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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

Interreligious Dialogue Concern for National Integration

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National Integration Perspective

It is generally assumed that a people of homogeneous race, language, culture and common history living in a compact geographical territory provide ideal conditions favourable for the growth of a well integrated nation-state.¹ This kind of nation-state or national integration is alien to India. The past history and the present circumstances in India favour the growth of a particular type of nation-state and national integration. It would, probably, go for a "federal"² model of integration, understood more in the attitudinal and emotional sense than in the political sense, which would promote a national culture that ensures for various communities freedom to maintain and develop their own self-identities so long as they are not detrimental to general welfare of the people and the unity of the nation.

But what constitutes the essential condition for national integration is the general will of the people to be a nation without which, no matter how homogeneous the people are, no nation-state or national integration is possible. The Constitution of India enshrines that "solemn resolve"³ of the people to be a nation. The fact that during the past 50 years the people of India have endorsed it through 12 general elections based on universal adult franchise proves its validity and vitality for integration of the people into a nation-state. What is required, however, at all times is the conscientious effort by all citizens to put into practice the potential for national solidarity contained in that "solemn resolve" as enshrined in the Constitution.

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The people who solemnly resolved to constitute India into a "Sovereign (Socialist Secular) Democratic Republic"⁴ have been endowed with plurality of community identities such as religious, cultural, ethnic and linguistic. Hence, in our search for a national ethos that is promotive of national integration, it is of fundamental importance to acknowledge and respect the multi-faceted plural nature of our people. This must become part of interreligious dialogue endeavours concerned with national integration.

For, any attempt to create, under pretext of national unity, a mono-identity based on religion or otherwise is an ideological manipulation and suppression of the value heritage proper to the plural identities of the people of India. On other hand, national integration is a legitimate unity of the India body politic founded on the fundamental human values that lie behind each community identity as a human community. National integration stands for the formation of a national community of diverse community identities and concerns. In our pluralistic scenario, those identities specify and concretise the particular human character of each community in its specified and concretized form is essential for sustainable process of national solidarity.

Communalism weakens Integration

Social analysts say that among the forces of disintegration rampant in the country, religious communalism seems to be the most destructive factor against national solidarity, the most difficult conflict to handle on account of its emotional appeal and the most frequent occurrence paralysing the life of the nation. It has been reported that from 1947 to 1980, 5000 cases of communal riots have been recorded.⁵ The Ayodhya disaster has heightened the communal trend in the country whose fall outs are not going to be settled down in the immediate future.⁶

Communalism is corruption of community, specially the religious communities. It is mobilization and politicization of the religious groups and communities organized on the basis of powerful religious symbols to fight for narrow goals on vested interest. As religion touches the deepest aspirations of persons,

the very ground and ultimate goal of existence, it is prone to evoke the most powerful emotional responses. When religious sentiments go astray, it turns up to be the most potent demonic forces for destruction. While religions have inspired the most heroic deeds, acts of unsurpassed generosity, the greatest refinements of art and highest achievements of human endeavour in every sphere, it has also provoked the worst type of bigotry, fanaticism, violence and oppression.

It has been acknowledged that religious and cultural or social and economic differences as such do not result into organized communal conflicts. The communal passions of religious nature flare up when latent tensions of these sectors are exploited by vested interest. These may be religious leaders who want to maintain their hold on their followers. More often it is the political interest which uses religious groups and communities in their power struggle.⁷ While communal parties appeal to their particular communities on the need to protect their interests, the so-called secular parties see in them vote banks to be exploited. Communalism enters the choice of candidates and party workers. Subtle hints and at times open promises are made regarding issues which deem to have communal concerns. The tension, at times, is aggravated by the press which provides detailed analysis of the communal make up of each constituency. Elections turn into communal battles. When power brokers play the communal card, the electorate are subject to manipulation and democracy is not seldom reduced to mockery.

It is generally the poor who suffer the most and have to bear the brunt of the periodic bouts of violence let loose by the forces of religious communalism. The rich and the powerful incite violence, but do not take an active part in mob violence and, therefore, do not have to suffer from the attack of rival groups or security forces. The poor must be conscientized not to fall prey to the machination of vested interests who put on the facade of defenders of religions.⁸ People need to understand that communalists are anti-people because they work against the general will of the people to be a community, to be a nation. They are also anti-religious because they do not respect the spiritual values of religious traditions except when religion is needed for material gains.

The Place of Dialogue for Integration

It is inevitable in India that the people will have to learn to live with religious pluralism. Studies show that no amount of secularization and modernization will marginalize religion from people's life.⁹ For, most of the religions of South Asian origin have a totalizing world-vision in which the "secular is encompassed by the sacred"¹⁰ and this attitude will stay on for generations to come. Moreover, most of the world religions are very much alive and thriving all over India as one sees all kinds of religious symbols dotting the country's landscape. And India lives still in the villages. A nation of villages has more emotional attachments to temples, mosques, churches and gurdwaras etc., than to civil and secular institutions.¹¹

We must also remember at the same time communal riots and blood bath on account of religious hostility challenge the "solemn resolve" of the people of India to be a nation. So, the challenge posed to believers is this: Is religious pluralism as guaranteed and protected by the Constitution supportive to national unity and promotive of harmony among believers of various religious traditions or a cause for communalism and national unrest?

Legislation and coercive power of the State may temporarily abate the forces of communal hostility and render some measure of harmony to civil society. However, enduring emity and understanding among multi-religious communities can only be built on spiritual and moral values and attitudes. These are to be cultivated and nurtured but cannot be reinforced by the State. Do believers of various religious traditions have the spiritual resource and moral concern to promote a national culture of amity and harmony? This precisely is the question a secular democratic society would ask believers lesson as well as those engaged in interreligious activities. The activities of interreligious enterprise should include in its agenda to search, preserve and promote through dialogue and collaboration such spiritual and moral values found among religious traditions for understanding among religious communities and for national solidarity.

The Context of Dialogue

It is of primary importance that in a vast country of multi-religious community identities, motives and objectives, the interreligious dialogue which wishes to respond to the challenges of communalism and national integration, must be situated in the context of certain definite value heritage expressive of the goal and objectives of the people's will to be a nation. In India they have provided in the Preamble as of the Constitution. In fact, in their resolution, the members of the National Integration Council underlined the Preamble the basis for integration.¹² Commenting on the place of prominence accorded to it in the body politic, the former Chief Justice of India, Mr. Hidayatullah said, "It is the soul of our Constitution which lays down the pattern of our political society... It contains a solemn resolve which nothing but a revolution can alter."¹³

In articulating the "solemn resolve" of the people to be a nation, the Preamble and most of the significant articles of Part III and IV of the Constitution emphasize that its positive and constructive goal is to create a welfare state on the egalitarian concept of human person and community of persons.¹⁴ To achieve this goal, the Constitution has committed itself to provide appropriate secular, democratic and socialist structures and institutions to the political society in order to secure to all its citizens the fundamental rights. The Constitution also proclaims its solemn desire to create a mighty solidarity of amity among all its citizens so as to promote a civil ethos conducive to human dignity and to preserve the unity and integrity of the nation.

In enunciating the people's will in matters of religion, the Constitution guarantees religious pluralism as an integral aspect of national policy. The Constitution believes that religion gives meaning to people, though not for all, and hopes that the Indian society can be built as a community of plurality of communities where the religious communities with their specific identities have a rightful place in the society. Hence, subject to public welfare and other fundamental rights guaranteed to all, all religions in their community, group and sectional identities are respected and protected under the law.¹⁵

The secular provisions of the Constitution do not privatize religion in its practice and marginalize it from our national culture. The constitutional policy is one of respect and non-discrimination in responding to the religious needs of the citizens.¹⁶ However, the kind of pluralism of religions guaranteed by the Constitution is not for mere co-existence of religions, a kind of nomadic conglomeration of private belief systems in the society. Pluralism means that the religious communities contribute to the national community the richness of their convictions, inspirations and spiritual and moral values in their specificities in such a manner that they operate as principles of respective community identities as well as provide common spiritual and moral force to strengthen the national fabric of a pro-human-egalitarian national community committed for the integral welfare of all.¹⁷

The Nature of Dialogue

The nature of the interreligious engagement which takes in its ambit the concern for national integration consists in (a) a sincere effort by believers of good will to purify their knowledge of religious traditions from prejudices and historical distortions; (b) cultivation of attitudes conducive to pluralistic culture so that various religious communities may learn to grow in amiable interaction expressive of mutual reverence based on human dignity and solidarity in diversity; and (c) a sustained attempt by all to arrive at a pragmatic consensus on spiritual and moral values and perspectives which may be responsive to religious aspirations and constitutional objectives as well as relevant to contemporary concerns of the nation.

Aim and Objectives of Dialogue

The proposed nature of the dialogue contains its aim and objectives. Its aim is not to win over the partners in dialogue as it were in a debate but to understand and acknowledge the believers of various religious traditions in their otherness in order "to bridge the gulfs of mutual ignorance and misunderstanding".¹⁸ The prerequisite needed in a dialogue of this type is that doctrinal foundation of each religious tradition may be studied critically but value judgements need not be

required. The reason is that in a secular society, each religion has the right to be what its followers claim it to be, subject, of course, to public order and the citizens' fundamental rights. Moreover, as Zaehner opined, the basic faith-claims of one religion are not so easily interpreted from the standpoint of another.¹⁹ In his book, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, Toynbee had this to write: "One's ancestral religion is bound to have so much the stronger hold upon one's feelings that one's judgement between this and any other religion cannot be objective."²⁰

Dialogue requires, therefore, a certain measure of understanding of and receptivity to the beliefs and practices characteristic of various religions. But it is presumptuous to hold that this can be easily achieved. The relation between believers of various religions are generally conditioned by emotional barriers influenced by historical factors than theological claims. For example, the communal polarization of the Hindu and Muslim communities by political parties which took place during the Independence movement and the traumatic experience of the Partition of our country, has been sustained to date by feelings of hostility. Suspicion and insecurity.²¹ To be realistic in dialogue engagements, these historical and psychological factors which block the process of understanding and receptivity between these two major religious communities of our country must be honestly encountered, dispassionately examined and not passively tolerated, but amiably transcended which involves forgiveness and compassion. Surely, this cannot be achieved overnight but dialogue must hopefully aim for it.

Another important objective of interreligious dialogue is to promote the true value of religious pluralism. Interreligious efforts intended to promote the culture of communal harmony and nation-building process is incompatible with any attempt either to suppress or displace or even to absorb one religion by another with a holy embrace. Hence, the objective of dialogue cannot be, as Dr. Radhakrishnan proposed, to evolve a "featureless unity."²² Nor its concern is to create a "universal religion", some kind of a "common denominator" religion as suggested by Herberg.²³

The aim of dialogue is not the change of creed but to change of attitude towards believers of other religions. Believers of various religions while being faithful to their own religious affiliations, should be able to discuss matters of religious concern and of other public interest in the dialogue forum and be able to interact with each other in their social life on non-sectarian terms.

The kind of pluralism to be nurtured through dialogue is one that accepts the legitimacy of all religious traditions and treats their followers as equal partners in religious and secular affairs of common human concern in the political society. Christians interpret this legitimacy theologically basing it on the universality of God's saving will and unicity of God's plan for all as they see it in their faith in Christ.²⁴ Morally, the legitimacy accorded to all religious communities is founded on the dignity of the human person and, therefore, built on the inalienable right to freedom of conscience and free exercise of that conviction. And legally the democratic constitutions protect, it as a fundamental right.²⁵ Through interreligious participation, affirmation of these values of heritage inherent in religious pluralism and by creating public awareness on these values, religions can support to strengthen the forces of national integration and harmony in the society.

People's Dialogue for Integration

In a nation of multiple diversity, national integration is a people's movement which, in its process, responds to the values of human rights, solidarity and welfare. It is a dynamic movement which transcends the narrow fixations of caste, creed and class that divide citizens into groups and communities. It is rooted in the basic bond of humanity which makes all men and women equal and assures to each citizen and community of citizens, rights and privileges guaranteed in the Constitution.²⁶ A value based integration of the people of diverse backgrounds respects pluralism on the basis of human dignity and supports to ensure a more equal, just and humane order in the socio-economic and political as well as socio-cultural and religious structures of the society.

In this context, the interreligious dialogue responsive to the process of communal harmony and national integration cannot function as an escoteric exercise of elite clubs with little or no influence on the religious, ethical, cultural and social values and attitudes of people. It must come forward to assist the process not through elite club activities and attitudes but by its active participation in the national issues affecting people's lives.²⁷ It must become a people's dialogue in the sense that the interreligious dialogue engagements should be an integral part of people's movement towards nation-building programs.

Seen in this frame, dialogue has got a vast potential for interreligious community collaboration and co-participation in the local, regional and national levels in solving citizens' problems. Some of these areas where the dialogue collaboration can bear much fruit are interreligious action in social service and social action, education and developmental projects, joint struggles against all forms of oppressions and exploitations of the people, joint commitment of the believers to protect the sanctity of human life and to preserve morality in the public life etc.²⁸ In fact, in these joint endeavours, the prophetic value heritage of the religious traditions will be put into action to shape the nation in the path of justice, equality and fellowship which are fundamental values for communal harmony and national integration.

The Role of Church

For the Church in India the task and the mandate of interreligious dialogue at all levels are ethical imperatives founded on the demand of the Gospel-vision of human person and community and of the existential context of the pluralistic heritage of our country. The vision of human life and the destiny of human history as embodied in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His message of God's reign of redemptive love are the foundational inspirations for social responsibility and interreligious collaboration. Indifferentism to socio-political and economic, cultural and religious realities of human life has no validity in the value heritage of Christian faith. For, the practice of Christian faith-vision demands ethical values of

co-existence, co-participation and collaboration with all peoples of God's family.

The affirmation of the dignity of every human person and of community of persons is a sign of God's Reign in our society.²⁹ By her respect and defense she offers to the value heritage of freedom of conscience as a foundational value of the dignity of the human person and of community of persons³⁰. The Church wishes to exercise her service to the secular society. This she does it not alone but through dialogue and collaboration with believers of various religions³¹ which is integral to the preaching of the Gospel of Christ.³²

The mission of the Church through interreligious dialogue is relevant and needed in the context of the value heritage of the pluralistic India struggling to achieve the objectives of communal harmony and national integration which are implied in the solemn will of the people of India to be a nation. The constitutional guarantee of religious freedom needs to be compatibly lived in a spirit of interreligious relations, harmony and amity.

In our Indian moral ethos, rights go with duties. The right of religious freedom goes with the duty to promote interreligious harmony and understanding. These are important factors for nation building process.

Conclusion

National integration is a process towards a healthy national life founded on constitutional values regulated by rights and privileges common to all citizens. It involves fostering fellow-feeling and solidarity, establishing good will and adjustments among diverse groups and communities in the body politic which is grounded on the will of the people to be a nation state.

In a nation of multiple diversity and plurality of religious community identities, religious harmony is an essential requirement for national integration. Sustainable harmony and national solidarity among citizens can only be built on permanent ethical values which protect human persons in their dignity as moral subjects and social beings. These values are given in the fundamental rights guaranteed in the Constitution of India and its secular democratic polity.

Religious pluralism itself is protected by these constitutional values and norms such as human dignity, freedom, justice, equality, fraternity, duty to maintain public order and morality, and respect for fundamental rights, etc. These values should find proper emphasis in the agenda for interreligious dialogue programs and policies. Through interreligious dialogue participation and collaboration, the spiritual resources of religious communities should be put into action to empower believers to protect and nurture these ethical and moral values among the citizens. In this way the interreligious dialogue engagements would get into mainstream political and democratic process for the growth of a humane social order which is constitutive of national integration. The Christian community's commitment to dialogue is based on their faith-vision of God's Reign inaugurated by Jesus Christ and on the ethical demand of being citizens of the political society which is religiously plural. God's Reign offers a vision of society which is a new humanity freed from all forms of slavery and violence and bonded together in solidarity with fellow-humanity of all citizens. Commitment to these values are already a sign of God's Reign in action.

Notes

1. On the development of the concept "nation" and "nationalism", see the works of B.C. Shafer, *Nationalism: Myth and Reality*, New York, 1955; B. Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1979; "Religion and Nationalism" in *Concilium* (special issue 1995/6), SCM Press, London, 1995.
2. A.B.Husain, *The National Culture of India*, NBT India, Delhi, 1956, p.4.
3. See the Preamble of the Constitution of India.
4. The words in bracket are substituted for the words "Sovereign Democratic Republic" by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976.
5. A.R. Desai, "Caste and Communal Violence in post-partition Indian Union", in *Communal Riots in Post-Independence India*, (ed.), A.A. Engineer, Sangam Books, Bombay, 1984, pp.10-41.
6. See various reports, analysis and comments on communalism and its political consequences: A. Arulsamy, (ed.), *Communalism in India: A Challenge to Theologizing*, Claretian publ., Bangalore, 1988; G.Sarvepalli, (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi Issue*, Viking, Delhi, 1991; T.N. Madan, "Religious Fundamentalism", in *The Hindu*, November 29, 1993; A. Beteille, "Secularism and Intellectuals", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 5, 1994, pp.559-566; J. Tharamangalam, "Indian Social Scientists and Critique of Secularism",

- in *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 4, 1995, pp. 456-461; P. Swamy, "A Life in Parivar", in *Frontline*, May 31, 1996, pp.12-13; S. Muralidharan, "The Fall", in *Frontline*, June 4, 1996, pp.4-7; V. Ramakrishnan, "Ayodhya: Towards A Temple", in *Frontline*, July 3, 1998, pp.130-134.
7. A.A. Engineer, "Communalism, its Facts and Roots", in *Main Stream*, vol.24, no.43, June 28, 1986, pp.15-19.
 8. B. Chandra, "Nationalism: The Antidote to Our Problem" in *The Telegraph Supplement*, August 15, 1991.
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 10. T.N. Madan, "Secularism in Its Place", in *The Journal of Asain Studies*, vol.46, no.4, November 1987, pp.747-59.
 11. V.K. Shina, "The Process of Secularization and Indian Democracy", in *Seminar*, no.134, August 1977, pp.22-25.
 12. Cf. P.B. Gajendragadkar, *Secularism and the Constitution of India*, University of Bombay, 1971, pp.166-70.
 13. M. Hidayatulla, *Democracy in India and the Judicial Process*, p.51 (loc.cit., in V.D. Mahajan, *Constitutional Law of India*, Eastern Book Comp., Lucknow, 1984, p.36).
 14. G. Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1966, pp.54, 115.
 15. *The Constitution of India*, Articles, 25;26;30(1).
 16. P.C. Jain, *Law and Religion: A Comparative Study of the Freedom of Religion in India and The United States*, Mohan Printers, Allahabad, 1974, pp.97-100.
 17. *The Constitution of India*, Articles, 25(1); 25(2)b..
 18. R. Panikkar, *The Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Paulist Press, New York, 1978, xxvii.
 19. R.C. Zaehner, *The Comparison of Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1962, p.16.
 20. A. Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, Oxford University Press, London, 1956, p.296.
 21. A.R. Desai, *op.cit.*, pp.10-41.
 22. S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion in a Changing World* George, Allen & Unwin, 1967, p.134.
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 24. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no.22; *Nostra Aetate*, no.1; *Ad Gentes* nos.1, 3.
 25. L. Janssens, *Freedom of Conscience and Religious Freedom*, (trans. Lorenzo, C.F.X.), St. Paul's Publ., New York, 1966, pp.75-82.
 26. M. D'Cruz, *Indian Secularism: A Fragile Myth*, ISI, Delhi, 1988, p.79.
 27. For a seminal reflection on the ethical imperative of inter-religious dialogue to pay attention to the political reality of India refer to: F. Wilfred, "Inter-Religious Dialogue as a Political Question", in *Vidyajyoti*, vol.LX, no.6, June 1996, pp.361-74.
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 29. S. Arokiasamy, "Religious Pluralism & Secularism — Ethical and Theological Perspective", in *Secularism in Indian context*, JPD, CBCI Centre, Delhi, 1994, pp.64-65.

30. *Vatican Council II, Dignitatis Humanae*, nos.2-4.
31. *Ibid.*, Ad Gentes, nos. 11-12, 15, 21, 41; *Nostra Aetate*, nos. 1, 3; John XXIII, *Encyclical Letter Mater et Magistra* (1961), no.157; Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), no.3; John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Redemptor Hominis* (1979), no.16.
32. *Dialogue and Proclamation, Pontifical Council For Interreligious Dialogue*, Vatican City, 1991, no.44.