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On Inter-Religious Relations with Special Reference to Indian Religious Festivals

By

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In recent years the role of 'religion' has generally been considered in the negative term, specially in India. Today, it may be a Kashmir or Punjab problem in North India, but all such problems are attributed to 'religion'. But that is when 'religion' is used at the higher level either by a state or sub-state, or by larger religious communities to protect their special interests. One such good example is of the Babri-Ramjanambhoomi conflict, over a Mosque and Temple, between the two larger communities of India, namely the Muslims and the Hindus. A recent film 'Bombay' in Hindi has well projected this problem from this angle. But then there is also the 'religion' of people, which operates at the lower or local levels, the level of ordinary people, where it plays the role of establishing relations, more correctly it helps building a larger community positively. This lecture deals with the latter form or level of religion.

This lecture is based upon the actual case studies. Though these case studies belong to North West India, yet the application of these are applicable generally to the rest of India also. For the sake of convenience this lecture is divided into two parts. In part one, two cases, one from rural and the other from urban areas, dealing with the theme of 'relations in religion' are given, and in part two, some comments, along with a few views of others are offered, and at the end, in the form of concluding remarks a summary of the whole lecture is given.

Part One: Cases of 'Relations in Religions'

a) Village Zafferwal, A Case of Sikh-Christian Relations

Village Zafferwal is one of the largest villages of district Gurdaspur, in Punjab. Punjab is one of the Northern States of India. Zafferwal has a population of over 10,000 people belonging to Sikh, Hindu and Christian religions. The largest population of the village belongs to the Sikh religion, which is further divided into different communities. These Sikh communities have four Gurdwaras (Sikh temples) each located almost at one of the four corners of the village, according to the placement of different Sikh communities in the village.

In Zafferwal, there are about two hundred Christian families, who live in a separate colony, located at one of the corners (but originally at the outer boundary) of the village. These Christians have a pacca (made of bricks) Girja (church building). Interestingly all the four Sikh Gurdwaras and the Christian Girja are located upon the circular village street, which goes around the village.

Besides religion, there are other differences also between the two communities, both economic and social. At the economic level almost all the Sikhs (except a small number who are Dalit Sikhs), own land and farms and are economically well placed. On the other hand almost all the Christians are landless labourers, who have a very low income. Socially, Sikh farmers fall within the categories of either upper caste or forward class, where as all the Christians are ex-untouchables (or today known as Dalits).

But besides these major differences at the level of religion, social life and economic conditions, it is still the area of religion, which brings these two communities together, particularly at the time of major festivals. For the Christians of Zafferwal, Christmas is the major festival and for the Sikhs the main festival are Gurburabs, the birthdays of their first Guru Nanak Dev and 10th Guru Gobind Singh. The other major festival is the founding day of Khalsa brotherhood (the day on which the tenth Guru introduced the Sikh baptism and various other requirements, which a baptized Sikh should follow), which is also the day on which another festival Holi, a festival of colours is celebrated and in which almost all communities participate. But it is during the Christians' festival Christmas and the Sikhs' important festival Gurburabs in which the participation of members of both the communities is visible.

It is almost 50 years back when the Christians started a practice as part of the Christmas celebration, of taking out a Christmas procession around the village, following the main circular street. This Christmas procession along with others, includes four stoppages either in front of the four Gurdwaras or nearby. At the time of these stoppages, the Sikh will welcome the Christmas procession with a suitable offering and the Christian pastor/leader is asked to deliver the message of Christmas to all. In return, on the days of the main Gurburabs, the Sikhs also take out a procession and they will have a number of stops, but one of the main stops is in front of the Girja of the Christians, where the Sikh procession is welcomed by the Christians and the Sikhs also deliver Gurburab's message. This practice is still going on, though some times the Christian pastors have tried to disrupt this practice, but the Christian community continues to follow it along with the Sikhs.

Besides the Sikh-Christian interaction, which takes place on the days of the major festivals of the two communities, there are other occasions during the year, when the different religious communities come together, which includes not only Sikhs and Christians, but also Hindus. The village Zafferwal does not have a Muslim population. They migrated to Pakistan at the time of partition in 1947. But interestingly, the Muslims have left behind a common religious heritage, which helps in creating a community relationship among the inhabitants of Zafferwal. This heritage is in the form of Kangahis, which have a cluster of green trees with tombs of the Muslim Saints right in the centre. Zafferwal has two such Kangahis which are now looked after either by Sikh or Hindu devotees. The annual festivals take place at these Kangahis as part of the remembrance of the dead holy persons. At these annual celebrations, all, including Christians, Hindus and Sikhs take part. The celebrations usually include drum beating in merrymaking, including sports, and some time it also ends with a grand, but simple feast.

b) Metro City Delhi, A Case of a Christian Organisation with Festivals of Eid, Diwali and Christmas

Delhi is one of the largest (among four) Metro cities of India, which has been located in the North, but is the state Capital as well as the national Capital of India. Delhi, besides having a number of historical and cultural places is also having a number of nationally famed historical religious places, which include Jama Masjid (a Muslim mosque), Birla Mandir (a Hindu temple), Gurdwara Sisgunj (a Sikh temple), St. James Church and the Bahai temple. These are the religious places which are normally visited by all belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Jain and Christian religions.

But Delhi, besides being the main city of religious and historical places, is also the home for thousands of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Among these NGOs, one is the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), which was originally a branch of SPCK London, but later on in 1958 it became an autonomous independent Christian NGO. Today ISPCK besides being a Christian publishing house in Delhi, is also having a number of training courses in the areas of publishing, book-selling and 'workshops for writers. Its staff, numbering about twenty, share different religious backgrounds, which include Christians and Hindus. But through its work it has direct contacts with the followers of Muslim and Sikh religions also. Because of these multi-religious relations, ISPCK staff form a unique community. Mr. Habib Ahmed is a Muslim, and is involved in a number of small businesses, connected with the work of publishing. He runs a small printing press, owns a lamination machine and also supplies printing paper for books. Through these works of his he came into contact with the ISPCK staff. Mr. Habib Ahmed is an average practising Muslim, who celebrates all three Eids, -Eid-ul-Fitr, which takes place at the end of the month of Ramazan. According to the Muslim religious calendar, which is based upon lunar months, the ninth lunar month is known as Ramazan (around March/April). During this month, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and during these hours they do not eat anything. At the end of the month long fast of Ramazan is an occasion for rejoicing and thanking God. On this day Muslim believers remember one of the main teachings of Islam, according to which a human being is an obedient servant of God.

The second major Muslim festival is Eid-ul-Zuha, which is also known as Bukari Eid. This is the time when Muslims go on pilgrimage to Mecca (holy city). This pilgrimage is known as haj. On Eid-ul-Zuha Muslims offer goats or sheep in sacrifice to God. This is part of the commemoration of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son Ishmael in obedience to God's command. Therefore at the time of Eid-ul-Zuha Muslims celebrate this great act of sacrifice and faith.

On the day of besides the prayers offered in the morning, people felicitations to one another by embracing each other. They also offer sacrifice of animals or whatever they can afford. The meat of the offered sacrifice is given to the poor and needy. This is the reason why Eid is known as Eid-ul-Kurban (the Eid of Sacrifices). Besides this Eid is the time of a larger community celebration. In many places, people of other religions also join the Muslims in celebrating Eid.

At ISPSK Delhi, the celebration of Eid-ul-Zuha takes the form of community eating during lunch hours. Almost for the last ten years now Mr. Habib Ahmed has been offering to the members of ISPCK, both Christians and Hindus, the Muslim way prepared fried rice either with chicken or mutton (known as Biryani). Those Hindu colleagues who do not eat non-

vegetarian food, Mr. Habib Ahmed always offers them a special vegetarian lunch. So in this way, both the Hindus and Christians join with Mr. Habib Ahmed in celebrating Eid.

During, Christmas time the ISPCK Christian staff share their joy by either distributing sweets, including cake or inviting Hindu staff, along with ISPCK associates, the printers Mr. Deepak Seth (a Hindu), Mr. Habib Ahmed (a Muslim) and Mr. Surinder Singh (a Sikh) for a get-together meal. At the Diwali festival time, which is basically a Hindu festival, all the ISPCK staff join with their Hindu colleagues in celebrating Diwali (festival of lights), in honour of Lakshmi the goddess of wealth and prosperity. There is also another legend associated with Diwali, according to which it was first celebrated at the time of Lord Rama's return to Ayodhya, when he came after defeating Ravana, which acts as a symbol of the victory of the light of truth over darkness of falsehood. This message of Diwali is expressed in the sparkling of millions of lights, laughter and gaiety Diwali, of course is today celebrated all over India by all, belonging to all religions.

Besides ISPCK, there are thousands of other NGOs and governmental offices where similar larger community celebration of festivals takes place by all belonging to different religions.

Part Two: Views and Comments

The need of 'Inter-Religious Relations' has been expressed by a number of thinkers as well as by theologians in the recent times Hans Küng, an ecumenical theologian in his work 'Global Responsibility - In Search of a New World Ethic', while discussing about the need and scope of inter-religious dialogue says: "Even more, we need everyday dialogue of all the people of different religions, who meet and discuss daily and hourly all over the world on all possible occasions all over the place, where in questions great and small, the religions constantly interact in quite a practical way". Hans Küng, at the end of his discussion, concludes that there will be "no peace among the nations without peace among the religions" and "no peace among the religions without dialogue, among the religions". Here Hans Küng is using the expression 'inter-religious dialogue', with the same meaning, with which in this lecture, the 'inter-religions relations' is used, because at the one level at which dialogue should go on, according to him, is among "those who live in the same street or in the same village work in the same factory or study at the same university" (page 138).

If one carefully notes what Hans Küng has said, it is already going on in the village Zafferwal and among the ISPCK staff in Delhi. Hans Kung has made his remarks while dealing with 'Global Responsibility' of the 'Global Community'. However, about inter-religions relations, a Muslim thinker, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan has expressed more clearly in his work 'Indian Muslims-The Need for a Positive Outlook' and has stressed the need of people to people dialogue or relationship. Khan's comments came after the demolition of the Babri Mosque on December 6, 1992. He said, "It is high time that Muslims changed their way of thinking. They must look to the Hindu public... In fact, Hindus and Muslims must interact at all levels if ever tensions are to be eased between them and misunderstandings removed. Only in that way improved relations and peaceful coexistence become distinct realities" (page 138). These remarks of Khan are linked up with one of the main issues faced by India's two largest religious communities. Again in both the case histories of Zafferwal and ISPCK staff, Delhi, it is very clearly seen that the relationship about which Khan has made observations, among, the people of different religions, is already working.

The views of Hans Küng and Maulana Wahiduddin Khan are two representative views dealing with the problem of religion, which are created at the top level either by the religious or

political leaders. Because it is crystal clear that the process of establishing relations among the followers of Sikh and Christian religions are on for the last 50 years, in the village Zafferwal. The same can be said about the process which the second case of Delhi has narrated.

The two cases of Zafferwal and Delhi are linked with the major historical traditions or what some scholars of religious studies will call 'great religions', which include Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religions also. But every great religion has to get related by becoming part of a particular culture and society and when that happens, the great religious traditions become part of the popular religious traditions or reach the peoples' level. The two cases of Zafferwal and Delhi in real fact narrate the stories of great religious functioning at the people's level through their popular forms. About the popular religions or traditions a well known Jesuit scholar Michael Amaladoss in his work 'Walking Together' has said, "A popular religion... is primarily concerned with everyday life and community relationships, is constantly influenced by the reflection and spiritual quest of the great religion. A great religion keeps prophetically opening up popular religions to more universal perspectives. A popular religion keeps a great religion down to earth and relevant life" (page 91). The views of Amaladoss certainly get support from the two cases of Zafferwal and Delhi, where it is very clearly seen that when any religion reaches the people's level or takes a popular form it certainly starts working in building up a common and wider human community.

The two cases of Zafferwal and Delhi are very good examples of 'inter-religious solidarity' about which Daniel O'Connor in his work 'Relations in Religion' says that it takes place when one "is moving out from that sort of thing, a moving beyond such restrictions across frontiers, in order to stand beside, to identify with the other". Opposite to this Daniel O'Connor has earlier also referred to 'primordial solidarity' according to which one's solidarity is with one's own specific origins. He gave an example of Gandhi for the latter case by quoting Gandhi, when he said, "I must restrict myself to my ancestral religion the environment where in we were placed at birth by God". O'Connor also quotes from a Roman Catholic document, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (concerns for social matters) to make his meaning clear in the first sense of 'inter-religious solidarity', which reads: "It is above all a question of interdependence, sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category. When interdependence becomes recognised in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a 'virtue', is solidarity (that is) ... a commitment to the good of one's neighbour with the readiness ... to 'lose oneself' for the sake of the other."

He also adds: "Solidarity, then like friendship across the religions, can be a religious event in itself, not least because it is motivated, as it almost has to be, by love, by a sense of justice, or by a vision of human unity" (pages 18,19). The cases of Zafferwal and Delhi possibly are the best examples of the solidarity about which the Roman Catholic document, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* said that it is "a commitment to the good of one's neighbour" and it has the basis as love, a sense of justice and a vision of human unity. It is also true that this solidarity (relation) in it has the elements of economic, cultural, political and religious unity. This is more clear from the second case of ISPCCK staff of Delhi.

In the two cases of Zafferwal and Delhi, basically the meeting points are the festivals, about which, in his most recent work 'A Rainbow of Feasts- An Inter-Religious Appreciation'; Swami Shilananda, a Jesuit priest, while talking about the importance of feasts or festivals has said, -"To bring people together and strengthen their bonds of union is one of the noblest tasks. Festivals are occasions for people to come together. The remembrance of some past

event, religious or national, is the usual basis for common deliberation." Swami Shilananda also adds, "Unfortunately, owing to difference of religion or culture, the unitive force of festivals is not fully utilized, and at times they can even become occasions for strife and communal clashes" (page 7). To prove his view Swami in his work has narrated 54 feasts, of Hindus (30), Muslims(4), Jains (1), Christians (16), Buddhists (1), Sikhs (1) and Parsis (1).

Concluding Remarks:

The two cases, one of Zafferwal and the other from Delhi and the various views with comments, which are a part of this lecture, hint towards a 'deeper humanity', which are part of every human person and community. This deeper part of humanity it seems is the guiding force, either for inter-religions relations' or 'inter-religious solidarity'. This point is clear from the Zafferwal case, where Sikhs and Christians religionwise, economically and even socially are different, but still festivals of Christmas and Gurpurab are able to bring them together.

In the case of Delhi ISPCCK staff and their associates like Surinder Singh, Habib Ahmed and Deepak Seth, all of them practise different religions, which include Sikhism, Islam and Hinduism, but still the festivals such as Eid, Diwali and Christmas are able to bring them together into a community formation, at least for a few days in a year.

Finally, the two cases of Zafferwal and Delhi make the point very clear that at the ordinary people's level, in their ordinary way of life and work and their participating in this ordinary way of their religious feasts and functions continue to bring them more and more into human unity. At this level their differences of religions, beliefs and practices, become the uniting forces rather than division. This process needs encouragement and expansion for the sake of preserving the humanity.

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