

Building communities across faith boundaries

In this, we need to prioritise the ethico-moral urging of, and the spiritual strength from, our respective faiths. Humility to learn from others is basic to meaningful dialogue, and for effecting a culture of solidarity to live and let others live.

MARTIN ADHIKARY

TONS of books have been printed; time, talent and trust have been invested on inter-faith dialogues and understanding during the last century in almost all parts of the world. Today, not a single day passes when there is no inter-faith dialogue held somewhere in the world. However, suspicion, misunderstanding and hatred continue among peoples of different religious persuasions. Religious intolerance, extremism and militancy have escalated in many parts of the world in recent years. Someone once said: "We have more religions to hate than to love."

Purely from a human point of view, it is not easy to have authentic inter-faith leading to diapraxical solidarity. But, however challenging that might be, it is not impossible. We need the mentality and pro-life interpretation of religious teachings in day-to-day life. In this, we need to prioritise the ethico-moral urging of, and the spiritual strength from, our respective faiths. Humility to learn from others is basic to meaningful dialogue, and for effecting a culture of solidarity to live and let others live.

We need also to guard against any danger of limiting our religious beliefs within some particular culture or cultural pattern. Otherwise, we may fall into a kind of idolatry. Let me quote here Paul Tillich to explain how it would lead to idolatry, which Tillich defines as "the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance."

On October 13, 2007, one hundred and thirty-eight Muslim leaders addressed a letter to Christian leaders all over the world. They said: "Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is

not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders. Christianity and Islam are the largest and second largest religions in the world and in history. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55% of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace in the world. If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace."

The spirit in which the above excerpt from that historic letter was written can better be imagined than described. The invitation signed by the 135 Muslim leaders to Christian leaders all over the world has served as a clarion call to set in motion a dialogical relationship between Muslims and Christians.

The late Indonesian president, Sukarno, said at the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung on April 18, 1954: "Religion is of dominating importance, particularly in this part of the world. There are perhaps more religions here than in other region on this globe. But our countries were the birthplaces of religions. Must we be divided by the multifariousness of our religious life? It is true each religion has its own history, its own individuality, its own raison de etre, its own special pride, its own beliefs, its own mission and its special truths, which it desires to propagate. But unless we all realise that all great religions are one in their message of tolerance and in their insistence on the observance of the principle of 'live and let live,' unless every state does its duty to ensure that the same rights are given to the followers of all faiths, unless these things are done, religion is debased, and its true purpose perverted."

(From Building Spirituality and Culture of Peace: Revitalising the Spirit of Bandung in the Context of Globalised World - Towards A Spirituality of Common Future; Ed. Josef

PWidyatmadja). Sukarno echoed the mind of the majority of the people living in the religiously and ethnically pluralistic contexts of the post-colonial Afro-Asian nations.

There is no alternative to giving priority to the ethical and moral values and demands above legalism, external rites and the extra-mundane doctrines. We need to understand more the spirit behind, and not the letters of, our Scriptures. In major faiths of the world Man is the crown of creation, and has the sacred stewardship mandate to act as faithful steward/khalif or representative of God he is to love and care for. They teach both theocentric and anthropocentric values of love, morality, holiness, piety and service to the needy. However, there appears to be something wrong in us. We hear sermons but we scarcely implement them. Religion becomes dysfunctional in terms of values and objectives if it is manipulated for parochial and communal interests.

According to the Bible righteousness and justice are two sides of the same coin. Without justice there cannot be peace. There is injustice in almost every areas of social life. The poor continue to remain poor. As in the Bible, a great concern for the poor and the weak is also expressed in the Qur'an from the perspective of justice. "He is not righteous who turns his face to the East or the West, but righteous is he who believes in Allah and the Day of Judgement and the Angels and the Scriptures and the Prophets: and gives his wealth, for the love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observes proper worship and pays the poor due" (Sura-2 Baqara: Ayat 177).

Religions teach adherents to work for a better world order, a more equitable society for all. Their basic tenets are essentially concern for human dignity and the fulfillment of people's aspirations. But as we see, the religions being practiced and used in their institutional, structural and ideological manifestations have become instruments of subjugation and alienation. It is of great importance that we discover essential human values and portray them to people in a realistic manner in order to liberate them from indoctrination and domination of the weak by the powerful.

People must be, first of all, treated as people: people created as imago Dei. This fosters inter-faith diapraxis. It is not easy to have inter-religious dialogue or diapraxis in a place where the gap in number among peoples of various faiths is large, especially where the percentage of enlightened people is quite low. One key theological reason why should we nurse this attitude is that all human beings have the same origin.

This themes run through the Bible right from Genesis 1:1-2:4 to Revelation. Paul declared in Athens two thousand years ago: "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples build by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made nations of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:24-25). God is the Creator, Owner, Redeemer and the Judge of all Mankind.

We need to promote inter-religious dialogues for finding common grounds on socio-economic justice and equity, ecological, overpopulation, globalisation, bad forces of market economy, and women's place in society to create a vision for a new humanity. The most important step in the journey is to be able to identify the matters of common concern. This is possible when we can respect each other's traditions and values that have contributed and can contribute to civilisation and culture.

We should recognise things that are praiseworthy in the life and conduct of people of other faiths. Paul exhorted the Christians in Philipians thus: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things" (Philipians 4:8).

The following can be recommended towards the achievement of this goal:

- Before establishing diapraxical relationship with people of faiths we need to have realistic intra-faith dialogue. A broader sense of ecumenism among the various Church denominations and confessional groups will help;
- The teachers and preachers of every



Reaching up towards the same God.

religion should first practice what they teach or preach to others. There is no alternative to an enlightened clergy in any faith;

- Scriptures of every religion should be interpreted with life-oriented focus. People of different religions should try to identify the real life-issues and human needs faced by humanity; issues like poverty, socio-economic disparity, injustice, ecological imbalance, adverse effects of globalisation, corruption in high places, overpopulation, violation of the rights of women, children, people with disabilities, and minorities from religious, ideological and ethnic perspectives;
- Religious education and value formation should be in place up to college level in academic institutions;
- Politicisation and commercialisation of religions should be guarded against. It is unfortunate that politicians and business use religions to suite their vested agenda;
- People of any religion should be encouraged to decry any injustice to, or attack on, the followers of any religion anywhere in the world;
- Value or faith based NGOs, groups and agencies can play a vitally important role in inter-faith dialogue and

- diapraxical movement, and interfaith seminars and interfaith dialogues on various concerns of common interests should be organised. These will help sustain the impact of developmental activities for the poor and weak people;
- The media should be used to spread news of stories on interfaith harmony and tolerance among peoples so that other people are also encouraged to love people of faiths other than their own;
- Writers and artists should use their talents in their writing and arts on interfaith harmony;
- State and government must protect the genuine rights of the people of all faiths and ethnic groups.

If we claim that we believe in something divine, noble, peaceful and life-giving we will do well to share that with others in real life. We need to change ourselves first if we wish to change the world. We need to have the sincere will and courage to face the realities of the world in the light of the anthropocentric values that our faiths enshrine. We cannot love God, whom we do not see if we do not love the people we see.

Reverend Martin Adhikary is a Christian Theology teacher and a Social Worker.

How secular is the West?

All this goes to prove that the Western democracies are not as liberal or as secular as many in Europe and America perceive them to be. In this, Western political leaders and the media have a responsibility.

CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

NEARLY forty years ago, when I was already living in Spain, I had to undergo emergency surgery at a public (most private hospitals in Spain at that time used to be run by Catholic religious orders) hospital in Madrid. As I gradually regained consciousness after general anaesthesia in a room shared with two other patients, I heard faint voices talking about me. It was comforting to see my entire family around my bed anxiously waiting for me to wake up.

Soon a couple of pretty nurses in their white uniforms came to check on me. They were kind and efficient. When I queried about my chances of full recovery, one of the nurses, pointing her finger towards a crucifix pinned to the wall right

over my head, which I had not noticed until then, said, "Don't worry, you are going to be all right. Our Lord Jesus Christ is watching over you." Then I noticed that the other two beds in the room had similar crucifixes near their headboards. When the nurses left, I told my wife that even though I was a liberal Muslim, I did not like the idea of having symbols of other religions fixed to the wall over my headboard.

Forty years have gone by since that incident. General Franco died in 1975 and a new constitution restoring full democracy and religious freedom was passed in 1978. But symbols of Franco's national Catholicism are still visible everywhere. State ceremonies are conducted in accordance with Catholic rituals and in the presence of the representatives of the Catholic hierarchy. A substantial part of

the Church budget is financed by the government from public funds. Yet every year it demands more and more to run its huge establishment, which spreads across the country. The Church owns schools, colleges, universities, newspapers and radio stations through which it preaches its dogma. The current government's proposal to introduce certain reforms in the religious law has drawn heavy criticism from the Catholic Church. The mere mention of the word reform has been characterised as "diehard secularism" by the archbishop of Pamplona. The justice minister has been accused of being a "Christ-hater" because of his proposal to remove the crucifixes and other religious symbols from public places.

Secularism advocates the establishment of civil societies and institutions of government based on reason and not on religious tradition and dogma. So, although in theory, Spain is a secular non-denominational state, in practice, Catholicism's powerful presence can be felt everywhere which gives the impression that in Spain the task of separating the Church and the State has not yet been

completed. The vehemence of the reaction to the current government's reform proposals suggests that this task will, most probably, not be completed in the near future.

If this is the situation in a new democracy like that of Spain, are things much different in the older democracies of the West? Let us have a look at only a few examples.

Under the guise of secularism, the United States, remains a deeply religious country. Following the Calvinistic doctrine, the distinction between the Church and the State has been maintained, but it remains the responsibility of the State to guarantee strict adherence to Church doctrine and ceremony. In most oath-taking and public ceremonies, God's name is invoked. Across the country, public school teachers daily lead students with a pledge of allegiance in which the words "under God" are uttered. US coins carry the solemn pledge "in God we trust". No non-Christian has ever become president or vice-president of the US. Before John Kennedy, no Catholic was ever president. In fact, one of the worst accusations the conservative Republicans

(many of them are members of the Christian Right) could think of levelling against President Obama in their current hate campaign is that he is a secret Muslim.

Luckily, the Christian Right is not as powerful in Europe as in the US. Even though, in comparison with the US, Western Europe appears to be less religious, many countries invoke God's name in their constitutions. The Italian constitution acknowledges the pre-eminent position of the Catholic Church, which by right enjoys enormous privileges. The Greek constitution recognises the Eastern Orthodox Church as the dominant faith and owes allegiance to Jesus Christ as the head of Eastern Christianity. In Britain, the position of the Church of England is extraordinarily solid. No one except a member of the Church of England can ascend the British throne. Actually, the king or the queen, as the head of state, is also the head of the Church of England. France is perhaps the best example of a secular European state where the constitution has tried to make a clear separation between religion and state. Since 2004, all ostentatious reli-

gious symbols have been banned at public places including state schools. Unfortunately, this measure has had unintended consequences. Wearing headscarves at school, which is considered by the authorities as a Muslim religious habit has also been prohibited. (This, in my opinion, is wrong because in the name of secularism, the state has no right to impose dress codes on anyone. Such an arbitrary policy targeting a minority often produces counter-productive results.)

All this goes to prove that the Western democracies are not as liberal or as secular as many in Europe and America perceive them to be. In this, Western political leaders and the media have a responsibility. For the purpose of lowering the level of misunderstanding between the Christian West and the Muslim democracies they should refrain from using simplistic generalisations and derogatory platitudes about Muslim societies. History suggests that focusing on the perceived deficiencies of other peoples simply underscores one's own.

Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam is a Daily Star columnist.

Climate talks sabotaged?

Industrialised nations are trying to "sabotage" a treaty to combat global warming in advance of the December climate summit in Copenhagen, China's chief climate negotiator said Monday.

TAREQUL ISLAM MUNNA

INDUSTRIALISED nations are trying to "sabotage" a treaty to combat global warming in advance of the December climate summit in Copenhagen, China's chief climate negotiator said Monday.

In the talks in Bangkok on a climate treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol, tension is running high as negotiators representing 180 countries attempt to whittle down the exhaustive 200-page document before Copenhagen.

"The reason why we are not making progress is the lack of political will by Annex 1 (industrialised) countries," said Yu Qingrai, China's special representative on climate talks, the Guardian reports. "There is a concerted effort to fundamentally sabotage the

Kyoto Protocol." Lumumba Di-Aping, the Sudanese chair of the G77, which represents 130 developing nations at the talks, said: "Feelings are running high" among G77 states. "The intention of developed countries is clearly to kill the protocol," he said.

Most developing nations want to keep the same framework of 1997 Kyoto, which expires in 2012. Under that arrangement, developing countries wouldn't be required to make binding commitments on cutting their greenhouse gas emissions. But 37 wealthy nations would have to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by an average of 5 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

As time winds down before the Copenhagen meetings, poor countries are complaining that rich nations seem

to be on a path to carve out a new agreement that forces them to cut their emissions, while rich nations will get away with minimal cuts. The United States, Japan and Australia have offered a number of proposals in Bangkok, moving away from internationally binding emissions cuts. Instead, individual countries would pledge their own cuts without binding timetables and targets.

"The United States wants only to have a national target without binding it to a global treaty. It appears to have won over many other developed countries," said Martin Khor, the director of the South Center, a think-tank of poor countries based in Geneva, the Guardian reports.

Yu said that the proposals would lead to the termination of the Kyoto Protocol and all it stands for. "They are introducing new rules, new formats. That's not the way to conduct negotiations," he said. "We are faithful to the Kyoto approach, its system, in its entirety," Yu told reporters. "We believe the different pieces must be kept together. It is a holistic system with

commitments, with instruments, with compliance systems. We cannot pick and choose."

While developed nations have yet to come up with a figure on what their emission cuts should be, the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change proposes emission cuts of 25 percent to 40 percent for wealthy nations by 2020 compared with 1990 levels. Developing countries, however, think the aggregate cut should be at least 40 percent.

China and a bloc of developing nations Monday accused rich countries of trying to kill off the Kyoto Protocol, the only international treaty in force that fights global warming. "We now hear statements and actions that will lead to a termination of the Kyoto protocol and everything that it represents," Yu Qingtai said.

Yu lashed out in Bangkok, where 180 nations are trying to lay the framework for a global climate deal in Copenhagen in December that would take over when the current provisions of the Kyoto Protocol run out in 2012. "It's just like the final five minutes into a game in

which one side is putting forward a set of new rules, and expects the other side to agree. That is not a fair way of conducting negotiations," he told journalists.

The world's nations vowed nearly two years ago to hammer out a new global agreement by the end of 2009 to slash drastically the heat-trapping greenhouse gases that drive global warming. Emerging giants such as China and developing countries say the new agreement should strengthen Kyoto, under which 37 highly industrialised nations took on hard commitments for cutting carbon dioxide pollution between 2008 and 2012.

The United States signed the treaty in 1992 but never ratified it, and thus was exempt from its provisions. In Bangkok, several nations -- notably the United States, Australia and Japan -- have floated proposals calling for an approach in which each country would make its own national commitments.

These would be measurable and verifiable, but outside any kind of internationally enforceable

compliance regime. Rich nations have suggested that poorer countries, which had no Kyoto obligations, could make efforts to curb carbon dioxide output in keeping with their level of development under such a scheme.

China was not alone in calling instead for beefing up Kyoto, which could exist along with whatever other measures might be adopted at the climate conference in Copenhagen. At the same press conference, Lumumba Di-Aping called on developed countries to say clearly that they were not out to "kill the Kyoto Protocol."

In a UNFCCC session in June, Indian climate negotiator Shyam Saran also warned against attempts to undermine the existing treaty. "We are not negotiating a new Protocol. The Kyoto Protocol does not cease to exist in 2012 and will remain valid and in effect until such time as the state parties decide to abrogate it or amend it, or decide to replace it with another legal instrument," he said.

Tarequl Islam Munna is a Journalist, Columnist and Conservator, Wildlife and Environment on behalf of World Wildlife Fund (WWF). E-mail: munna_tareq@yahoo.com