



HUMANITARIAN TIFFIN TALK—IX

Rapporteur's Report

PANEL DISCUSSION

CHALLENGES OF THE CHANGING HUMANITARIAN LANDSCAPE: THE ROLE OF INTER-FAITH ORGANISATIONS

Thursday 29 September 2016
India Islamic Culture Centre, New Delhi

Organised by
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Background / Introduction

The delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in New Delhi held an interaction session on the theme: *Challenges of the Changing Humanitarian Landscape: The Role of Inter-faith Organisations* at the India Islamic Cultural Centre on 29 September 2016. This was within the context of the Humanitarian Tiffin Talk series. **Surinder Singh Oberoi**, Political and Communication Adviser, ICRC introduced the Moderator and the Speakers.

MODERATOR/CHAIRPERSON

Professor Akhtaratul Wasey – President of Maulana Azad University

PANELISTS

Swami Shantatmananda – Senior monk and head of the Delhi centre of the Ramakrishna Mission

Father Victor Edwin SJ – Jesuit priest and director of Vidyajyoti Institute of Islamic Studies

Prof. KTS Sarao – Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Delhi

Mufti Mahfooz-ur-Rahman Usmani – Islamic Scholar and founder of the Jamiatul Qasim Darul Uloom-il-Islamia

Dr. Dharmendra Singh Ubha – Director Education, Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee

Shri Jagmohan Singh Rajput – Educationist, writer and former director of the National Council of Education Research and Training

RAPPORTEUR

Dr Santosh K. Upadhyay – Assistant Professor, Ansal University

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Presentations

Professor Akhtarul Wasey invited **Jeremy England**, Head of the Regional Delegation of the ICRC for Bhutan, India, Maldives and Nepal to give the welcome address.

Mr. England highlighted how religion can mitigate the effects of conflicts and enhance the provision of humanitarian assistance. He cautioned against the dark shades of stereotyping, systematic hatred and attacks on humanitarian workers etc. There is a need, he emphasised, to come back to our common values of humanity. The time is right, he added, to learn from each other's wisdom and passion. He highlighted the role of faith based organisations in



providing guidance and help to the young generation to inculcate the values of humanity and mutual coexistence. He stressed that this kind of interfaith dialogue would help evolve shared values of humanity common to all faiths and ultimately ameliorate suffering. He also spoke on the similarities between different religious texts and the Geneva Conventions, a link through which societies affected by conflict can understand its relevance and ensure respect.

After the remarks of Mr. England, the Chair suggested that all faith based organisations could develop a common minimum programme to confront the ills plaguing society. He thereafter invited Swami Shantatmananda to make his presentation.



Swami Shantatmananda began with a Vedic hymn. According to him, scientific progress has failed to ameliorate the problems of humanity and instead has generated skewed human relationships causing desperation and misery. He indicated that economic

inequality is prevalent in most societies and is one of the main reasons fuelling conflicts. He highlighted the need to inculcate values in society which can then act as a gatekeeper for science and technology. He underlined the urgency for creating small inter-religious groups of likeminded persons to work collectively towards the establishment of humanitarian principles.



Father Victor Edwin SJ, began by saying 'to be religious, is to be inter-religious and to be a person of faith is to be a person of inter-faith' emphasizing the need for communal understanding and compassion for others. Sharing his own experiences, he said that recognizing the value of 'humanity' is the best way to promote peace. To him, the idea of 'love thy neighbour' within Christianity best demonstrates what he believes in, which is showing compassion and empathy towards those around you. There is a need, he concluded, to draw common lessons from the different religious scriptures towards developing a shared understanding.



Professor KTS Sarao examined the debilitating effects of poverty which traps humans in a cycle of delinquency. He laid emphasis on two immediate needs of humanity; to end existing deprivation by ensuring egalitarian access to all resources, and to inculcate the values of humanity and humaneness in people. He noted that acceptance and sensitization should begin at a young

age for children to become tolerant of the different ideas of salvation.

Speaking of Buddhism and its different doctrines, he highlighted one specifically which states that a good person does not indulge in the degeneration of other faiths, like the retributory karma theory of rebirth that says, "each one of other happens to be the part of one." Thus, any degeneration of the other is actually the degeneration of oneself. Competition should be replaced by cooperation as pluralism, according to Buddhism, can solve all the contemporary problems of humanity.



Mufti Mahfooz-ur-Rahman Usmani emphasised the Islamic teachings of universal brotherhood and fraternity and reminded everyone that the ultimate purpose of humans on this planet is to serve humanity. He spoke of God as someone who is tolerant and appreciative of those who serve humanity. Quoting from the Holy Quran, he said that the killing of one human being is equivalent to the killing of all humanity. In his conclusion, he observed that humanity should be the basis of all relations in the world and one must always treat others the way they want to be treated in return.



Dr. Dharminder Singh Ubha informed fellow panelists and the audience that when one recites the name of Guru Nanak, one seeks the welfare of all. Talking about the basic teachings of Sikhism, he underlined the three main tenets: to work with honesty, to chant the name of God and, to share the earnings of hard and honest work. He went on to observe the irony that one must teach humanity to human beings and emphasised the need to reconnect with the basic values of love and tolerance. He narrated some anecdotes from the lives of different saints and linked them with

contemporary humanitarian ideas. Speaking about Sikhism again, he analysed the cosmopolitan approach of this particular religion and the idea of “fatherhood of one God and the brotherhood of all humanity.” He concluded with the thought that staying true to the idea of humanity is what each one of us must remember.



Shri Jagmohan Singh Rajput, examined the direct relationship between scientific progress and unparalleled destruction, stating that this is the contradiction of modern times. People must learn to live together and this requires a knowledge of all religions, as well as the commonalities, including having an understanding of the differences so that misinterpretation of different religions can be avoided. He went on to highlight the five common elements of all religions; truth, peace, non-violence, righteous conduct and love and stated that these must become common knowledge. He also emphasised that fulfilling one's duties is necessary so that the rights of all others may be ensured. There is a need, he added, to inculcate the spirit of inclusiveness, pluralism and humanism within everyone. He concluded by saying that the success of one's life should be measured in relation to how many lives were positively impacted.

This brought to an end the presentations and the Chair opened the discussion to the audience.

Contribution from the Audience

Mr. Gaurav Rey in the audience raised the point of engaging youth in inter-religious and inter-faith dialogues in India and outside. Swami Santatmananda reflected on the said point and underlined the need for value added education for children and youth, referring to the ongoing work of Ram Krishna Mission in this respect. Adding to this, Mr. N K Singh from the Indian Red Cross Society agreed that different religious groups could synchronize their philosophies to attract the youth. Father Victor Edwin SJ and Dr. Ubha highlighted the three institutions of learning for young citizens; parents, teachers and, preachers. Young people respond less to preaching and instead like to be inspired and that must be followed as a model to engage and connect with them.

Mr. Sandip Jindal, an advocate with the Supreme Court of India inquired about the role of inter-faith dialogues in resolving religion inspired conflicts also reminiscing on the responsibility of the educated section of the society to understand the teachings of their religion to avoid any misinterpretation. To this, KTS Sarao again reflected on the debilitating role of poverty and spoke about selective amnesia within the media which highlights negative

trends and very rarely any positive ones hence, ignoring those who work for peacebuilding in the society.

Recommendations

- To create small inter-religious groups of likeminded persons to work collectively towards the establishment of humanitarian principles.
- To draw common lessons from different religious scriptures with a view of developing a common understanding amongst various peoples.
- To undertake sensitization of children and youth to develop tolerance towards different religions.
- To inculcate the spirit of inclusiveness, pluralism and humanism within everyone through dialogue and constant interaction.

Closing Remarks

Mr. Jeremy England expressed appreciation to the audience for its engagement and underlined the ICRC's commitment towards continuous interaction with interfaith organizations. He observed that words and actions hold equal power and simplistic generalizations about different religions have proven to be unproductive.



Professor Akhtarul Wassey joined Mr. Jeremy England in thanking the panellists and the audience. He emphasised that all faiths aim to make the world a better place. Finally, bringing an end to the discussions of the day, he proposed setting up of an advisory body comprising persons of different faiths who would play a proactive role in establishing peace in times of conflict.

The *Humanitarian Tiffin Talk Series* is an open forum that facilitates frank and professional interaction between stakeholders with a view to generating workable ideas that can contribute to surmounting humanitarian problems.