS 1998, 123.

The process of national integration is fostered by inter-religious dialogue. Dialogue does not mean that leaders of various faiths come together periodically just to pray or for a mere theological or spiritual exchange without a living witness of involvement. Nor does it mean approving everything that passes in the name of religion. The prime motive is to plan out a liberative action; the social, economic, political and cultural factors of alienation should be discussed and a joint action is planned. Religious Dialogue in our country should, hence become a mass movement to build up our nation is solidarity, peace and harmony. National Integration is process that has to begin from oneself. "All over the world great conferences are held for bringing about universal peace, universal brotherhood (/sisterhood), and religious harmony. Such is the ego and vanity of man (human) that he (/she) tries to reform society without trying to reform himself (/herself)".⁸³

9. Conclusion

National Integration is a complex phenomenon. As there are many factors that work together for an integrated India, so also there are man tools or forms of actions that could draw us towards the ideal of an integrated nation.

9.1. A Return of the Spirit of Religion

Religion is that which sustains the individual and society. It must also transform society because people cannot really worship the object of their faith when they are beset with social problems, living in conditions unfit for human beings, when they do not have the peace of mind conducive to listening to the good news of their various religions. One must become aware of his/her own divinity. Only then will he/she be able to return to the Spirit of religion.

When religion becomes a means for unity and religious pluralism is understood and appreciated as 'unity and diversity', then dialogue among religions can certainly lead to Nation Integration. The adherents of the various religions must act as leaven in the societies in which they find themselves, transforming these societies, purging them of values that militate against the tenets of their religions and the dignity of the people in these

⁸³Cf. Pandith Medagama Vajiranan, "Buddhist Perspectives Working Together", *World Religions in Dialogue*, 84.

societies.⁸⁴ "It is a moral duty of all religious leaders to educate their co-religionists about the commonality of the ultimate commitment of all the religious prophets. One religious group declaring war on another militates against the very spirit of religion".⁸⁵ "Religion denotes the differences, the historical diversification while spirituality points to the underlying harmony among religions. Spirituality is the essence or the basis on which religions are built. The genuineness of our spirituality is proved not by how comfortable we are with those who are like us, but by our ability to think and feel for those who differ from us..."⁸⁶

9.2. Judiciary and Indian Constitution

We have a beautiful Constitution that respects individual religious freedom and envisages a society wherein all people of all religions can live together in a spirit of fraternal love and charity. This is basically what all religions aim at. A true believer of any religion must imbibe and develop the conscience of the nation, so that national unity is not sacrificed at the cost of spreading any particular religion.

"WE THE PEOPLE OF India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN 'SOCIALIST' SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and opportunity; And to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation."⁸⁷

Liberty, Equality and Fraternity are the basic principles of our Constitution, which every religion preaches and propagates. This is safeguarded by the judiciary. It is important to use every legal and judicial means to protect the values enshrined in our Constitution and to especially go to the defense of the defenseless and powerless with united legal action.

9.3. Education

To follow the conscience of the Nation, one must be educated. It is only the educated people who can really participate in the political process of our

⁸⁴ Joseph Osei-Bonsu, "God and Humanity", *World Religions in Dialogue*, 55.

⁸⁵ Manjit Singh, "Message from Manjit Singh-Jathedar", in SDS 1998, 23.

⁸⁶ Most Rev. Gali Bali, "Words of Welcome", SDS 1998, 42.

⁸⁷ The preamble of the Constitution of India.

country in a meaningful way and build the country and hold it together. Education is, therefore, an important factor that every religion should strengthen to promote the feeling of nationalism. When students study together, inequalities based on caste, gender, region and religion get buried and the feeling of mutual love, brotherhood/sisterhood, and oneness grow stronger in their minds. As a result the sentiments of patriotism and national unity are inculcated in the minds of the students. It is, hence, the duty of the religious leaders to make their people and enlightened

9.4. Communications Media

The world is becoming smaller because of the means of transport and communication media like the radio, TV, internet and e-mail. People are becoming broad minded. The differences of 'high' and 'low' between castes and classes are decreasing, though not as fast as we would wish. Our consciousness for the abolition of evil customs and practices has increased. For example, women in Rajasthan revolted against "Sati" recently. Religions, therefore, can use these modern communication media to spread nationalism and patriotism by uniting to develop programs on themes that further integration, such as:

- a. To be loyal to our National and Constitution.
- b. To obey the laws of the Nation and at the same time to oppose unjust laws.
- c. To use our right to vote at elections.
- d. To respect, appreciate and promote the good found in other religious.
- e. To pay taxes levied by the state.
- f. To protect our Nation's wealth and environment.
- g. To render full cooperation in the progress of the nation.
- h. To take part in local administration and cooperate with the local self-government bodies
- i. To protect the sovereignty and integrity of the nation.
- j. To make serious efforts to eradicate social evils like caste system, Sati, child marriage, corruption, religious bigotry, etc.

9.5. An Inter-Religious Body for National Integration

The issue of national integration is so essential yet so thorny that there is a crying need for leaders of the religions in India to unite. Representatives must form core cells in each region with united national action in a phased manner. Some of the tasks before such a community of religions could be:

- a. Each religion, in the light of its authentic source and Scriptures, has to call into question the elements of its contemporary beliefs and practices thereby strengthening its duty towards its nation and making itself a liberative force in society.
- b. In India, to be religious means to be inter-religious. For this, people of different religious traditions could come together periodically and share their God-experiences with others and learn from others, too. This will help us to appreciate, preserve and promote the positive values found in all religions.
- c. All the religions uphold the values of love, peace, harmony and concern for the well being of all. The prime concern of each religion, hence should be the promotion of justice, defense of human rights and protection of all life and environment.
- d. It is vital that the essentials of all religions are included in the school as well as college syllabi thereby avoiding misunderstandings and prejudices regarding other religions.
- e. Each district should have an *Ekta-Samiti* (harmony group), comprising of all religious leaders, to promote inter-religious fellowship and co-operation, to organize the common celebration of feasts and festivals, to solve common problems like water, illiteracy, and malnutrition, and to bring about reconciliation when conflicts arise in the name of religion. This can be an agenda of the state governments to be implemented in each district under the leadership of the collector.
- f. The formation of Basic Human Communities in the villages irrespective of Caste and religion could also be an effective antitoxin to the menace of disruptive and destructive fundamentalist forces.
- g. A greater sensitivity towards the sentiments of the people of other faiths is required specially in organizing large-scale conventions, and *rath-yatras*, which can intimidate other communities.
- h. Family is the basic society. Followers of various religions, therefore, need to work together for the welfare of families and the youth.
- i. Since the media plays a vital role in shaping our culture, the great values of all religions could be brought out effectively through both print and electronic media. A separate web site could even be designed to promote the noble values.
- j. Article 25th of the Constitution says that every Indian has a right to religious freedom. This does not mean that the poor and the illiterate can

be “converted” or “re-converted” through allurements and false propaganda. Religious communities, therefore, have to work towards authenticity of life.

Finally, National Integration will be possible only through inter-religious dialogue and joint action because religion plays an important role in India's national life. This inter-religious body needs integral spirituality and action programs. To create and provide to the nation such an inter-religious body is the most challenging task before religious leaders in India today.⁸⁸

9.6. Politics and Culture (Secularism⁸⁹ and Festivals)

The biggest challenge before the national body will be to evolve a people-oriented polity and a culture of secularism and unity. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* defines “secular” in terms of that which is non-spiritual or that which is not concerned with religious matters. This is not the meaning that the founding fathers had in mind when they declared India a Secular State. Their vision was not to found a state of irreligion or anti-religion. They were fully aware that the Motherland was soaked with blood before and during the partition of Pakistan. Keeping in mind the recurrent religious wars, they evolved a political system, called secular democracy, in which all the religions have basic freedom for their faith-expression and development. “The model that influenced them (the founding fathers of the nation) was the Gandhi Ashrams where people from many religions lived, ate and prayed together while at the same time mobilizing for the common good, astute and powerful political movements like the Dandi March”.⁹⁰

Gandhiji called this political system as “*sarva-dharma-sambhav*” which was translated into English as “secularism” for want of a better English word. *Sarva-dharma-sambhav* does not mean that all religions are equal. It rather means that all should try to understand and appreciate the religions of others by placing them against their respective backgrounds and points of view.⁹¹

⁸⁸See SDS 1998, 101.

⁸⁹Secularism in India does not mean ‘nihilism’ or anti-religion. It rather means *sarva-dharma-samabhav*- equal respect for and a positive attitude towards all religions. See Ishanand, Krisna and Christ, 454-455. See also SDS 1998, 88.

⁹⁰Vempeny Ishanand, Krisna and Christ, 455.

⁹¹Ibid.,

Religious festivals express the culture and the religiosity of the people. In India, practically all the religious festivals, cutting across the barriers of caste, creed, language and race, express a sense of belonging as to we all are Indians. If Mother India is poor economically, she is rich religiously and festivals like *Diwali*, *Dasera*, *Devi-puja*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Onam*, *Janmashtami*, *Rakshbandhan*, *Moharum*, *Pongal*, *Holi* and *Uttarayan* express her very existence in terms of "unity in diversity".

The festivals lead people to **spontaneous interactions and relationships**. They exchange sweets and take part in religious and cultural activities of other faiths. Though they differ from one another in their approach to God and belief systems, they mutually accept and respect one another as persons. This type of inter-community contacts and interactions are not merely on the levels of ideas and concepts but of the heart with great emotional implications leading to the unprejudiced understanding of other communities and to co-operative ventures for common national causes. Such interactions are of greater value than seminars and symposia on National Integration.

9.6. Religious Dialogue

"Inter-religious dialogue helps believers to say "no" to fundamentalism, fanaticism, extremism, and say "yes" to the liberative values of each faith, to the basic values of the human person and community, and to their protection and promotion".⁹² The main process of interaction within a national body can only be inter-religious dialogue. Religions do not encounter each other in the abstract. Only believers encounter and meet each other. When can one believer challenge the other and be open to be challenged by others? It is only when:

i. Every religion, that is a community of believers, is able to make space for other believers, that is other religions, not merely in the sense of their being tolerated as second class citizens, but accepted as full and equal participants;

ii. Every religion is able to distinguish between its faith convictions and their moral consequences; a certain consensus regarding moral

⁹² Arokiasamy S., FABC Papers. *Sixth Plenary Assembly: Position Paper, Asia: The Struggle for Life in the Midst of Death and Destruction*, no. 70, 44.

imperatives for personal and social behaviour can be arrived at by people who believe differently.⁹³

Every religion must teach nationalism and patriotism even to the extent that one cannot be a good religious man/woman without being nationalistic. This will affirm that **one is first an Indian and then he/she is a Hindu or Muslim or Christian or Buddhist**, one belonging to a particular region. A strong feeling of nationalism is the only answer to communalism and regionalism.

Dialogue must promote "human dignity" and "human rights" so that one does not oppress or dominate or exploit other believers with self-interests in the name of religion. This inter-religious encounter is not only to provide spiritual enrichment, but also to build up a community of fellowship, justice, and peace. Here the role of dialogue has to be prophetic, contributing a common human, moral, and spiritual foundation to public life. In doing so, religions are not playing politics but doing precisely what they should do as religions in human society. "Inter-religious Dialogue is never structured to demean other religious or cultural traditions nor to raise one's own".⁹⁴

Dialogue, hence, implies openness, self-criticism and the desire to learn. There is always a gap between the experience and the articulation. So the dialogue partners must go beyond the words as articulated by M.A.C. Warren. "Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's (human's) dream. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival".⁹⁵

Religious Dialogue is an attitude of life and love. It is a relationship, not a concept. It is a way of sharing our vision and mission for India. It would remind us that we are all co-travelers towards a common goal, which is understood in different ways by different religions as *Moksha*, *Mukti*, *Nirvana*, Liberation or Heaven. "It (Religious Dialogue) is a pilgrimage

⁹³Amaladoss M., *Making All Things New*, 137.

⁹⁴Cf. Pandith Medagama Vajiranana, "Buddhist Perspectives Working Together", *World Religions in Dialogue*, 87.

⁹⁵M.A.C. Warren, from the General Introduction to the Christian Presence (London: Series SCM Press, 1959), quoted in Alan Race, *Christian and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 3.

towards the fullness of life and truth, through mutual communication, which demands a deep commitment to one's own faith and genuine openness to that of the other."⁹⁶

The religionists should come together and offer their teachings in their pristine condition, with rich personal convictions, but without competitions. This will enable them to join hands for a common cause, respecting the views of each other, without feeling the views as equal.

Let me conclude it with a prayer that is originally taken from an old Anglican book.

Gather us in; Thou Love that fillest all;
Gather our rival faiths within Thy fold.
Rend each man's (human's) temple veil and bid it fall,
That we may know what Thou hast been of old;
Gather us in.⁹⁷

⁹⁶FABC Theological Advisory Commission (1987) *Theses on Inter-religious Dialogue VI*, April 12.

⁹⁷As quoted by Vempeny, *Conversion: National Debate or Dialogue?*, 93.