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WORLD RELIGIONS AND HUMAN DIGNITY

By Pabitra Chaudhuri*

My special thanks to you, Mr. Chair, for arranging the panel on this important topic, and gathering this group of distinguished panelists. Thanks to the Organizing Committee for giving me a chance to speak. And to this august assembly which will deliberate on the pressing issues of religions and human rights. I will try to discuss religion and human rights from the perspective of people, as a world citizen.

Religion is perhaps the greatest force that has shaped human life throughout history. Yet, religion has not been a subject of discussion in intellectual circles in the 20th century. Outside the parochial schools, religion has always featured rather poorly in school and college curricula, though the world is becoming pluralistic at a very fast rate. On a neighbor to neighbor basis, at least in the countries wedded to the secular democratic ideal, we do not have much problem sharing our gods, and praying to our own. Yet on a global scale, difference of religion enters into politics, economics, legal systems and wars with overwhelming effect. There are many troubling issues and it is only a matter of time for them to explode. It is in the interest of all common people of the world that we should address them soon. If you will give me courage, I would like to place before you some of the questions surfacing in the common people's minds in the real work-a-day world.

As we know, tenets of all religions foster brotherhood, truth, honesty and love among all, irrespective of boundaries – political, geographic or religious – which is a vital common bond and a solid foundation to start.

Let us explore the first serious problem; in many countries, there are explicit laws that favor one gender at a severe cost of coercion and suppression of human rights of the other. Let me share some facts about gender-related privileges to males and outright injustice to females that deeply affect one half of one billion people.

In most Islamic countries, marriage, divorce, child custody and alimony are state mandated to be governed by the *Muslim Family Laws* as interpreted by the religious clerics. On all these matters, however, women have to carry the heavy load of inequality. In matters of marriage, the women have very little say on the selection of a partner. She is not equal to her brother in inheritance.

In marriage, it is lawful for a man to marry four women and maintain them at a time under one roof. He can divorce any and all, at anytime, without showing any reason or submitting to due process. He pays alimony only for three months. He can keep the children above age two in his custody.

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It is very hard for a woman to get a divorce, should she want one. Let me tell you in the way a Moroccan professional woman explained to a journalist; in matters of marriage, divorce, alimony, child support, we are in the same position as our illiterate country sisters.

In 1948, when the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was adopted, only a handful of nations were practicing the Islamic laws – now it is in scores. It is dangerous that it is not going down but rather shooting up.

India, a large secular democracy of nearly a billion people, has a separate Act, prejudicial to Muslim women, empowering Islamic religious clerics in matters of dispensing justice to the Muslims in regard to family law. The thriving democracy, India has one civil procedure code for the rest of its citizens – Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jews and Jains, who make up 88% of the population.

In the late 1980's, a divorced Muslim lady, Shah Bano, filed a suit for alimony, as she was denied proper justice in customary religious procedure. It went up to the Supreme Court, and in a landmark ruling the court ordered a considerable compensation. Vehement protests erupted by the Muslim males and clerics, and the whole country was rocked. Government yielded to the unjust pressure and enacted a law making sure that a court finds no scope of jurisdiction in matters of Muslim marriage, divorce, etc. in the future.

If India bends down, then small secular democratic nations would find it difficult to hold their position of equality and justice for all.

Among the followers of the Mormon Church, who concentrate in Utah, polygamy is not uncommon. But, the women who marry into polygamous relationships know that the marriage is not sanctioned by the law, and they are doing so by their own choice, and not by any religious or legal compulsion. They live in their own way, peacefully, and the government also does not go out of its way to prosecute polygamy.

But the law is one spouse for one spouse. On this aspect, I draw attention to Ms. Mary Robinson who is considered in her own country as the voice of the voiceless.

Now let us look at another problem.

The world is shrinking at a very rapid pace; globalization is in full swing. Pluralism, secularism and religious tolerance is considered as the norm of the day. But it is not so in Islamic countries.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was signed in 1948, but two decades after that, in 1969, the Organization of Islamic Conferences was formed with 20 members, which now has soared to 56 member nations. In most of these Islamic countries, rules and laws are different for people of different faiths. Free expression of faith by others is either prohibited or seriously curtailed. Egypt, a declared secular country among the Islamic nations, is much better than others in matters of free expression. You may even wear a cross. The Coptic Christians have a population

between 8 and 10 million, and they are the original children of the soil. They are the Christians from the start of the first millennium, and thrived until the 8th century when Syrian Muslims invaded and overpowered them. Now they are the subject of continuous torture, forced conversion and murders.

In Saudi Arabia and neighboring Islamic countries you can not even carry a Bible in public. Several Filipino men were arrested and put in prison for handing out leaflets and video cassettes on Lord Jesus.

In fact, theocracy and secularism make different mind-sets. Let us look at the Indian subcontinent – we will see how differently secularism and theocracy work.

After a thousand years of slavery under barbaric Muslim and torturous British rule, India was set for independence in 1947. Muslims, who were about 18% of the population of British India, led by Mohammed Jinnah, demanded to Gandhiji, upon threat of a bloodbath, religion-based separation from the majority Hindus and got it as riots unleashed showed its fury. They got 22% of the landmass for 18% of the population. Pakistan was created and made into an Islamic country. Now, Pakistan is divided into two countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh, both Islamic. In Bangladesh, the population of minority Hindus, Buddhists and Christians now has come down to 10% from 35%, and in Pakistan, minority Hindus, Sikhs and Christians are now 2%, down from 23% just in 50 years, whereas India, which chooses a secular way, started with a Muslim population of about 8% to 9% , is now estimated at around 12%. This is the beauty of a secular tolerant society, though there may be aberrations.

Religious dominance breeds intolerance, and intolerance in different spheres of everyday life, even in normal times, brings ethnic cleansing. Draconian blasphemy law in Pakistan forced a bishop to commit suicide, in protest of death penalties sentenced upon Christians. In Bangladesh, bounty is declared on the head of Miss Taslima Nasreen, noted author and doctor, as she detailed in her novel, the pogrom of the Hindus in Bangladesh in 1992. She has been in hiding for several years.

Another aspect: corporal punishment.

I understand that just in November 1998, Saudi Arabia chopped off the hand of a pickpocket. Stoning to death is a dreaded punishment in law that silences the women even when they are victims of rape. Because law mostly works against women. As a result, in those countries only God may help a woman from rape, specifically if she is a minority woman, even in normal times.

The last problem we deal with is evangelizing.

Yoga and Meditation is an integral part of Hindu religious scriptures, with their origin some 8000 years ago, for complete control of mind and body. It is a step to empower the mind to delve deep into the ocean of spiritual attainment. Due praise is to be showered on the broad mindset of yogis, who brought Yoga and Meditation into the West, also adapted it to a secular form, devoid of its religious attributes so that anyone of any faith may draw immense benefit, without compromising one's own personal belief system. Because of their therapeutic value, increasing numbers of

psychologists and medical practitioners of preventive medicine are adopting these techniques, apart from the general populace. Universal good is achieved by the non-sectarian approach of yogis, making the scriptural knowledge a non-denominational one.

All the denominations of Christianity and Islam are, in high gear, proselytizing all over the world. A Hindu organization, Krishna Consciousness Society, and Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, are also active in preaching. America and most of the non-Islamic countries do not bar preaching. So the American, European and some Asian landscapes are changing fast.

Recently, Saudi Arabia financed an \$8 million mosque in California. New York also got a grandiose mosque. Now, in Fair Fax county Virginia, a huge school and prayer complex for an Islamic school are on the drawing board. Local opposition has been tackled with sweeteners, like use of a gym by locals.

People are becoming apprehensive. Why?

In fact, Saudi Arabia has taken up the project of constructing, I suppose, over 200 mosques all over the world including, a dozen just in the U.S. Saudi Arabia spends over 5% of its annual budget abroad on Islamic causes, per its own admission.

A disquieting question surfaces. How can a kingdom, or any state, carry on efforts relating to the cause of their choice religion or proselytize the world when they ruthlessly suppress any expression of any other religious faith in their own nations, taking advantage of the secular nature and open acceptance of other faiths in the world at large, while debasing other religions at home?

I think people, who are from the O.I.C. and settled in the free secular democratic world, who breathe the free air, need to give a thought for change of direction in their homeland. "Do the minority in my dear homeland enjoy the same religious freedom or same opportunity as I do, and take for granted, in my adopted land?"

As a corollary to this intolerance, there brews a new sign of intolerance in some European nations. A bad precedent has always its followers. Russia made a law on religion in 1997, with different obstacles for overseas faiths, particularly the Hindu faith, in the same way as some other former Soviet Republics. Certain European governments started changing the boundaries of activities of foreign faiths by their own explanation of the word "religion". The definition depended heavily on whether the organization is local or foreign. A report compiled on religious movements for the French Parliament was carried out with very little dialogue between the government investigators and the representatives of different faiths, in an absolutely arbitrary way. They are trying to make it difficult for ISKCON, who follow the 5000 year old Hindu Vaishnav tradition and others not well known in France, to function. Likewise, Greece effectively bars foreign faiths to preach.

Belgium, Austria and Finland are taking the same approach. Some Eastern European countries are poised for that almost theocratic mindset. Respect for the diverse religious traditions of the world is absolutely crucial in this squeezed world

where everyone must have the basic right to practice or change his own religion, wherever or whenever.

As I am carried away by the theme of unbridled freedom of expression and equality, I place a note of caution as well.

Since the advent of Christianity, and later of Islam, three worlds – the civilized and spiritual world, the primary simple world with indigenous life style and the world in-between, suffered the most heinous acts of destruction and carnage committed upon humanity by the zealots, missionaries and invaders, aimed at the conquest of the body, soul and possessions of the “heathen”. The savagery was sanctified by their pious religious establishments and perpetrated by the military power of the royalties.

Are those days not over ?

Surely it will not come back in the same way, but the world has to be extra cautious. I am a fervent admirer of secular democracy. So I feel the need to exercise constant vigil, to pry, to unmask if anyone devised any sly, surreptitious way, tailored to present day needs of the codes of ethical conduct, to carry on the flag of religious imperialism in the name of spreading God’s message, so that illiterate hungry people and naive indigenous people are not taken advantage of by the grand slam of the insinulators destroying their native culture and heritage. The only substance to matter in conversion is the realization of spirituality, without the aid of any material to barter. Conversion by coercion, deceit or inducement is absolutely reprehensible and must not be allowed to occur.

Close to the context is the call by Pope John Paul II, in his eighth encyclical “Redemptoris Missio” – its title in English is “The Church’s Missionary Mandate” – Published in December, 1990, by the Vatican, urging a convert drive, even where Muslims ban it. “The Pope was sharply critical of church workers, who in his eyes have gone too far in their sympathy for other religions, while making no attempts to convert its members.”

Clearly, the encyclical is a direct drive to proselytize worldwide, which is reflected by the feverish activities of Catholics, as well as all other denominations during the 1990’s. While they could not make much headway in Muslim countries, they targeted soft people, Hindus and Buddhists, worldwide. The aim is an increase in flock, not in spirituality. All sorts of unethical means have come into play for quick ambitious results. A sudden spurt in the number of new believers left a trail of families divided and destroyed, communities shattered, life styles wrecked and placed village societies in seize, making each one suspicious of the other. This does not touch the controlling ecclesiastics who govern the machinations for proselytizing from thousands of miles away. They have enough funds for buying a lot more than free meals for those helpless poor in the third world. Curiously, the ugly poverty in those places is a direct consequence of the colonial extractions by those same power bases.

A question arises from the call by the Pope – is it not an act of aggression? Is it not aggrandizement? It no longer looks like a noble goal of spiritual realization of the self.

Religion is marketed as a commodity with the aid of the latest mass merchandising techniques of crass capitalism. The sole purpose is the enlargement of the market share by any means. It smacks of religious imperialism of the medieval ages. Nobody wants the revival of crusades or jihads with their appurtenances.

No wonder Gandhiji said, “If I had the power & could legislate, I should certainly stop all proselytizing for it is the deadliest poison that ever sapped the truth.” Gandhiji told C.F. Andrews – “This proselytization will mean no peace in the world. Religion is a very personal matter.”

I abhor any external pressure, subtle or explicit. What I want is freedom and equality to explore spirituality for all – men and women, rich or poor, the illiterate and the elite.

I do not need any dogma, any doctrine, any philosophy to justify inequality – I simply want a world where I can freely practice my faith, call the same omnipotent God in whichever name I love to call, without any threat. If at any time I come up with more questions and become agnostic, then let me stay that way, or if at any serious juncture I find no answers to my questions and turn to be an atheist, then in the name of your God, do not corner me, but let me myself search alone for my answers. If my odyssey takes me to a new direction, convinces me to embrace a new religion to quest the answers of life and eternity, then let me have the blessings of your God in whichever name we may address the Almighty.

Thank you.