

LIVING IN HARMONY WITH OTHER COMMUNITIES

Dr M.D. Thomas

Our memories, I am sure, are still alive to the brutal atrocities perpetrated against the Christian community in Orissa and other parts of the country in recent months and years. About fifty districts were hit by violence; several hundreds of villages were traumatized; many thousands of houses were burnt or destroyed; above fifty thousand people were displaced and rendered homeless; hundreds of persons were burnt alive or murdered; a lot of women, including nuns, were raped; personal documents of numerous people were burned; quite a few hundreds of churches were desecrated and ruined; a lot of tens of public institutions, like schools, colleges, social welfare centres, orphanages, hostels, hospitals and dispensaries, were vandalized; thousands and thousands of people had to flee to the unprotected forests or take refuge in the carelessly managed relief camps; in sum, countless human beings were forcefully dragged into incalculable miseries of diverse degrees; they became badly sick, jobless, shattered in life and indefinitely uncertain about their future.

It is obvious that the above calamity has been orchestrated by certain misguided fundamentalist forces. The sweeping attacks have been grounded mainly on the fabricated pretexts of religious conversion. All the same, it is more than clear to any well-meaning person that there have been political, economic, ethnic and social considerations behind the fowl design. Inability to recognize the inner deficiencies of one's own community, re-asserting the domination of the so called high caste community, snatching the private property of the poor away, attempting to weaken the Christian commitment to the uplift of the weaker sections of the society, ventilating the deep-seated feelings of jealousy towards the Christian community in its popularly acclaimed social welfare schemes and inflicting a fear complex in the Christian community against its multifarious advancements of service were some of the inherent dimensions of the unexpressed evil design implemented by the miscreants. It is not difficult to observe that the above devastation is connected to similar massive violence that was performed on the Sikh and the Muslim communities in the past. At any rate, this communal tragedy projects itself as a 'national shame', to quote the words of the Prime Minister of our country. It is a matter of national mourning, as well. Besides, it is an issue of deep concern, because it is done to a community that has contributed in an unparalleled way to the making of the country through its committed service in the educational, medical, social and other areas.

It is imperative for us, as citizens of independent India and as members of the global human society of the 21st century, to go beyond the limits of the Christian community

and to mull over seriously the lessons that cross the purview of religion itself. We have to delve deep into the drastic implications of the communal tragedy that is recorded in black letters in the annals of the country and of world history. First and foremost, it is a deplorable anti-social drive against the honest efforts of a large number of individuals and organizations of all religious persuasions for promoting harmony among communities of faith and ideologies. It is a massive violation of another community by one community that ends up in the sheer breakage of the courtesy line between the two. It is the display of the unabashed audacity to attempt subjugating the minority communities to a second class level. It is the desecration of the spiritual traditions and cultural values of the nation. It means the shattering of the secular and democratic fabric of the Indian national ethos. It is the utter defiance of the Constitution of the country and its provisions, especially that of freedom of conscience, religion and equality. It is a major violation of universal fundamental human rights as ensured by the UN Declaration. Above all, it is committing grave crimes against humanity like genocide.

Amidst all these hues and cries, it was a happy piece of information that two villages in Kandhmal district in Orissa were totally untouched by the miscreants. It seems that when the ruffians approached the villages to attack, the Hindu leaders of the respective villages took care of the situation. They told the violent mob in both places that if they dared to enter those villages to attack they would not go back alive. Consequently, the mindless ‘gundas’ never attempted to attack any Christian houses in those villages. The reason is obvious. The Christians in those villages maintained an excellent rapport with the Hindus living around them in the surrounding area. Amidst the unrestrained violence of the hysterical mob all around the district, the happy news of the above villages is nothing less than a miracle. These villages and the Christians in these villages can speak to us volumes of how one has to live one’s faith amidst people who pursue other faiths.

‘Living in harmony with other communities’ is the right answer to tensions and problems of all kinds in the human society. Our being born into a society of immense diversities is certainly the sublime plan of the Divine Creator. Having different affiliations in caste, race, class, creed, language, ideology, interest, profession, culture and nationality is part of the innate character of life. Difference is a positive quality and is not to be mistaken as a negative drive and a separating factor in life. All that is present in the society and in the nature are the collective gift of the same God or Creator to the human society. They are the common cultural heritage of the human society that is to be enjoyed gratefully and in a shared manner. Different perspectives and traditions do not contradict each other in any way. Different communities are complementary to each other. A ‘spirit of togetherness’ is the fruit and utility of living any faith, too. As Christians there is an additional duty to maintain sisterly-brotherly

relations with people of all communities in a given context, on account of considering 'God as Father'. The above tragedy, though extraordinarily humiliating and painful, is a timely 'challenge' that comes down to us as 'a golden opportunity for responsible introspection and decisive action for creating, maintaining and fostering good relations with people of all communities'. 'Living in harmony with other communities', I honestly believe, is in line with the right understanding of the vision and mission of Jesus Our Master. That is the new and right way of being a Christian in an increasingly globalized and multi-cultural world of today, especially in Asia and very specially in India. Our country and the world at large look forward to 'a leadership with a difference' from the Christian community in India today, in order to facilitate ushering in 'a culture of harmony' among the humans in the 21st century.

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