Seeking Religious Harmony
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EDITORIAL

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A peaceful coexistence of religions requires more than tolerance

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As an invitee to the World Parliament of Religions, held in Barcelona in 2005, I heard speaker after speaker reiterate the importance of cultivating a spirit of tolerance in individuals, and teaching people to respect diverse faiths. If people are not convinced of the intrinsic equality of all human beings, they are not likely to want to learn about their different faiths with a spirit of respect. Individual transformation plays an important role in building tolerant societies. However, some forms of hatred and prejudice cannot be banned; they can, at best, only be kept in check and under control.

It is only when societies are able to institutionalize fair and just norms for determining the rights of various groups--irrespective of power, status, class, race, caste, color, gender, language, religion or national origin--that they create the essential prerequisites necessary for imparting interfaith harmony.

Learning about other people's faith is easier if we see that faith as a part of their culture, values and collective aspirations. In pre-modern times, the task of interfaith learning and bridge-building between diverse groups occurred in different ways.

A few hearty souls undertook long journeys across major geographical boundaries to immerse themselves in the lifestyles of distant communities and form bridges of spiritual communication between those cultures and their own. Most ordinary people, however, learned about other religions simply through direct contact with followers of those religions. By participating in the festivals of friends and neighbors of other faiths, they absorbed foreign customs almost imperceptibly.

The people of the Indian sub-continent provide a good example of how, over centuries of cohabiting, different religious communities can evolve humane and dignified ways of living together. These included--in addition to joining in the celebration of each other's festivals--having common shrines of worship and learning from saintly figures whose teachings transcended religious divides. This was all possible because, in the Indic universe, there has never been a centralized religious authority issuing dictates regarding how one should relate to people of different faiths.

Bonding despite differences

Such cultural bonding was facilitated by a deep-rooted belief, shared by many people of different faiths and religions, that, among many other social responsibilities, padosi dharma (the moral responsibility towards one's neighbors or fellow villagers) is no less sacred than one's responsibility to family or caste. For example, a woman born in a particular village is expected to be treated like a daughter of that village by the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who live in that village. Although it must be clarified that everyone certainly does not follow this principle uniformly, it is nevertheless a tradition that has commanded enough respect to be regarded as a moral code worthy of transcending religious divides.

This is reflected in the fact that, starting from the early days of Indian cinema, an overwhelming majority of Bollywood films have depicted idyllic inter-community bonds established on the basis of neighborhood ties and personal friendships between people of different religions. In these films, the bonds of neighborhood and friendship are depicted as being at least equal, if not higher, than those of blood relationship. This is one important reason why Bollywood melodramas have gained greater popularity in non-European countries than Hollywood films have. In such a moral universe, a sensitivity to other religious sentiments comes spontaneously. For example, it is a common practice for Hindu and Muslim neighbors to exchange food gifts during important festivals of both communities. However, Muslims take care to

send only uncooked dry food to their Hindu neighbors out of respect for their unique taboos. Likewise, no Hindu family would ever offer to a Muslim friend a non-vegetarian dish not prepared with halaal meat. One can cite innumerable examples of such spontaneous and graceful mutual accommodation. Religious differences or caste-based taboos are rarely perceived as cause for hurt or conflict. Unfortunately, many modern secularists, who insist that inter-community harmony can be established only when everyone gives up all their religious taboos, end up creating more strife than harmony.

When freedom causes pain

Currently, the formal study of interfaith relationships is confined primarily to a small group of academics. Every now and then, some scholar of religion will trigger interfaith hostilities because his or her writings are perceived as "hurtful " or "insulting." For example, a book on the Hindu God Ganesha, by American scholar Paul Courtright, caused a major uproar recently because the author used Freudian analysis to interpret Ganesh's elephant head and trunk in sexual terms. Those Hindus who led the campaign against this book saw it as part of a deep-rooted bias in Western academia, stemming from a tendency to trivialize or demonize Indic religions and cultures. The book is undoubtedly the product of painstaking research, and Courtright obviously knows more about the stories, myths and legends surrounding Ganesha than many practicing Hindus. What offended believers, was not his lack of knowledge but his use of a totally alien and inappropriate tool of analysis to deal with the belief system and iconography of a faith that does not lend itself to a Freudian worldview.

This is a classic example of conflicts arising not out of too little knowledge, but too much of it, combined with the unconsciously imbibed arrogance of a Western academia which assumes that its tools of analysis give it the right to understand and pass judgment on the experiences of all human beings. Instead of dealing with what was actually a criticism leveled at their intellectual approach, many Western Indologists treated the conflict as a case of "academic freedom " versus an intolerance of Hindu community leaders. Such an approach left the conflict unresolved in a bitter stalemate.

Western vision predominates

The problem is further compounded by the fact that the study of other religions and cultures is largely a one-way process. While Western universities have any number of departments, centers and courses for studying and teaching religions and cultures of non-Western societies, as well as their own, most non-Western countries are not engaged in similar studies of Western faith systems, or even their own. Thus, for a serious scholarly study or teaching of Hinduism, Indians go to American, British or Australian universities, because there are simply no such opportunities available for this study within India.

For this reason, most noteworthy scholarship ends up being processed in Western universities that are burdened with their inevitable, in-built bias. Today most people know of the faiths of others through brief and limited exposure to superficial descriptions of them on TV, in newspapers, films and other mass media. The dominant forms of international mass media have deeply imbibed a distorted Eurocentric worldview, with its tendency to see the cultures and faiths of non-European peoples as intrinsically inferior and backward, as mainly of anthropological interest, existing only as a curious hangover from a lower stage of human evolution. Therefore, instead of leading to greater understanding, fleeting mass media images of unfamiliar practices tend to create negative stereotypes that fortify prejudices.

Those of us who are interested in interfaith harmony need to consider seriously how we might reconcile conflicting assertions. While it is true that academic freedom should be preserved, it should also be acknowledged that every cultural community should be treated with respect and integrity. For this, special tools of analysis need to be evolved that can encompass the experiences, value systems and sensitivities of a diverse group of people.

Exclusivist claims hinder

The concept of God in Christianity (as well as that of other Abrahamic traditions) poses the biggest challenge for interfaith harmony. We cannot provide meaningful interfaith education without effectively combating the culture of intolerance derived from a belief in the inherent superiority of an exclusivist, hierarchical, jealous God, and without connecting such views to the power imbalances that came to define the economics and politics of our planet during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are strong connections between authoritarian ways of thinking and tendencies to see God as an intolerant, jealous and tyrannical authority figure who

punishes those who do not do His bidding.

Monotheistic faiths have consistently claimed that the commandments of their Gods are somehow more superior and justified than those of other faiths. Although the followers of various Hindu sects also believe that their own faith is best, they don't usually hate or attack those of others.

Riots, massacres and genocidal attacks are almost always linked to conflicts over economic and political power. In such charged situations, religion often becomes the match that lights the tinder. This is an important reason why politicians strategically co-opt religion in their secular battles.

The colonial dimension

The military, political and economic colonization of India resulted in aggressive onslaughts upon the country's cultures, faiths and value systems. People were told that their Gods were false and their faith systems were flawed, inferior and even evil. Not surprisingly, the flourishing of anti-colonial national factions simultaneously gave rise to religious and social reform movements, during which colonized peoples fought to defend their faiths, families and cultural values against their ruler's onslaughts.

At first, many important religious reformers in colonized countries tried to modify their faith systems so that they would be acceptable from a Western point of view. They tried to purge their religions of supposed evils, like the worship of images and idols and the belief in Gods and Goddesses. These reformers dismissed polytheism as a lower form of Hinduism meant to aid the illiterate masses and claimed that the Vedantic conception of the Divine, adopted by the colonial Hindu elite, was not all that different from the Christian belief in a one and only, all-supreme God.

The sense of humiliation and self-loathing encouraged by colonial education created whole new generations of confused people with a fragile sense of selfhood. A few astute people like Mahatma Gandhi recognized that, in most cases, the apologetic efforts of the elitist reformers only succeeded in wedging a divide between these

well-meaning reformers and the sincere followers of their own faith. This did not, however, prevent them from asserting their hybrid religious/ethnic identity as a living example of modernity and progress.

Interfaith learning is like language learning. A person who is not in command of his or her own language will find it difficult to learn alien languages and certainly will not be able to understand their nuances. Similarly, those who are not deeply rooted in their own faith and belief system will find it difficult to understand and appreciate those of others.