

How Can Christians And Muslims Work For Peace in India?



Fr. Victor Edwin during a visit to a Shii Madrasa.

Introduction

The pulsating life of the Indian Union is preserved by sustenance drawn from the diverse religious, cultural and linguistic roots of the diverse peoples of India. This *togetherness-of-diversity* was sanctified when we, the people of this nation, resolved to adopt and enact the Constitution of India (adopted on 29 November 1946 and enacted on 26 January 1950) that framed India as a Sovereign Social Secular Democratic Republic with a parliamentary system of governance.

The idea of India is underpinned by the idea of 'one and the many'. A metaphor may serve us well to visualize the idea of India: India is like a *mosaic*, or like a *plate with several dishes*. Many colours and patterns in a harmonious blend make a mosaic beautiful. Many dishes, different in taste, together make a wholesome and sumptuous meal. Similarly, India, with its enduring differences of creeds and cultures, costumes and customs, languages and ways of life, remains one nation, celebrating diversity without losing the togetherness as one nation. India will flourish if remains faithful to its secular-democratic roots.

This idea of India is expressed in the form of equality of all citizens. All Indians are equal citizens: equal before the law. No one can be discriminated against on the basis of religion, culture or language. In the words of Shashi Tharoor: "India's democracy imposes no narrow conformities on its citizens. The whole point of Indian pluralism is you can be many things and one thing: you can be a good Muslim, a good Keralite and a good Indian all at once." In the same vein, we could say that one can be a good Christian and a good Indian at the same time. Likewise, one can be a good Muslim as well as a good Indian.

This idea of India enshrined in our Constitution is today threatened and breached by right-wing elements that hold the leavers of power now. They are fired by their imagination of a 'Hindu India' underlined by the Hindutva doctrine. Hindutva as a doctrine runs against the very design of the vision of India as a sovereign socialist secular democratic Republic. This truncated vision spreads the poison of communalism and denies equality to millions of Dalits and religious minorities. The Hindutva vision destroys the foundations of Indian democracy. Tharoor affirms: "Hindutva movement rhetoric echoes the bigotry that India was constructed to reject".

Muslims and Christians: Targets of hatred

Religious freedom is under attack, globally. India is no exception, but rather, where these issues have taken vicious forms dangerous proportions often resulting in rioting, lynching and looting. One must pay attention to the assessment done by a professional body like 'The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom'. Commenting upon India, It says: "religious freedom conditions in India experienced a

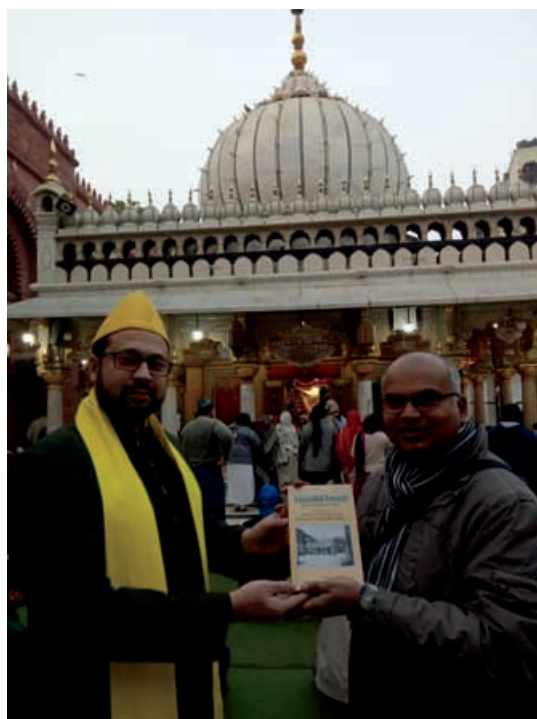
drastic turn downward; with religious minorities under increasing assault ... the national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims. The national government allowed violence against minorities and their houses of worship to continue with impunity, and also engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence”.

In a well-researched essay, Asghar Ali Engineer argued that police together with law enforcement machinery, such as the local administration and judiciary, play a crucial role in communal riots. He wrote that riot victims and survivors generally complained that: (1) Police did not come to their rescue; (2) the police forces were themselves instrumental in killing; (3) they led the mob in looting and burning; (4) arrested innocent persons and tortured them inside the lock-up and put false charges against the arrested persons, and (5) encouraged the culprits to do whatever they liked by preventing the members of one community to come out during the curfew and allowing members of another community to do so with impunity (See: Asghar Ali Engineer, “Communal Violence and Role of Police”, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 29, No. 15 (Apr. 9, 1994), pp. 835-840).

Crimes against Christians have been reported from at least 22 of the 28 Indian states. Besides rape and murder, they include social excommunication, threats, physical assault, setting houses and churches on fire and preventing Christians from using common water sources. “Essentially, to be Indian is to be Hindu. Those who are not Hindu are thus viewed as foreigners and with suspicion. The increase in violence can mostly be explained by the cycle of incitement and impunity often perpetrated by members of the BJP and other Hindu nationalist organizations operating in India,” explains William Stark, the Head of South

Asia at the International Christian Concern NGO.

It is in this context, we, Indian Christians and Indian Muslims need to ask ourselves, how can we work for peace in India? In the face of gradual erosion of democracy and several incidents of atrocities against minorities, especially Christians and Muslims, we must ask: What is the antidote to such corruption that poses a threat to the soul of India? For this, Muslims and Christians must work, drawing from their own resources, with all people trying to protect our secular space and defending the Constitution and our democratic institutions. The Indian Muslims (around 14%) and the Indian Christians (around 2%), two major minority communities, must wisely learn to recognise the need to work together for safeguarding our common future.



Fr. Edwin with Sufi brother Syed Muhammad Nizami

Antidote for Hatred: Commitment to Secular Space

The need of the hour is that both Christians and Muslims should work together with other secular individuals and civil society organizations to strengthen the secular-democratic roots of the country. In this enterprise, we should work with people of diverse faiths and also with people who have no faith affiliation. Our guiding star is the Constitution of India and the Constitutional values that are the connecting glue that binds diverse peoples in our shared respect for the dignity of all persons. There is a galaxy of men and women in the country who toil day and night for defending our Constitutional values. Establishing contacts and working with them is very necessary. The shrinking of the secular space must be stopped, and for that we must work with all who affirm their allegiance to the Constitution of India.

Commitment to Peace

On another level, both Christians and Muslims must recognise that we have another source to draw for this common shared responsibility. They can work together for inter-community peace by drawing from their religious faiths.

Pope Francis, in his recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (no. 81), teaches all people of goodwill that the dignity of a human person is preserved by *caring* for the vulnerable and by *overcoming* the many prejudices, personal interests, and historic and cultural barriers people may have for others. Thus, we need to build a society that includes, integrates and lifts up the fallen, marginalized and suffering peoples. In the same encyclical (no. 85), Pope Francis calls all Christians to recognise Christ in every excluded person. Further he calls them to leave the comfort zones and find one's fuller existence in the other (no. 88).

Pope Francis presents 'benevolence and solidarity' as tools to build up fraternal societies. Further, he points out the link between peace and forgiveness. Peace aims at forming a society founded on reconciliation (no.227 - 229). A society that

is founded on reconciliation is underpinned by love and forgiveness: love for all, loving even the oppressor (helping the oppressor to change and not allowing the oppressor to continue oppression); and forgiveness that renounces evil and revenge.

As-Salam ('The Source of Peace') is one of the ninety-nine Names of God in the Islamic tradition. Peace and justice are central to the message of Islam. Muslims understand that peace is not just the absence of war or conflict but a process in which human persons strive to establish a foundation for interacting with all in harmony and to institute just social, economic and political structures where they can fulfill their potential.

The Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims, recognizes diversity of religions as part of God's design for the world (Q 5:48 and 49: 13). Any discrimination among people on gender, ethnic, and religious grounds contributes to conflict. Recognition of pluralism (respect for different beliefs and identities) is essential for resolving conflicts and to establish peace. Muslims recognise that to exist in the world is to live in diversity. They explain that recognizing diversity in the light of the Oneness of God (the central affirmation of Islamic faith) is to live in an interconnected way with diverse peoples. Hence, Islam calls upon Muslims to collaborate with all people of goodwill and actively pursue unity and harmony. Further, Muslims point out that human beings are meant to God's representative on earth and that they are called to contribute work for harmony and to live in peace.

We recognise from this discussion that peace laced with justice is at the heart of both Christianity and Islam, even though both faiths present this aspect of religious conviction in different ways. The desire to contribute for peace in a secular arena is strengthened by inspiration from our sacred sources.

In the secular field, Muslims and Christians as Indian citizens, drawing from their spiritual sources, should engage with other citizens to protect the secular space in order

to ensure peace founded on justice. These two sets of believers must communicate with, and inspire, one another and remain open to inspiration from the other. Such open-ended communication would synergize both of them for commitment to build sustainable peace in India. In the following section I present briefly a model developed by some Jesuit pioneers in dialogue.



Fr. Edwin in the Iranian Cultural Center.

Christian-Muslim Dialogue in India

Before we present the model developed by some pioneering Jesuits, we must briefly state some difficulties that Christians and Muslims face in their interactions with one another. Many Indian Christians, especially after 9/11, look at Muslims indifferently. Some are ignorant of Muslims and Islam, and others often are belligerent in their attitudes towards Muslims. The source of their prejudice is often the media, and, sadly often, hearsay. Often, the present writer has wondered whether the Catholic Church adequately familiarized Catholics with the documents of Vatican II, especially those documents that explicitly talk about Christian-Muslim relations. Rarely one finds Christians who are aware of the Catholic Church's position on Muslims. One positive development must be noted here is that some Christian religious men and women personnel are exposed to Muslim-related issues during their formation years.

Muslim views on Christianity and Christians are restricted to the way in which the Holy Qur'an portrays Christians. In the Islamic

religious vision, Christians have failed to preserve the revelation given to Jesus. Consequently, Muslims believe that Christians have developed religious doctrines which are either irrational or incompatible with faith in the One God. Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus Christ, crucifixion and redemption are dismissed as corruption.

As a result of these and several other factors, religious conversation between Muslims and Christians was often marked polemical debates. It is in this context a new dawn appeared as the 20th century unfolded. **Victor Courtois** broke new grounds in Christian-Muslim relations. He insisted that the study of Islam should lead to greater love for, and better appreciation of, Muslims. He dedicated much of his life to promoting mutual understanding and brotherly love between Christians and Muslims. He published a journal, *Notes on Islam*, to foster better understanding between Christians and Muslims. Following Courtois, **Christian W. Troll** and **Paul Jackson** strengthened and deepened the *Courtois Model* in Christian-Muslim relations in India. They distanced themselves from polemics, began studying Islamic texts with respect and reached out to Muslims with love.

While Courtois anticipated the open attitude of Vatican II, Troll and Jackson, in the light of *Nostra Aetate* and *Dignitatis Humane*, ventured to build bridges between Christians and Muslims without losing their identity as Christians. Their lives were challenged and shaped by both their own faith and that of Muslims. The significance of their life and work emerges from the high level of integration they attained in living as Christian friends among Muslims.

Troll and Jackson contributed to Christian-Muslim dialogue in the area of theology and spirituality respectively. Troll's work on the Muslim reformer Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan remains as a standard academic account. Jackson's translation and commentary on medieval Sufi texts highlighted the spiritual treasures of mystical Islam. While they wrote weighty theological essays in journals, they



Fr. Edwin in a Madrasa in Chennai, India

contributed articles for magazines for average Christian readers to learn to appreciate the Church's teaching on interreligious dialogue. The *Islamic Studies Association* that they had established along with their Christian friends in dialogue with Muslims continues to serve the Indian Church as a vanguard in encouraging dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

One must point out here that we have not found many Muslims studying Christian faith from Christian sources in a non-polemical manner. Indian Muslims must not ignore this dimension of Christian-Muslim relations.

Conclusion

Muslims and Christians as minorities increasingly experience marginalization in India, especially in the last few decades as right-wing forces gained ascendance on the Indian political map. While the Constitution remained a bulwark of secular Constitutional values, this foundation is increasingly being damaged today. In this context, this essay has pointed out that secular individuals and groups must work together for preserving the secular space. Christians and Muslims must fulfill their responsibility in defending the Constitution. Their respective religions have resources to work for peace. Christians and Muslims must draw from these resources to make their work for peace wholesome.

On a second level, Indian Christian and Indian Muslims must speak to one another and discover the beauty of one another's religious faith. Debates and polemics must end and dialogue must begin. Initiatives with regard to Christian-Muslims relations in South Asia may have some useful insights for the rest of the world.

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Jim Kroeger, MM