

MAKING OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Dr M.D. Thomas

Religious leaders have to be universal spiritual masters. They are not leaders of ‘their own faithful’, in a given community. They need to consider the religious sensibilities of all faith persuasions. Their leadership has to respectfully take care of the sentiments of even those who do not subscribe to any religious faith. Only when they are capable of rising above the boundaries of one’s own faith perspectives and convictions, there emerges a religious leader, worth being mentioned. They must be characterized by a universal appeal. They have to be capable of coordinating the diverse cultural and social sensibilities of the world. The spiritual dimension of the faiths and cultures can be experienced only when one rises beyond the set limits of faiths and cultures. Spiritual heights across the boundaries define the quality of the religious leaders.

Religious leaders have to be multi-religious in their outlook. The Declarations of the Second Vatican World Catholic Council on ‘The Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions’ stated: ‘Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture’. This statement categorically underlines the conviction of the Christian community that inter-faith dialogue is the duty of all Christians. This is the grown up and right way of being a Christian. Similarly, every human being, irrespective of his or her religious or ideological belonging, has to maintain a positive attitude with other communities. Religious leaders have to discern and chalk out the details of such an outlook that takes the community to broader horizons.

Religious leaders have to network with other faith communities. Religious communities today can no longer exist like islands. They cannot afford to travel like parallel lines, either. They need to interact with each other, learn from each other and contribute to the enrichment of each other. They need to join hands with others to make the life of the society more harmonious. They have to be role models in pursuing peace processes. The attitude of considering people of other faiths a threat to one’s faith has to be changed. People should be helped to accept those of no faith as well as of other faiths as partners in the pilgrimage to God or Creator. Mutual networking is the mindset that suits the multi-faith landscape of the society, especially in South Asia.

Religious leaders have to forge interaction at diverse situations of life. To have one's existence in the same neighbourhood and to share the same working situations with people of diverse affiliations is a commonplace reality of life. To extend one's experience of the divine towards the other is a communication of one's faith. To listen humbly to the divine whisperings in others and to get enriched by them is a complementary gesture. To have frank sharing of one's emotional needs and aspirations, ups and downs, hopes and disappointments, successes and failures, etc, is to transcend the religious world as human beings. Such dialogical interactions at the level of life-situations, ideas, feelings and spiritual experiences need to be supported by religious leaders.

Religious leaders have to promote better relations and collaboration with other communities. To exchange ideas on matters pertaining to faith broadens the horizons of perspectives and leaves one with enlightened insights. To have good will and to be neighbourly and friendly towards others is to promote good relations of friendships with persons of other communities. To be committed to common humanitarian concerns and to work together, as children of the same Creator, for making a better society is to share a common path. This is dialogue in action. Inter-faith dialogue is interaction, better relations and cooperation among different faith communities and social groups. To live one's faith in an authentic way would mean all these and much more. Religious leaders are responsible for promoting among their followers such an attitude to life.

Religious leaders have to encourage civic sense. Civic consciousness is fundamental to being a citizen. It is the fruit of being civilized, too. Therefore, citizens can never part with their duties as citizens. From this angle, no person or sector should attempt anything that disturbs the smooth flow of civic life. The religious sector should all the more be scrupulous about practicing their public duty. In this context, the propriety and modalities of the religious processions on the road at festival times should be re-considered. They often make the entire traffic to a perfect standstill. They disturb the human needs, including emergency imperatives. They leave the road almost as bad as a long stretch of garbage heap. These processions seem to be more a demonstration of the power of the given community than any devotional practice. Religious VIPs seem to be absorbed in the prominence they enjoy then. The religious leadership is invited to revise such sheer violations of civic sense and contribute positively to social order.

Religious leaders have to promote universal values. Values the humans live by determine the quality of life. All communities, especially religious communities, have processed certain patterns of thoughts and actions as values. Religious values are the pillars of human life. Values should have a universal appeal. They should have the quality of going beyond the boundaries. Such are universal values. Commonalities

from the different religious and social communities form their contents. They travel the path of eternity. They are spiritual as well as human values. Religious leaders have to inculcate in people the basic qualities of being good human beings. They have to train people to be co-travelers in the spiritual journey of life. They should continuously remain in the process of discerning values that are capable of enlightening men and women of all nations on earth, regardless of their culture and religion.

Religious leaders have to be committed to making a more harmonious society. Dialogue begins when people meet each other. Getting to know each other is the path towards friendships. We do not meet Hinduism or Islam. We do not meet theists or atheists, either. We meet human beings like us, just like any other person of any faith or none. All human beings have similar aspirations and sentiments. Building bridges of understanding and friendship among people of different religions and ethnic groups will lead to harmony among the different social units of the society. A person of faith has to have extra capacity for a sustained engagement with all aspects of life. Faith and public life cannot be separated. Good will, interaction, good relations and mutual collaboration have to be maintained among people of all backgrounds and persuasions.

Religious leaders have to be catalysts and facilitators of social life. They have to shoulder such a noble and common mission. This is the spirituality the religious leaders of all affiliations are invited to live. Only a culture of sustained commitment to making a more harmonious society will usher in a tomorrow that is more worth living. The ball is in the court of the religious and spiritual leaders of the world. It is up to them to play honestly and effectively. The world is looking up to their success. ‘Either do or die’ is the challenge before them. The way they lead the human society decides the relevance and worth of their leadership. Will the religious leaders of all communities stand the test of the world today and establish their spiritual stamina by the quality of their leadership?

Dr M.D. Thomas

Founder Director, Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies

Floor 1, A 128, Sector 19, Dwarka, New Delhi 110075

Tel.: 09810535378 (p), 08847925378 (p), 011-45575378 (o)

Email: mdthomas53@gmail.com (p), ihps2014@gmail.com (o)

Website: www.mdthomas.in (p), www.ihpsindia.org (o)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mdthomas53>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mdthomas53>

Academia.edu: <https://independent.academia.edu/MDTHOMAS>