

RELIGION IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

By

Ven. Dr K Sri Dhammananda

The teachings and messages of the founders of world religions were primarily aimed at alleviating sufferings and bringing peace and happiness to mankind through the application of moral and ethical conduct and righteous living. However, world religions today have developed into massive organised impersonal institutions with the result that the original teachings of their respective founders have been so eroded or neglected that hardly any influence is left over their followers particularly in the field of simplicity, restraint, truthfulness and selflessness.

The moral content of religion and its peace-promoting spiritual values are clouded by the more attractive materialistic values. Many followers of world religions have ignored or slighted the injunctions of their religious teachers in order to seek power, fame and other material gains for their personal aggrandisements. That tend to pollute the minds of modern religionists and cause unhealthy competitions and barriers amongst different religious groups as well as within the same religious community.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

When one studies the history of the various world religions and the great influence religions had on people over a long period of time, one can understand the mistakes that have been committed through religious intolerance. Words like 'persecution', 'heretics', 'heathens', 'pagans' and many others of similar caliber have crept into the vocabulary of religious books to describe all the brutalities, cruelties, prejudices and discrimination carried out in the name of religion due to religious intolerance. These unfortunate occurrences have left a stigma on religion, so much so that many thinking people tend to turn away from the very word 'religion' itself. Real religious values are rapidly deteriorating and disappearing from the minds of men, even from amongst those who are designated as religious people. To counter this unfortunate trend, it is necessary and essential for a proper study and research into the practice of religious principles to be undertaken by all concerned in order to bring about better understanding and awareness of true spiritual values of religion and to avoid the unfortunate mistakes of the past.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

To co-exist in peace and harmony in a multi-religious society, one should have a sound religious education with strong emphasis on moral and ethical values as the first positive step towards better understanding and mutual co-operation amongst all religionists. All religionists should unite and co-operate with one another to promote and institute a proper and systematic religious education, not

only of a particular religion, but on the essentials of all religious teachings that would enlighten as well as give an insight into the nature of higher spiritual values of life, particularly its moral and ethical values. Such a step would be of definite assistance in reducing if not wiping off hard-core religious fanaticisms and traditional prejudices, which have been the bane of inter-religious strife. Other measures to help create a better inter-religious understanding and mutual regard for one another would be the setting up of inter-religious organisations catering for the holding of regular lectures, talks, discussions, seminars and forums on religions and allied subjects. In so doing, the motivation should always be on the search for common grounds leading to peace and harmony rather than the adoption of an attitude of supremacy or domination of one faith over another.

WELFARE ACTIVITIES

The holding of fellowship meetings, the institution of community service programmes and other social and welfare activities where all religionists work hand-in-hand for a common humanitarian cause, to uplift the lot of the more unfortunate ones in society would serve as a mean for a common bond of friendship leading to inter-religious peace and harmony.

YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

Another important area where religionists should seriously address themselves is in the field of youth organisations and related activities. The youths of today are the adults of tomorrow. They should not be allowed to stray into pitfalls of the present age. All the youthful energies and resources should be properly harnessed and directed towards constructive purposes. They should be apprised of all the fundamental teachings of religion in promoting a peaceful and harmonious society and not fed with venom decrying one faith against another. If properly guided through religious principles such as patience, tolerance and understanding, the youth of today would be the greatest religionists in the days to come.

TOLERANCE AND RESPECT

Tolerance and respect are two vital words that should be borne in mind in a multi-religious society. One should not only preach tolerance but try, on every possible occasion, to put into practice the benign spirit of tolerance as this spirit would go a long way in creating an atmosphere leading to peace and harmony. We may not understand or appreciate the intrinsic values of certain religious rituals or practices carried out by certain co-religionists. Similarly, others may not be in a position to understand or appreciate our own rituals or practices. If we do not want others to ridicule our actions, we should not ridicule others. We should try to fathom or understand the practices which are foreign to us as it will help to create a better understanding, thus enhancing the spirit of tolerance amongst the followers of the multi-religious denominations.

It has been said that respect begets respect. If we expect other co-religionists to give us that measure of respect in regard to our religious observances, we in turn, should not hesitate to show respect to others when they observe their own religious practices. Such an attitude will definitely contribute to a smooth and cordial relationship in a multi-religious society.

Without the practical application of the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect for one another, the ugly venom of discrimination, ridicule and hate would pour forth in jets to destroy the peace and tranquility of our society and our country. It is a fact that in certain countries where the spirit of religious tolerance and mutual respect was non-existent, murder, arson and destruction of valuable property had taken place. Such senseless action, causing irreparable loss of valuable lives and property, should serve as an eye-opener to all those who cherish peace and harmony. All co-religionists should join hands in friendship and amity and in a spirit of good-will towards one another to attain the cherished hope of all peace-loving people in building a harmonious and tranquil society.

SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF LIFE

Life in this world is a short span in the space of time. We crave for material gain but we should not neglect the spiritual aspects of life as taught to us by our religious forbears. We should enrich our lives by putting into practice the pristine and noble teachings of our religious teachers to lead a respectable and useful life shunning evil at all times. The common denomination propounded by religious teachers of all world religions is for all humanity to lead a humane existence and to uphold the spiritual aspects of their respective teachings, thus contributing to peace and harmony.

PROPAGANDA OF RELIGION

In order to propagate a particular religion it is necessary that the best or the most important aspects of the religion be propounded to gain attention. To put the best foot forward is a fair enough proposition as all religionists, in trying to sell their religious wares, would invariably do so. However, in a multi-religious society where there is keen competition to solicit devotees and or converts, there should be a mutual understanding amongst the religious leaders to refrain from belittling, criticising or speaking ill on the beliefs and practices of another religionist. It is reasonable that all that is beautiful, attractive and beneficial in a particular religion be brought forth by its protagonist, but one should refrain from stepping on the shoulders of another religionist in order to tell the world that one's particular religion is the best and only genuine religion whereas other religious beliefs and practices are fakes. To adopt such an attitude would tend to create ill-feelings and animosity among religionists.

It is a fact that all religions exist for the good of mankind. All the great teachers of world religions preached peace and harmony for humanity. The respected

religious leaders of the world in their wisdom brought forth all that is good, humane and ethical for the deliverance and emancipation of mankind. The noble religious teachers did not castigate or humiliate one another to create chaos, misunderstanding and friction amongst the masses. They had the well-being of all mankind at heart. Their sole aim was to create a better world for everyone to live in amity and harmony.

The fact that the various world religious leaders appeared in this world at different periods of time and at diverse places, tend to create the apparent diversity and multiplicity of religious beliefs and practices prevailing in different environments and in different parts of the world. Each religious leader had his own concept and his own ways and means of imparting religious teachings to his multitude of followers, hence the diversified religious beliefs and practices.

VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCES

If a child happened to be born in a Christian family, there is no other choice except that the child would be brought up in accordance with the religious beliefs and traditions of the parents in a Christian family. Similarly a child born in a Muslim family, would be brought up in accordance with the beliefs and practices of the Islamic faith, and that of a Buddhist family would invariably follow Buddhist way of life. A child born in a Hindu family would be brought up as a Hindu. We are all bound by circumstances, environment, religion, race and culture, over which we had no control. As a child in a particular religious family, we would be brought up in accordance with dictates and religious background of the parents. The religious beliefs of our parents invariably became our own beliefs and a cultural background for our way of life.

Every religionist should try to understand the different environmental and cultural heritage of each and everyone of us and respect the person for what he is and what he believes in as a way of life rather than pushing down the throat of another person of a different faith, by ostentatiously declaring that “my religion is the true religion – you ought to embrace my religion – your religion is a false religion”. One man’s meat could be another man’s poison. No compulsion, force or coercion must be exercised in a multi-religious society, if we desire to live in peace and harmony.

FREEDOM OF WORSHIP

Although Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, freedom of religious beliefs are enshrined in our country’s constitution. We are free to be free-thinkers or to follow any religious denomination. We are not compelled to toe any particular line of religious worship or beliefs. Our religious freedom would be maintained and sustained for all time and that it would not be destroyed by fanatical moves by any fanatical religious group or organisation. Fanaticism, in any form from any quarter is inimical to peace and harmony in any society.

PATIENCE, TOLERANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

All of us are perpetually seeking for peace and harmony. We want peace and harmony for our family. We want peace and harmony in society and in our country. We do not want inter-religious or inter-racial clashes. We should uphold all that is ethical. We should practice patience, tolerance and understanding. We should work as befrienders to one another, helping each other wherever and whenever the need arises. We should discard racial and religious discrimination. Irrespective of race or creed, we should regard one another as brothers and sisters in a happy family. This should be the resolve of all co-religionists in a multi-religious society.

BE CONSIDERATE

Whilst appreciating the fact that in this country we are privileged to carry out our respective religious rites and practices without any hindrance, we must realise that we are living in a multi-religious society and as such, try to be considerate at all times in whatever we do. We must not forget the feelings of our neighbours who happened to be followers of a different religions and who may not appreciate certain ritualistic performances which are foreign to them. We must be considerate. We must not be egoistic and think of ourselves and our needs only. We may feel that because of a certain special occasion or happening in our home, sad or otherwise, we must perform certain religious rites and rituals in accordance with our tradition and cultural background; even so we must be fair and considerate in that we do not overdo things causing hardship and annoyance to our neighbours.

Whatever religious practices performed by us must be done within reasonable limits and within the confines of our homes without causing undue disturbances to the peace and serenity of our neighbourhood. If we dogmatically insist that we have the right to perform our rites and rituals, however noisy, cumbersome or irritating to others, without caring for the feelings of our neighbours, we would definitely be courting trouble or difficulties particularly in a multi-religious neighbourhood. We must not only be considerate but we must also be realistic in whatever action we do, particularly in our religious performances wherein we tend to go to extremes and even become fanatical at time. Consideration for the well-being of others, even under difficult or trying circumstances, is the key to peaceful and harmonious living in a multi-religious society.

ITINERANT SALESMEN

Many a time householders had cause to complain that the peace and quiet of their homes had been violated by the unwelcome attention of itinerant salesmen hawking their unsaleable religious goods, useful or otherwise, on to the laps of unsuspecting householders. The high-powered sales-talk by the inexperienced but over-zealous itinerant salesmen, could be a real nuisance to the

householders. They would not listen to a polite “no” as an answer but would insist that the goods, usually in the form of religious books, are of the finest quality and that by purchasing them, the householders would be stepping on the ladder leading to a heavenly paradise. They never cared to find out the particular religious denomination embraced by the householder – they are not worried as to the intelligence or religious sensitivity of the householder.

It is unfortunate that certain religious denominations choose to send out such over-zealous religious salesmen to hawk their religious wares. Such an action tends to debase rather than enhance the particular religion. No one likes to be told that they should embrace a particular religion by patronising certain religious books failing which they would be heading for eternal damnation in hell. Everyone should be given the respect of a mature thinking person, capable of deciding for oneself the virtues of a particular religion and whether that religion is leading him to heaven or hell. It is the person’s choice – a choice fully covered by our country’s constitution on freedom of worship.

It is considered that in a multi-racial and multi-religious society like Malaysia, our religionists should not stand so low as to debase themselves by condemning or speaking ill of other religionists who have embraced religions formulated by illustrious religious leaders many centuries ago. It would be well for a particular religionist to sing praises of his particular religion in his particular religion rostrum. We should refrain from besmirching the efforts of other religionists and allow the individual to decide on the type of religion that the individual would like to embrace. There is a saying which states that ‘good wine needs no bush’. If the wine is good, people will go for it. A person should feel free to choose what religion is good for him without the embarrassing efforts of an itinerant religious hawker trying to sell his religious ‘wares’ and insisting that the person should adopt a particular religion. To achieve the elusive peace and harmony in a multi-religious society, everyone should feel free to sing praises for their respective religions but should, at all costs, refrain from slinging mud at one another. The mud will spill and the effects would be disastrous.

POLITICS AND RELIGION

Another aspect to be considered in the search for peace and tranquility in a multi-religious society, is that political and racial issues should not be introduced into a religious forum. It is appreciated that in present day politics and even those of yesteryears, politicians would like to influence all institutions including religious institutions to further their political ends. All means are fair game for politicians, but religion should fight shy of politics and politicians. Spiritual platforms cater for the spiritual needs of religious-minded people, including politicians who are religiously minded, but such platforms should not be opened for politicians who might wreck the religious peace and serenity of a place of worship through their political affiliations. Religion is all-embracing – hence there should be no racial barriers whatsoever.

Each and everyone of us, whilst respecting and upholding our respective religions, must not, under any circumstances, decry or look down upon the teachings of other religionists. We should try to study and understand the basics of all religions, picking up what is good and common in practice and discarding those which are controversial in character. In short, uphold your religion but respect the beliefs of others. This will definitely help in the maintenance of peace and harmony in a multi-religious society.

OUR AIM

The brief write-up in this booklet contains an important message from our Chief Religious Adviser, Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda, for the consideration of all peace-loving people. It is a call to all religionists to work in the true spirit of religious tolerance in their religious practices to promote goodwill, understanding and peace in a multi-racial and multi-religious society.

Well-known for his efforts in promoting patience, tolerance and understanding especially among the Buddhist community in the country, the Venerable author has produced a number of such booklets and articles with the hope to enlighten the public and other fellow religionists to work in peace and harmony with one another so as to effectively promote and maintain moral discipline and a proper sense of religious values amongst their respective adherents.

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