



RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY:

THE FORMULA FOR LASTING WORLD PEACE?

“In view of the definition of creativity, Ramakrishna, indeed, demonstrated creative genius in bridging all religions by practicing each of them. He may very well be the first, if not the only person to practice the major religions of the world to come to the conclusion that that they lead to the same God. His contribution to humanity is particularly significant for the world after the bombing of the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Clearly, Islam is not to be blamed for the incident of September 11, and no religion should be blamed for any act of terrorism, because we know from the life of Ramakrishna that all religions lead to the same God”.

Dharm P.S.Bhawuk's Culture's Influence on Creativity: The case of Indian Spirituality.

1) INTRODUCTION

Diplomacy is the art of establishing substantive relations between nations through mediation, negotiation, or arbitration. The extent to which nations are able to co-exist culturally, economically and politically is a testament to the usefulness of bilateral and multilateral negotiations. Diplomacy through interfaith relations is a unique attempt to

create harmony amid potentially tempestuous environments. Ironically, religion, which was created as a means of acknowledging and paying obeisance to a superior power, is arguably responsible for the most memorable conflicts over the last century. However, the importance of religion to man's psychic composition cannot be trivialized. Journalist Moiz Amjad states:

The whole corpus of religion is, in fact based on the realization, recognition, and acceptance of our part of the relationship between us and our unseen Creator and Provider. Man is not merely a physical being. On the contrary, man has a strong moral aspect to his existence. This moral and socio-moral aspect of man's existence is the foundation on which the legal and social structures that we see in all the societies have evolved overtime. It is in fact the acceptance, appreciation and realization of mutual rights and responsibilities which has resulted in the strong bonds of family, friendship, tribe and society.¹

Clearly, throughout the annals of history, religion has proven to be a constructive diplomatic tool, but unfortunately has also disrupted the means to socio-political fluidity. That religion has become such a divisive force can only be attributed to factors such as competition for resources, and doctrines that promote ethnic and religious superiority. Attempts to promote interfaith harmony may be publicized today more than any other time in history. Such efforts are unrestricted by geography, ethnicity, and class. Hence, a subject of this nature must be explored through the examination of the many salient efforts at interfaith communion. The thrust of the paper is two fold: Diplomatic

¹ www.understanding-islam.com

techniques and instruments applied to inter-religious dialogue and (2) How religion influences inter-state diplomatic relations, as in the case of Iran and Israel today.

With this in mind, the following treatise will review historic Cordoba as the exemplar of inter-faith tolerance. In fact, many a peace initiative in today's society has used the term 'Cordoba' to signify its putative objective.

Beyond a review of the principles which defined Cordoba, this paper will review the works of the following - Sri Aurobindo, Ramakrishnap Paramahamsa, Jeddu Krishnamurti, and the most recent overtures by the Papacy to promote dialogue. Notwithstanding the work of the latter, the paper will also cite the recent controversy that swirled around the remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI in September 2006 at Regensburg University in Bavaria, where he cited the words of a Byzantine emperor; the very emperor who criticized Prophet Muhammed for advocating proselytizing by the sword.

Here, one may be moved to ask - Why have the likes of Sri Aurobindo and Ramakrishna assume such relevance? This can only be explained by the unique plurality of the Indian society which automatically makes it receptive to all religions. According to Dr. Shantilal Somaiya, "Indians are not only religious by nature but they also freely partake of the practices of all religions and thus manifest in their daily lives, unity in diversity."² Of course the validity of such an assertion will be challenged in some quarters

The importance of interfaith dialogue cannot be overemphasized. In his seminal work, *"Modern Diplomacy,"* R.P. Barston chronicles the international violence that has

² URL: [http://www.somaiya.edu/third\(Interfaith\).htm](http://www.somaiya.edu/third(Interfaith).htm) last access 09/2008

plagued the latter part of the 20th century, many having veritable religious overtones. He writes:

The events of 9/11 had a profound impact on both foreign policy and many aspects of diplomacy. International terrorism became part of globalization. Moreover, in terms of ideas, the Islamic-Western structural ideological conflict introduced at different periods sub-national, transnational and global tension.

On the issue of transitional diplomacy, (newly founded sovereign states establishing bilateral and multilateral relationships), Barston focuses on the fragmentation of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the spasm of ethnic violence that it wrought. Further, the two Chechen wars were poignantly marked by the determination of extremists to liberate the Muslim majority from the yoke of Slavic imperialism. The Bosnian and Kosovo crises were also characterized by sharp religious and cultural differences. The Kashmir confrontation between Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India has also highlighted the indispensability of interfaith dialogue and tolerance. Today, interfaith organizations are to be found in every country and region where there is diversity of religious beliefs. From the Buxton Initiative and the Cordoba Initiative to the recently established International Institute for Inter-Religious Diplomacy, a global landscape bereft with violence has made such groups integral to every aspect of diplomacy.

2) THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN POLITICS AND NATIONALISM [YES]

Religion has, and continues to shape the politics of contemporary society. One stark example etched in the minds of every student of history and international politics, is that

of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict. Interestingly, both sides have claimed that the swath of land once known as Palestine was bequeathed to them by, what some consider an anthropomorphic God. Ironically, both claim Abraham as their patriarch. Both claim the land upon which Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock were constructed is equally sacred to them. Both claim exclusivity to Rachael's Tomb. And in a classic example of how religious fervor can engender deadly nationalism, a visit to Temple Mount by Ariel Sharon sparked an *intifada* (Palestinian uprising) that effaced religious reason and filled the streets with terror. Conversely, Israel's response was deliberate and punitive.

Of this conflict, Syrian columnist Khayri Hama was quoted as saying:

The conflict with the Zionist enemy (meaning Israel) has never been a border issue, nor an interstate conflict but rather a total confrontation concerning the survival of our Arab nationalism against the threat posed by the Israeli entity. (The Al-Ba'th daily, July 26, 1994)

The Israeli-Arab conflict exemplifies the role of religion in forging nationalistic identities. Linked with Judaism is Zionism, a political movement that advances the right of the Jewish people to claim Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel) as their inalienable right. In the case of the Arabs, many have voiced support for the return of the caliphate, the term used for the political entity that once had governance over Muslim controlled lands). In an article that appeared in *'World News Forum' Aug-Sep 2002*, I wrote:

"The history of the Jewish State predates the United Nations' creation of the State of Israel in 1948. That Jews lived and flourished for millennia in what is today called Israel is hardly debatable. Some 3000 years ago, Jerusalem itself had already served as the capital of the State for many periods during its tumultuous history having to surrender its Jewish

identity as many an invader, including Persians, Babylonians and later, Muslims controlled its gate .With the construction of the Al Aqsa mosque in 638 Jerusalem became a holy site only after Mecca and Medina in importance.”

The above reflects the seemingly unbridgeable gap that exists in that region, where the degree of peace and co-existence is only determinable by the extent to which both parties are willing to compromise.

3) THE CREATION OF THE JEWISH STATE

From 1920 to 1940, tensions rose between Arabs and Jews, the result of the Balfour Declaration which earmarked Palestine for the European Jewry, as their existence was being threatened by the Nazi’s Final Solution. An attempt by the UN to partition the land and create two states was resisted by Arab governments. On the eve of the 1948 war, it was Ben Gurion who stated: "During the assault we must respond with a decisive blow, the destruction of the Arab place and the expulsion of its residents.” A decade earlier, Golda Meir eerily remarked: “I too want the Arabs out of the country and my conscience will be absolutely clear.”

The forcible expulsion of the Arabs is known as *Al Nakba* or the Disaster. Today, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an extension of a long history of distrust, bloodshed, and possible obfuscation of injustice. However, it is worth mentioning that although Israel has been treated as a pariah throughout the Middle East, some Arabs have expressed support for the Jewish state.

In 2004, the website, ‘*ArabsforIsrael.com*’ was launched. According to its Middle Eastern founder Nonie Darwish:

Israel has few friends at this point in history and I wish to convey to every Israeli and Jew around the world that there are Arabs and Muslims, like us who support them and wish for their well being.

Such remarks, arguably in the minority, must be contrasted with the following:

They (The Israeli people) are partners to occupying the land and possessions of Palestinian people and are the instruments of the Zionist authorities. They are the occupiers of Israel and this is the Islamic republic's firm and official position." (Ayatollah Khamenei remarks on the people of Israeli. (*New York Times, September 20, 2008*).

Iran, now notorious for its anti-Israeli diatribes seems bent on a collision course with the Jewish state. A preemptive strike by either nation will no doubt have a devastating economic impact regionally and globally. It will also sabotage any attempt at future Jewish-Islamic dialogue.

4) POLITICS AND THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

While organized religion has undoubtedly affected diplomacy and global politics, one cannot negate the impact of, what this writer refers to as religious '*One - Manism*'. Throughout history, the cult of personality has usurped traditional religion with the political and cultural deification of political leaders. And there have been many. In the *September 20, 2008* edition of the New York Times, the atmosphere surrounding the demise of North Korea's founder and president, Kim Il -Sung was vividly described:

"The demilitarized zone between the Koreas became what soldiers and civilian residents in the frontier town remember as "an opera house of funeral songs." For 10 days, the North Korean propaganda loudspeakers filled the air with dirges and Soviet style funeral marches, so heavy in mood that one resident said, "It felt like a dark cloud."

China's Mao Zedong, notorious for his pejoration of religion, was himself exalted in a manner reminiscent of the most venerated religious personages. Chairman Mao, as he was known, virulently rejected all forms of religion and deemed it a poisonous opiate and a hindrance to the fruition of communism. Today, many have argued that China's suppression of religious expression is one legacy of Mao Zedong. [The persecution of Falun Gong practitioners is well documented.

“In the last 20 months, 170 Falun Gong practitioners have been tortured to death. Several hundred have been sentenced to long prison terms, and over 50,000 sent to detention centers or mental hospitals according to one Falun Gong website. In November 2002, the Chicago City Council issued a resolution in support of Falun Gong. The resolution stated that the US government should use every appropriate forum to urge the government of the Peoples Republic of China to release Falun Gong practitioners from detention and put an end to the practice of torture and other cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment against them.” (<http://www.fofq.org/persecution>).

Today, the voices of Chinese dissidents, including those of Falun Gong continue to capture the attention of westerners. The recently concluded Olympics in China, steeped in pageantry and ebullience, belied the vestiges of draconian rule that still dictates the extent of religious freedom permissible in its society.

5) THE LEGACY OF CORDOBA

The invasion, occupation and colonization of Iberia by Muslims in the 8th century until their expulsion in 1492 by the Spanish Crown, has always been hailed as model of inter-religious tolerance. Writer Charlie Leocha, in the article "*Islam in Spain*" states:

“Al-Andalus, the Moorish name for their Spanish caliphate, experienced a golden age of civilization from the 800s into the early 1000s that set the stage for the European Renaissance that followed. Muslims, Christians and Jews interacted together in an Islamic-ruled region with tolerance and cooperation unparalleled in its time. Influences from Arab Spain spread over the Pyrenees to France and throughout Europe, and naturally to the Americas.” (<http://www.tripso.com/traveler/islam-in-spain/>).

Strongly influenced by the historic achievements of Muslim ruled Iberia, and eager to stymie the vitriol against Islam after the 2001 terror attacks on US soil, the Cordoba Initiative was formed in New York City. Among its aims are the following: Increase intercultural understanding, tolerance and respect, both in Muslim societies and the West; improve the nature of the discourse about Islam in America, and stimulate fresh thinking about peace in the Middle East. (<http://www.cordobainitiative.org/index.html>)

6) INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND THE ROMAN SEE

After his verbal faux pas at Regensburg University, Pope Benedict XVI has attempted reconciliation not only with Muslim leaders, but those of the Jewish faith. In a historic visit to New York City in April, 2008, the Pope visited the Park East Synagogue. There he stated: "I find it moving to recall that Jesus as a young boy heard the words of Scripture and prayed in a place such as this." Rabbi Arthur Schneier reciprocated:

In our lifetime we have experienced the ravages of war, the Holocaust, man's inhumanity to man and tasted the joy of freedom. This momentous occasion takes place on American soil where men and women escaping the clutches of oppression and religious persecution have built a nation of democracy and freedom. This is a nation which has allowed all religious communities to flourish.

As early as 1965, the Second Vatican Council exonerated Jewish culpability in the crucifixion of the Christian messiah – a gesture that tempered centuries of animosity between the two groups.

7) ISLAM RESPONDS

The Regensburg incident offended many in the Muslim community. In a move aimed at healing the wounds of an offended Muslim community, the Vatican appointed Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran as head of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, the department that centers on Islamic affairs.

The Islamic response to such overtures has been discouraging and does not augur well for diplomatic relations between two of the world's great .Only days after the Pope's controversial remarks, Iraq's Mujahidin Council issued the following statement:

“After the stupid and obeyed bearer of the cross flag, Bush, declared a few years back the start of the new crusade on Islam and its people, and launched his crusade with the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the servant of the cross, the Vatican Pope appears before us, orbiting around Bush, to continue in Bush's footsteps in the flagrant assault on Islam and its prophet Muhammed, may God's peace and blessing be upon him, especially with his remarks on the 'duty of jihad in the name of God' a duty that flowed through the body of the nation and terrified the crusaders the world over."

A more measured response has emerged with the founding of the Organization of Islamic Conference which recently participated in the Third Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace. It is there that its General Secretary

Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu reiterated the importance of achieving lasting peace between Christian and Muslim communities.

8) ECUMENISM AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Beyond the effort at promoting a healthy dialogue amongst Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, the Vatican must also confront fissure within the very body of Christendom. Historic grievances and theological disagreements have failed to create the Pan-Christian movement which would better serve interfaith interests. Of this divide, John Paul II wrote:

“The courageous witness of so many martyrs of our century including members of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church gives new vigor to the Council's call and reminds us of our duty to listen and to put into practice its exhortation. These brothers and sisters of ours, united in the selfless offering of their lives for the kingdom of God are the most powerful proof that every factor of division can be transcended and overcome in the total gift of self for the sake of the gospel.”³

Clearly, theological polarization within the Christian movement cannot be overlooked. Calumnious attacks against the Roman Church by evangelical and other charismatic Christian movements, coupled with concentrated efforts at proselytizing throughout the Catholic stronghold of Latin America, has torpedoed Christian homogeneity.

³ *Ut Unum Sint - On Commitment to Ecumenism*. May 25 1995

9) **POLITICS AND RELIGION**

Again, religious diplomacy cannot be viewed through parochial lens. The contextualization of religious diplomacy within a geo-political framework must be employed. Only then can one fully understand its complexities. For many, the US occupation of Iraq should be condemned ipso facto. The impact of the US invasion of Iraq on Christian - Muslim relations has provided an insight into the nature of cultural perceptions. In "*The Iraq Invasion, the War on Islam, Consequences and the Way Forward*", one reads:

"The media and policy discourse on the Iraq war over the last 5 years has focused on and evolved around issues such as civil war, the Sunni-Shia divide, the involvement of external actors such as Iran and Syria. However, an important issue which needs to be emphasized is how the Iraq war and the subsequent occupation are linked to the Western objective of weakening and containing the growth of Islamic revivalism in the Muslim world. However the US and the West have also had an eye on the Muslim population in the West, in particular due to the failure to secularize them and giving them a national identity, which replaces their Islamic transnational identity as one Ummah.

"As a result, the West has fashioned and crafted policies to create secular identities among Muslims. There has been an increased emphasis on patriotism in the US with flags outside people's homes a common seen and people being seen as been unpatriotic and to an extent committing treason. If a flag is not apparent forcing Muslims into developing a secular national identity, loyal to the US and her troops in Iraq."

Seven years after the terror attacks on US soil, the sense of anti-Muslim sentiment is no longer palatable. The fortune of the Iraq war now seems to favor the US, and the greatest threat to world security, for now, appears to be a global economic meltdown. The

Muslim is arguably, no longer unduly burdened by the fears and ignorance of the wider society.

10) THE FUTURE OF ORGANIZED RELIGION AND INTERFAITH ORGANIZATIONS

Many have contended that organized religion is responsible for most of the world's ills, including wars and bigotry. The visceral attack on the Roman Catholic Church from the likes of renowned musician Elton John should be noted. John recently stated that organized religion should be banned because of its promotion of poisonous anti-gay atmosphere. In 2000, he again criticized the Roman Catholic Church for what he called, "its anti-gay dogma". In the recent interview granted to the Sunday Observer newspaper, he impugned against organized religion as a particular cause for concern "as it turns some people into hateful lemmings". (*November 12, 2006*)

The ravages of war in the name of religion have also repulsed many according to the article, "*In Defense of Organized Religion*". Herein, the destructive side of religion is discussed. It states: "There is no denying that organized religion has played and still plays in some wars and persecutions." But more importantly, it raises the issue of the inter-play between political manipulation and religion, a factor that will be later addressed. The article then incisively expounds "that many religious wars are actually deeply rooted in politics", and continues, "for instance the roots of the perennial unrest in Northern Ireland - always presented in the press as "Catholic-vs-Protestant"- actually go back 800 years, long before the Reformation. Political strife between Britain and Ireland

existed when both were Catholic; only after Britain became Protestant did the dispute take on a religious aspect". (<http://home.earthlink.net/~mysticalrose/religion>).

The same can be said for modern conflicts, including the US occupation of Iraq.

11) THE VIABILITY OF RELIGIOUS ESOTERICISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

Although analytically accurate, the political element of such religious confrontation is seldom highlighted and one is left with exoteric displays of religious mayhem. Beyond the divisive nature of religious dogma, organized religion continues to lose its grip on the populace because of immoral acts within the sacerdotal class, as in the case of the Roman Catholic Church. The show of excessive opulence by religious leaders within the evangelical movement has also drawn the ire of many.

In 2003, journalist Jerry Van Martar reported that the Presbyterian Church lost 46,658 members, (Source: *Presbyterian News Service, June 8, 2004*). The Salt Lake Tribune refuted claims that Mormonism is one of the fastest growing religions. It stated: "The annual number of LDS (Latter Day Saints) converts declined from a high of 321,385 in 1996 to 241,239 in 2004." (*Article last updated; 06/22/2006*).

Also, the president of the Seven Day Adventist, Pastor Jan Paulsen alluded to the ineffectiveness of ministering, as one reason for a dwindling membership. (<http://news.adventist.org/data/2005>).

Interestingly, in a 2006 feature on Al Jazeera, it was reported that the number of African Muslims had declined markedly with some 6 million being converted annually

by Christian evangelists. That missionary work is inclusive of poverty alleviation, as well as access to health and education, raises the question of the degree to which converts are committed to the religion itself.

The apparent decline in membership and ubiquitous displays of religiosity does not denote a total absence of God consciousness in society. What it may suggest is that spirituality, or individual religious expression, may have assumed a more prominent role. The negation of religious dogma and the rediscovery of ineffable and cross-cultural spiritual values may be at the fore of social consciousness. The popularity of yoga, Qi Gong, Tai Chi and other forms of eastern esoteric practices is telling. The importance of such must be explored, for it will portend the efficacy of interfaith organizations and dialogue. Is the message and intent of these organizations reaching their members, nominal or otherwise?

Of yoga, Sande Waybill writes:

“In the sixties, yoga became popular due to TV series introducing it into every lounge room. It is currently starting a new wave of popularity as more people are searching to not only improve their physical condition, but escape from the pressures and stress of modern life, and discover more about their spiritual well being than purely seeking a well toned body”. (<http://www.helium.com/items>).

The key word here is ‘spiritual,’ which may denote the assumption of responsibility for one’s own enlightenment. This differs from the concept of religion where one is shepherd by those in authority, be they rabbis, priests, monks, or imams.

12) ORGANIZED RELIGION AND HUMAN SUFFERING

Yogic practices, like other forms of eastern meditative expression, are derived from Hinduism and Buddhism. Both these organized religions have also been accused of fomenting intolerance and ethnic strife. The Buddhist Sinhalese in Sri Lanka are at war with the Hindu Tamil; and Hinduism and Islam continue to confront each other for religious pre-eminence in the disputed Kashmir region or in India proper. In 1992 a 16th century mosque in Ayodhya was destroyed by Hindu nationalists with sledgehammers. The Prime Minister addressed the nation, stating that he did so "under the grave threat that has been posed to the institutions, principles and ideals on which the constitution structure of our republic has been built." *The New York Times* article by Edward Gargan reported that the incident was guaranteed to inflame passions of hatred which in the last four decades had claimed thousands of lives. (*December 7, 1992*).

Within Hinduism itself, many a questionable tradition persists. In "*A Final Thought From The Editor*", I wrote:

"The displacement and historical genocide of the Sudroid people popularly referred to as the 'untouchables' or 'varna' is well documented. From the marauding Aryan invaders of Southern India over 3,000 years ago to the tales of gruesome killings of untouchables in contemporary Indian society, one is transfixed at the horror that is nullified by the 'holy scripture'... The Ambedhar Center for Justice and Peace recently corroborated the existence of an apartheid-like system in India. This was done through the presentation of case studies to the UN Committee on Human Rights." (*World News Forum, Oct/Nov 2002*).

This is testament to the inherent problems in organized religion, whether western, or eastern. Hence, genuine interfaith dialogue may be rightly viewed as a leap of faith, difficult to conceptualize. Yet, the western mind continues to romanticize on the esoteric practices of eastern religions. The western religious systems it seems, have failed to offer like alternatives. This explains the perennial theme of Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and Krishnamurti, all raised Hindus but all of whom promoted a form of religious universalism that continues to grip the psyche of the masses. Indeed, it has promoted religious diplomacy of the individual, and not that of an organization. In this form of religious expression, the emphasis is not on understanding or tolerating the faith of another, but actually embracing the commonalities that exist. Tradition and customs are abrogated at the door of universal principles. It is this quintessentially existential experience that encapsulates the foundation of the spiritual experience.

13) THE TEACHINGS OF HINDU MYSTICS

This is exemplified in the words of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), which reverberate with this spirituality:

“I have practiced all religions - Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found out that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. You must try all beliefs and traverse all the different ways once. Wherever I look, I see men quarrelling in the name of religion. A lake has several ghats. The substance is one under different names, and every one is seeking the same substance; only climate, temperament, and name create differences.”

In fact, Ramakrishna exhibited the rare ability to engage himself in several faiths. And this is very relevant to the question of religion being used as a diplomatic tool to heighten man's sense of justice and equality. Further, he confronted the poisonous ramifications of the caste system by seeking fellowship with the 'pariahs', an act that Brahmins or those of the higher castes were taught to stridently resist. He once wrote:

"Sometimes I used to go to the closet of the servants and sweepers and clean it with my own hands, and prayed, "Mother! Destroy in me all idea that I am great, and that I am a Brahmin, and that they are low and pariah, for who are they but Thou in so many forms?"

Interfaith dialogue only becomes significant when the followers of faiths can spiritualize their being and view all humanity as one. This will be elaborated at the conclusion of this paper.

The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, as expected, is rooted in the teachings of this revered *Sadhu*. Located in West Bengal, India, it stresses the validity of all religions, the potential divinity of man, and service to man as a way of worshipping God. And "while culture is the Institute's specific field of study, it is not national culture alone that it studies, but that culture which is the common heritage of all mankind and to which every race and religion has made its own contributions."⁴

Another spiritual stalwart, Sir Aurobindo (1872-1950) also advocated the inner transformation of the individual as a means of effecting universal peace. The Sri Aurobindo Society succinctly states in its website that its aim "is to work towards

⁴ URL: (<http://www.sriramafrihna.org/insti.htm>)

individual perfection, social transformation and human unity based on a spiritual foundation."

Here, the philosophical and metaphysical axioms of JEDDU KRISHNAMURTI (1895-1986) cannot be omitted. As if directly addressing the conflicts that seem endemic in organized religion, the Nobel peace prize recipient stated in February 21, 1962: "Conflict must end. It is only when the mind is completely quiet, and not in a state of conflict - it is only then that the mind can go very far into the realms that are beyond time, beyond thought, beyond feeling."

On the July 30, 1967 he reiterated his teachings on the emotive content of the mind, the very element that fuels religious hatred and conflict:

"Whatever thought does it breeds misery, sorrow, conflict and when thought realizes that, it will come to an end by itself, the vicious circle is broken, thought, meaning time comes to an end."

14) CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF INTERFAITH

DIALOGUE

From the great schism of 1054 to the fragmentation that threatens contemporary Anglicanism, it is evident that religious diplomacy is intrinsic to global peace and security. Yet, religious dialogue fails to bridge the gap between the faiths and usher in an era of enlightenment and unity. Interfaith organizations continue to be the creation of genuine and sincere individuals, who unfortunately are sometimes disconnected from the *pulse on the street* and the very ethos of their members. Further, one must ask if organizational leaders have the means to comprehensively educate their members of the tenets of other faiths. The more pertinent issue is whether people are interested in

learning, respecting, and even indulging in the religious practices of others. For example the General Secretary of the European Council for Religious Leaders, Reverend Vebjorn Horsfjord, speaking on the conflict in Sri Lanka recently stated:

"When formal peace talks are non-existent, it is important that various parts of civil society, including religious leaders continue to build trust. Any future peace settlement will require popular support which must be based on the minimum level of mutual trust." (*The European Inter-Religious Encounter 2008*).

Not unexpectedly, the civil war in Sri Lanka rages on. A New York Times article recently concluded that the war between the Tamil fighters and the Sinhalese majority has escalated. (Article: *War Worsens as Sri Lanka Puts Pressure on Rebels*. September 28, 2008, p.17).

Indeed, this is a classical example of how the good counsel of religious leaders has been ignored by their people.

A) THE NEED FOR A SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION

As in the past, religious depictions and figurines bear the phenotypical characteristics of the devotee. This only strengthens the concept of ethno-religious identity, and creates a chasm among peoples. The roots of historical stereotypes are found therein.

The fragility of interfaith dialogue persists for another more conspicuous reason - that being the politicization of religious differences. As aforementioned, the US occupation of Iraq is such an example. I once wrote:

"The initial success of any occupation relies on the marginalization of one group while those who facilitate the occupation are duly rewarded." In the same article the views of AP journalist Sean O'Driscoll were highlighted. On the historic divide between Catholic and Protestant in Ireland, he stated, "The British occupation created a situation where brothers were fighting each other. There were those who benefitted from the occupation. Those who stood to lose like the farmers resisted." (*Serf City, Vol.3 Issue 3*).

The violence in Iraq must be viewed as a political struggle between competing interests for vital resources. Imam Faisal Rauf of the Cordoba Initiative refrained from calling the Iraqi sectarian strife, a religious conflict. "It is purely political, and it is caused by the occupation. Sunnis and Shiites have always managed to live together and intermarry despite fundamental differences," he is noted as saying.

Surely, the politicization of religious differences has created the need for both interfaith and interfaith dialogue. But success has been tenuous at best. Religious and ethnic manipulation is used by political leaders to advance their own agenda whether that is material or personal. History has shown that the capitulation of personal power is indeed rare. So too is equanimity in the distribution of resources. This brings to the fore the question of man's nature, a subject that is ontological in content and scope, and does transcend the parameters of this discourse.

Again, this paper is inclined to comment on the teachings on Ramakrishna which stresses transformation of the individual as the primary step toward true integration. The Hindu sage "emphasized that God-realization is the supreme goal of all living beings. His mystical experiences through different religions led him to teach that various religions are different means to reach absolute knowledge and bliss - and that the

different religions cannot express the totality of absolute truth, but can express aspects of it." (See *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*).

Interfaith dialogue must go beyond tolerance and respect for another's faith. Individuals must learn to share each others experiences; they must learn to indulge freely in the practices of another faith. The Hindu should be embraced in the Masjid, and the Christian in the Mandir, without reservations and qualms. The idea that one's religion is the lone path to realization must be discouraged. The Koran (Sura 2:112), comments on such everyday theological quibbles: "The Jews say that the Christians are misguided, and the Christians say it is the Jews who are misguided, yet they both read the scriptures."

Theories that profess religious superiority cannot be vouchsafed, and so too is any modicum of iconoclastic thought. Substantive peace demands a new educational thrust that must debunk historical fallacies, address legitimate historical grievances, and redress wrongs perpetrated by one group on another. Tuebingen professor, Karl-Josef Kuschel, commenting on the conflict in former Yugoslavia stated:

"And there is no doubt that the religions that are so involved here neglected in the period of more than forty years since the second World War to engage in mourning, honestly confess to crimes which had been committed on both sides in the course of centuries."

Leaders must discern the commonalty in every religion; that thread of similarity which centers on the inner teachings of organized religion. The mystic is found in Islam, where he is called a Sufi. In Hinduism he is referred to as a *Rishi* or *Sadhu*. Christian history too is laden with her share of emulous mystics. It is the mystic that sheds the trappings of customs, rites and rituals so integral to organized religion, and concentrates

on the esoteric element. Throughout history, it is the exoteric aspect of religion that has promoted misperceptions, bigotry and perfidy. Religion and ethnocentrism, have, and continue to be enjoined by historicists, past and present. That the growth of interfaith organizations is a reflection of the need for greater understanding and peace is self evident.

Interfaith dialogue has initiated the first step toward this end, albeit a more revolutionary approach is required to attain the apogee of psych-spiritual accomplishments.

Ending wars and strife has always been the objective of the multitude. "Pure idealism!" many have said. But to others, the advent of Sat Yuga (Age of Enlightenment), as richly inscribed in the Vedas, is already nigh at hand.

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