

# CHRISTIANITY AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY

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## 1. CHRISTIANITY – AN OVERVIEW

### 1.1. Christianity – An Introduction

Christianity coils around the person and teachings of Jesus Christ as its essence, whose name 'Immanuel' means 'God with us' (Mt 1.23). The lifestyle of living the human, ethical and spiritual values lived and taught by him defines what it means to be a Christian. Christian faith is grounded in a Trinitarian monotheism, which illustrates the three-in-one combination of 'Father, Son and Spirit' as God (Jn 15.26). Such a plural grounding paves the way for the humans in being a family or a community, as 'many parts in one body' (1 Cor 12.12-31). The Christian dynamics of life articulates itself in accepting God as Father and human beings as one's sisters and brothers, at the same time. 'Making the family of God' on earth, involving the humans of all communities and nations including the creation, is the esteemed mission of a Christian. Extending loving service to the voiceless, the weak, the least, the lost and the deprived ones, on a priority basis, is the singular genius of Christianity.

Christians compose the largest community of the world society, not only by way of members who formally belong to it, but also by way of individuals who draw inspiration from Jesus Christ in their personal life. The world calendar is based on the birth of Jesus Christ, as before Christ and after Christ (BC and AD). Bible is the religious scripture of Christians and is the book that commands the highest circulation capacity in the world and has measured the length and breadth of the world. It has two parts, Old Testament and New Testament. The latter defines the Christian Bible proper. Bible has 100s of editions and it is translated into nearly 3000 languages, in part or in full. 'Gospel', meaning 'God's spell' or 'good news', is the core of the Bible as it illustrates the life and teachings of Jesus. Gospels summarize the universal values of Christianity and it calls for 'being a good news to one and all' by living those sublime values, after the fashion of Jesus.

### 1.2. Christianity – Its Values and Principles

Christian values are charged with a stimulating ethical fibre and they have an amazing power to portray the dignity of the human person, in an uncompromising way. In fact, human dignity is rooted in the divine character as a singular endowment and it is established by the foundational statement 'human beings are created in the image of God' (Gen. 1.27). The human character is further enhanced by the status of being 'divine abodes' or 'living temples of God' (1 Cor 3.16). Christian values are a combination of the three-faceted and mutually related dynamics of life -- oneself, the other and God. First, one has to invest oneself totally for making the best out of one's life, to blossom to the maximum capacity and to live one's life in full, as demanded by the parable of the talents (Mt 25.14-30) and as qualified by the very purpose of the incarnation of Jesus (Jn 10,10). Second, one has to 'do to the other what one would have the other measure out what is due to one' (Mt 7.12). Third, 'when one has done to one's sisters and brothers, even if she or he is the least among them all, one has done it to God himself' (Mt 25.40).

The Christian values articulate themselves more pointedly in the following commands of Jesus. 'Be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect, for he sends sunshine and rain to the good and the evil as well as the righteous and the unrighteous, without even a pinch of discrimination' (Mt 5.45,48). 'Love one another as I have loved you', that 'the world may know that you are my disciples' (Jn 13.34, 35). 'Love your enemy' (Mt 5.44). Forgive the other as I have forgiven, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they

are doing' (Lk 23.34). Serve one another as I, as Master, have washed the feet of my disciples' (Jn 13.14). Consider one another as friends, 'as I have called you friends' (Jn 15.15). Reach out to the weak, the handicapped and the marginalized, 'as I have untiringly searched and found out the lost sheep, even leaving the ninety nine in the wilderness' (Lk 15.3-7). Be 'good news' to everyone yourself, 'as I went about doing well to one and all' (Mt 4.23). 'Honour everyone above yourselves' (Rom 1.12.10). Become a brother or a sister to everyone, 'as I proved to be an elder brother to one and all, relying on the filial experience of God the Father' (Jn 10.30, Mt 25.40).

### **1.3. Christianity – Its Provisions for Service of the Society**

Christianity, especially the Catholic community, has a system of priests and nuns, who draw motivation and strength from Jesus, are instilled by a whole-hearted spirit of service and are committed to the wellbeing of the society, on a lifetime basis. They leave their home, in-laws and their own personal cycle of life for good, live as bachelors on a minimal expense of sustenance and reach out to people of all communities, especially those in remote areas and are deprived and demoralized. Crores of such men and women have lived an admirable life and have made a history out of their lives. There are several lakhs of them in the world today, as well. They deserve the credit of having given a 'new life' to lakhs of unfortunate human beings, world over. Besides, their service has made an indelible mark in diverse areas of development and social transformation across the globe as well as people of all communities and affiliations. The range of their service extends over language, education, science, religion, culture, writing books, printing press, medical care, technical and agricultural institutes, empowerment of girls and women, care of the disabled, care of the orphans and the old, care of the weaker sections on the margins, rehabilitation centres, ethical living, religious harmony, national solidarity, nation building, social integration, etc. Thus, Christianity has played an outstanding role in shaping the civilization of the west in particular and the world culture in general, especially in strengthening the ethical fibre in social life and in promoting innovative thinking and human progress, in a variety of arenas.

## **2. CHRISTIANITY AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY**

### **2.1. Christianity – Its Genius of 'Vasudhaivkutumbakam'**

The plinth and pivot of Christianity are its idea of God as Father. The term 'Father' is beyond the purview of biology and gender. The Christian idea of God is familial and relational as well as spiritual and human. It proposes the idea of a large family on earth, with God as the Father and all human groups as members of that family. It includes the world of animals and vegetation, too. In other words, it is like opening a 'large umbrella' under which the entire family of the humans and the nature can gather together, as an integral whole. Such an idea rules out all sorts of discrimination and considerations of high and low as well as familiar and strange. It also underscores the sense of 'equality and relatedness' as guiding principles for a meaningful life, as members of one family. The entire notion of life is guided by the dynamics of family. Incorporating into faith such natural logic, in fact, is the brilliance of the Christian perceptive of life -- God, humankind and creation, all in one. 'Making the family of God on earth' is the life-mission of every Christian. For that matter, that is the mission of every human being, as well. Obviously, 'vasudhaivkutumbakam' implies just this and Christian worldview is full of that spirit.

### **2.2. Christianity – Its Fabric of Unity in Diversity**

Very well in tune with the plural setting of the concept of God, Christianity exists worldwide as 'unity in diversity'. In other words, it is a communion of communities, traditions and cultures, in India as well as in

the entire world. In recent centuries in particular, Christianity has become of age and has learnt to pursue and accommodate more and more pluralistic, critical and independent thinking as well as innovative and wide-ranging perspectives and ideologies. In such a context, Christian values, like bearing the image of God, being living temples of God, seeing God in one's sisters and brothers, love, service, non-discrimination, equality, forgiveness, brotherhood, friendship, mutuality and preferential option for the poor and the weak seem to make much better sense. Sustained efforts for advancing interaction, collaboration and harmony in the Christian communities are in the process, in a much sustained manner. That itself is the basis for a credible attempt for promoting a larger fellowship of communities of diverse affiliations in faith, ideologies and cultures. 'Unity in diversity' is a distinctive ideal in the Christian community and efforts for translating the same into action have been steadily in the process.

### **2.3. Christianity – Its Ground-breaking Launch of Religious Harmony**

The new wave of dialogue and interaction among religious communities in the world is grounded in a superior awareness of faith that evolved from the Catholic Christian community. The Second World Council of Vatican of the Catholic community initiated the vision and mission of dialogue with other religious communities in the 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This could be perceived as the Christian community becoming an adult in both age and faith, in the real sense of the words. The foundational document called 'Nostra Aetate', meaning 'In Our Time', affirmed that 'if Christians treat other individuals, groups and peoples other than as sisters and brothers, they have no right to call God their Father'. That would amount to state that Christians would lose their filial status with God, once and for all. That would further mean Christians would cease to be Christians and their faith in God would be rendered meaningless! This is not only tragic but also suicidal. Therefore, it becomes mandatory for Catholics to think in a catholic (universal) manner and Christians to think as large as the world and to engage in fostering relations, fellowship and collaboration with people of all communities. The Christian idea of family or community goes beyond Christians to include people of all religious persuasions and people of non-religious ideologies. The above idea of religious harmony is indeed ground-breaking and all-inclusive.

### **2.4. Taking off from the New Awakening**

Shouldering the imperative from the above spiritual awakening and the resultant larger consciousness, the Christian community, especially the Catholic community, took off to a larger mission of promoting understanding among leaders and believers of all religious and other traditions, across the globe. This includes also advancing universal values of all religions, ethics in social life, integration and solidarity at the national level and social harmony at the global level. This mission has different layers. The first layer is to foster unity, harmony and peace in the Christian community, called 'Christian unity' or 'inter-denominational dialogue'. The second layer is to promote better understanding and relations among people of different religious traditions. The third layer is to advance interaction between theists and non-theists. The fourth layer is to engage with well-meaning people of all communities and groups and to jointly address social concerns in respective countries in particular and at the global level in general. Perceptibly, the new awakening has an exceptional mettle in it in making a society that is definitely better and more harmonious.

### **2.5. Christian Set-up for Advancing Relations with all Communities**

Immediately after the deliberation of the World Catholic Council at Vatican in 1964, Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Vatican, Rome, was constituted for promoting relations with all communities at the global level in 1964 itself. Within a few years, Commission for Ecumenism (Christian Unity) and Dialogue (Interreligious Dialogue), CBCI (Catholic Bishops Conference of India), New Delhi, was

erected at the national level in India. The same was renamed as Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, New Delhi, in 2003, when Dr M.D. Thomas assumed office as its National Director and added diverse innovative avenues to its schemes and activities. Similar National Commissions were established in almost all countries of the world, as well. The Commission in India proceeded to erect Regional Commissions at state level and Diocesan Commissions at the local level. Besides, approximately 35 centres were erected in different parts of the country, to exclusively advance the cause. World Council of Churches, Geneva, and National Council of Churches in India, Nagpur, also were erected at the association of Protestant churches at the international and national levels, respectively, which had wings with similar engagements.

## **2.6. Christian Mission of Harmony and Peace – Implications and Applications**

The word 'harmony' refers to the 'combination of sounds, voices, ideas, feelings, experiences', and the like. It also signifies a 'pleasing effect', audio, visual and experiential. Harmony would mean also a mutual tuning of perceptions, ideologies, faiths, traditions, cultures, etc, so as to get a pleasing effect of integration, experience and serenity. Similarly, the term 'peace' is not just an external quietness, as of the cemetery, but is more of an inner calmness, which is fully alive and active. It is also a poise and stateliness of an elevated status of excellence. Individual peace is certainly the pedestal that makes one eligible for an advanced peace. All the same, peace is not just within the individual. It is more 'between and among' persons, among families, among communities, among nations and is spread over the entire society.

Harmony and peace takes one much beyond 'tolerance' and 'peaceful co-existence', which are not values, in the right sense of the words. Tolerating another, in fact, is an insult to the other as well as an expression of one's helplessness or weakness. Peaceful co-existence can mean 'indifference' towards and 'non-engagement' with the other. But, peace is a positive and dynamic reality of creative interaction and engagement among individuals and communities. Both harmony and peace overlap each other, with regard to their inner implications. Further, harmony and peace are complementary aspects, as two sides of the same coin, and they are not a ready-made product, but a never-ending process. The Christian mission of promoting harmony and peace is grounded in the larger plinth of the 'social character' of life, both divine and human. This mission is markedly applied to the 'social spirituality' of making a 'family and community' out of the national and global society of the humans in special and of the entire creation in general.

## **2.7. Christian Efforts for Promoting Harmony and Peace in the Society**

Christian efforts for promoting harmony and peace in the society have been monitored at the levels of the above institutions, in India, in other countries and at the world level. These efforts have been elaborately pursued by the Catholic community and selectively by other Christian communities. The efforts at the institutional level include over 40 Christian universities, colleges and institutes that developed courses on diverse religions mandatory in their curriculum. Departments and Chairs for Christian Studies were opened in many Universities for fostering comparative studies with different religions. Gradually, hundreds of scholars and specialists on different religious philosophies emerged from the Christian community and they have been steadily engaging in research and have been contributing books and articles on related themes as well as have been developing new perspectives and way forward.

Besides, several institutes and centres were opened for research and social action in India and worldwide and they have been organizing seminars, workshops and discussions on cross cultural themes and social concerns. Moreover, hundreds of experts and activists in religious harmony have been engaged in fostering interpersonal friendships with leaders and persons from other communities. They have been interacting with audiences of diverse compositions at organizations of different communities. All these sustained efforts certainly have contributed to the promotion of good will, mutual understanding, fellowship, harmony and peace, both at the national and global levels. These efforts from the Christian community, along with efforts from other communities, without doubt, are geared towards building a 'culture of interactive, dialogical, participatory, collaborative, democratic, inclusive, innovative and harmonious living' for the human species and are sure to contribute its mite in making a world that is definitely better than what it is today. Ensuring the present society better than the past one and making the future society better than the present one would characterize an integrated sense of time, which, in fact, is a more down-to-earth way of pursuing divine altitudes as well as human magnitudes in life.

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