

May the Light dawn!

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Today, as I welcome you to this first global celebration of the Centenary Year of the Chicago Parliament of World Religions and to this New Delhi Congress of the Inter-Religious Federation of World Peace on Global Harmony Through Inter-Religious Action, I do so with sadness in my heart. My land to this day moans with pain at what took place in Ayodhya on December 6th last year, and in the whole country in the aftermath.

The Sad Situation of Religion in India

This land of the Vedas and the Upanishads, the Gita and the Guru Granth Saheb, of Gautama Buddha and Ashoka Priyadarshin, of Jaina Mahavira and Kabir, of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda, of Nizamuddin and Sri Aurobindo, of Rabindranath Tagore and Maulana Abu'al Kalam Azad, of Sri Ramana Maharshi and Mahatma Gandhi, of Sadhu Sundar Singh and Sirdi Sai Baba, this land of Dharma and Ahimsa, this unique land where people of many religions have for two and a half millennia lived together in peace and harmony, this land of the rishis and sages, weeps today because Religion has been high-jacked by some politicians and prostituted by a few religious leaders. Political parties abuse and pervert religion as a mere means to get votes, even at the expense of hurting the feelings of other communities or of destroying the places of worship of other religions! Neither these political leaders nor the religious dignitaries show any compassionate concern about what happens to people or the nation in the process.

Swami Vivekananda in an address to the Shakespeare Club in Pasadena, California (January 27, 1900) said that in India, “even if you want to set up a gang of robbers, the leader will have to preach some sort of religion.” The Swami used his statement to show that in India in all things religion has to be uppermost. But what he said in his address to the concluding session of the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893, exactly a hundred years ago, is more significant and memorable:

“If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart.”

Well, sisters and brothers in the Spirit, who have come to us from all regions and religions of the world, Swami Vivekananda meant that pity for the fanatic Christian missionaries whom he had encountered. There are people in my country also who think along the lines Swami Vivekananda condemned, who deserve to be pitied from the bottom of your hearts. But give us a little more than your pity. Give us also your generous understanding and kind compassion.

This nation and our great neighbour, Pakistan, both bear the trauma of being born in the midst of fierce violence and hatred in 1947; we were drawn, even through all that murder and blood-shed, by two different pious hopes: India’s “Tryst with Destiny”, understood as a secular liberal democratic paradise where Hindu and Muslim, Christian and Sikh, Buddhist and Jaina, Jew and Parsi, Adivasi and people of no specific religious faith, could all live and work together in peace with mutual respect, where justice would rule, where no one religion would dominate, and where the poor and the downtrodden would flourish in dignity and freedom; and Pakistan’s fond dream of a perfect Islamic society where all would be equal

and free from what they see as the arrogant and., godless culture of the west, to live by the noble shariyah, worshipping Allah, in a nation where the lofty ideals of the Qur'an would become a social-historical reality.

Now both dreams have gone sour. Please forgive us for behaving irrationally. We are not in our best elements. We are a bit confused. That goes for all of us, Christians and Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. Even our intellectuals are not at their best. Bear with us. We will come around to our senses, we promise you.

We are glad you have come, in the midst of our darkness and gloom. You bring us good cheer and new hope. You are, together, a living symbol of our best hopes. We shall not be daunted by the darkness, but shall dare to dream again. Our hopes about the future should not be negated by the nightmares of the present. We Indians, who weep now, will soon join the rest of the humanity in lifting our tear-wet faces, once again smile-lit, to the rising dawn of a new hope.

Parliament: then and now

A hundred years ago, the Parliament of World Religions was a small part, almost an afterthought, even though several thousand attended, of the giant World's Columbian Exposition, a proud *fin de siecle* show of the new technological civilization of the New World of North America, which was setting out on a new campaign to civilize the world. Religion was just one aspect of American life, along with Art, Education and Electricity. Were it not for Swami Vivekananda's presence and personality, the Parliament itself would have gone down in history without making much of a mark, as one of the many such conferences. No one today talks of our highly learned and eloquent Jaina representative who was there, the distinguished Bombay lawyer Mr. Irchand A Gandhi, who gave a creditable account of Jainism on behalf of Muni Atmaramji of India and ably defended the Hindu religion also against the calumnies of bigoted and misled Christian missionaries.

Today we are at the new *fin de siècle*. This time the great Columbian Exposition has itself turned controversial. The question has been raised whether it was a good thing for the Native People of that continent (they were neither Americans nor Indians) to have “discovered” or encountered Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vesputchi and their like from across the Atlantic five hundred years ago. Has the American Technological Paradise also not gone sour by the time we get to the end of this American Century?

The question today is: Shall religion still look to the technological civilization as its patron and censor, as it did a hundred years ago? Shall it meekly accept the insignificant corner in the margin allotted to it by a secular and earth-bound culture dominated by the dazzle of modern science/technology, which was beating its drums of triumph at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago a hundred years ago? Shall we continue to pin our hopes on a secular culture which has not been able to provide us with inter-religious and inter-ethnic harmony within a nation, not to speak of global harmony? Or shall all religions go back to their own sources, in conversation with other religious traditions, to seek renewal and gain a new self-understanding, so that we can develop again the spiritual depth and the cultural creativity necessary for functioning as humanity’s true guides and advocates?

Human Race Needs to be Rescued

The human race first needs to be rescued from the adolescent hubris of an unreflected secularism and scientism on the one hand, and from the meaning-distorting and soul-destroying urban-technological civilization developed by the White West and their allies on the other hand. That is only the first part of the mammoth task facing humanity.

The secularism we want to be rescued from is the one that glibly assumes that the world open to our senses is the chief part of reality; that meaning can be found without reference to anything transcending that world; that religion is a matter of private individual choice (free enterprise religion, I suppose), to be banished from the public sphere, in such a way that the

main human activities like economic activity, politics, education, and health care can be undertaken without any transcendent reference.

The scientism from which we seek liberation is the one that assumes that modern empirical science is the chief way to get hold of reality, and that scientific knowledge is the higher kind of human knowledge. Our purpose in this civilization shaped by scientism-technologism seems to be to make reality too our colony, so that we can have a domineering, imperialist, exploiting grip on reality through our technology. We want to make reality our slave and our hoard. It looks like the same imperialist-fascist greed that drives rioting mobs to loot and arson, rape and plunder in Ayodhya or Bombay. The only difference between the industrial-urban-technological civilization and the rioting mobs seems to be one of style and scale and sophistication. Corporate and brutal violence exercised by the many over the few (the essence of fascism), monumental, heartless injustice with no concern for the victim, and plunder and looting with or without sophistication, seem to be common to both.

Different versions of the same are taking place everywhere—in former Yugoslavia, in Somalia, in the Middle East, and elsewhere. Adherents of religions are fully involved in the arson and plunder, in the torture and persecution, in the corporate violence of groups and governments which perpetrate injustice with impunity. Even in Ayodhya, according to the Frontline, after the Kar Sevaks had completed the “religious” task of demolishing the mosque, several precious idols and several hundreds of thousands of rupees kept in the place had suddenly disappeared. You, respected religious and spiritual leaders, must address these issues from this platform.

Let us find a new way of living together!

The second task is to find a new way of living together as human beings on this planet, with many ways of finding meaning and fulfillment for persons; this means not only several renewed religious and secular communities within which such meaning and fulfillment can be sought; it means also fresh ways of educating children to enhance their imagination,

creativity and sensitivity for meaning and for the transcendent; it means better ways of nutrition and medical care without loading the earth or the human body with chemical poisons and medical drugs; it means political-economic institutions which foster justice in democratic-pluralistic societies, promotes peace within and among nations, and nurtures a healthy life-environment; it means renewal of art and literature; it means a science and technology liberated from the shackles of bondage to war and profit and redeployed for the elimination of poverty, for wiping out ignorance and want, redeployed for helping humans to find meaning and fulfillment through serving each other, so that all of us can live dignified human lives. And in that process many of us can also find the Transcendent in our midst, within and among ourselves. Others will be free to seek fulfillment through renouncing the world and its ways.

If we can take the present darkness and gloom that shrouds the globe as a challenge along these lines, this Congress of leaders of many religions can bring hope, to us in India, as also to depressed people elsewhere on this globe. But I am slightly anxious. I do not see such signs of creativity among the religious leadership, even among the world's best known religious leaders.

Conclusion

Therefore I am coming to a strange conclusion. The kind of inter-religious dialogue we have been promoting is getting to be more and more pointless, beyond, of course, its rich symbolic value. I am beginning to envisage a somewhat different kind of inter-religious dialogue. My friends who are leaders of religions may or may not like what I have to propose. It cannot be carried out without their full cooperation.

Very simply put, my proposal is this: Let us give the lay men, women and youth in our various religions their full role in inter-religious dialogue and co-operation. I welcome what is being attempted here at the Inter Religious Youth Service level. But let us go beyond. I want the best talent in our religions, especially women who form more than half our

membership, to be drawn in: the literary writers, the artistes, the philosophers, the poets, the painters, the musicians, the professionals like doctors, lawyers and teachers, housewives and businessmen, political and social activists. Not in separate groupings, but coming together to reflect on the issues facing humanity. I would like to keep the religious leadership as well as the political activists as important minorities, but would not want either group to set the agenda or set up the programme. Something more sane and healthy, therefore more hopeful, than what has been hitherto achieved may emerge.

With those words may I welcome you all most heartily once again. Let us make this centenary year a time of soul-searching and pioneering. Let Ayodhya and its aftermath never happen again, anywhere.