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An Interreligious Approach to Peace

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Abstract: Peace is something everyone wants to have. It is the common goal of all religions. Without peace there cannot be true happiness. Peace is the basis of creativity and growth. Development and peace are also closely related. They are like two sides of a coin. In this article, it will be my endeavour to explore various aspects of peace. I have adopted an experiential approach inspired by a pilgrimage of faith that I have been involved in during the last 18 years, ever since an encounter with death in an air crash in 1982. I was serving as an officer in the Indian Air force at that time. This encounter with death at the least expected moment in my life made me realise that life is a gift and grace given to us with a purpose. It was my quest for the true meaning and purpose of life that brought me into a pilgrimage of faith as a disciple of Sadguru Jesus.

Christ. Keywords: Jesus Christ, Sadguru, Development and Peace, Purpose of life

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"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed " (Constitution of UNESCO, 1945).

Introduction

Peace is something everyone wants to have. It is the common goal of all religions. Without peace there cannot be true happiness. Peace is the basis of creativity and growth. Development and peace are also closely related. They are like two sides of a coin.

In this article, it will be my endeavour to explore various aspects of peace. I have adopted an experiential approach inspired by a pilgrimage of faith that I have been involved in during the last 18 years, ever since an encounter with death in an air crash in 1982. I was serving as an officer in the Indian Air force at that time. This encounter with death at the least expected moment in my life made me realise that life is a gift and grace given to us with a purpose. It was my quest for the true meaning and purpose of life that brought me into a pilgrimage of faith as a disciple of Sadguru Jesus Christ.

I have gone through experiences that have proved beyond doubt the interdependent and complementary nature of all religions and divine revelations.

Hence, I accept, respect and appreciate the truth in all religions and scriptures. But I do not believe that any religion has the whole truth or monopoly of truth. Religions and their scriptures are different limited expressions of the 'one truth' bound up with the cultures, languages, and thoughts, of different societies and their historical contexts. They are all pointers to something beyond. In themselves, they are not the 'goals'.

Religions and their scriptures are very important in our search for truth, happiness and peace. Hence, in this article, just as in my own life and mission, I have stressed the importance of an interreligious approach to peace. Each religion has a positive and unique contribution to make in humanity's quest for lasting peace and happiness in the world. I have briefly touched upon the 'inner' and 'outer' dimensions of peace. The emerging integral vision of reality and its importance in our quest for peace are also very briefly explored.

My most important contributions towards a culture of peace and non-violence, however, are developed through

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my own experiments and experiences. 'Dharma Rajya Vedi', 'Dharma Bharathi National Institute of Peace and Value Education' and 'Disciples of Christ for Peace' are bodies that I was inspired to create at different stages in my pilgrimage of faith. In, with and through them I have been pursuing the one and only mission of my 'second life', to be a disciple of Christ and an instrument of God for unity and peace in the world.

The five essential requirements, *Pancha Tatva*, for a culture of peace and non-violence in a multi-religious milieu, the 'Peace culture Paradigm' of 'Dharma Rajya Vedi' and the 'Peace and Value Education module' of Dharma Bharathi National Institute are fruits of my labour of love, a deep love I carry in my heart for my Lord and Master Jesus Christ, and for my motherland India. My Christian discipleship and Indian citizenship have been equally important to me. I have given the best years of my life to the nation, serving as an officer in the Indian Air Force. But today I see the whole world as one family. Hence, it is not Mother India, but Mother Earth who is the object of my love.

I believe that India and the Church have very important contributions to make in humanity's quest for truth and peace. In fact 'a marriage of East and West' as prophesied by my revered guruji, Swami Dayananda (Fr. Bede Griffiths, OSB), will have to be concretely expressed in a marriage of Hinduism and Christianity at a deeply spiritual level. From the spiritual communion of these two great religions will

spring forth a culture of peace and non-violence on earth.

'Disciples of Christ for Peace', Dharma Bharathi National Institute (Dharma Bharathi Global Open University of the future) and Dharma Rajya Vedi are meant to serve as 'salt of the earth and light of the world' in humanity's quest for a culture of peace and non-violence on earth. They embody in themselves a 'marriage of Hinduism and Christianity' at four levels – the levels of action, vision, philosophy and spirituality as I have been living and experiencing them. Hence, I have also tried to give in this article brief outlines of all these three bodies and their common vision and mission.

A Crisis of Violence and a Culture of Peace

The world at the dawn of the third millennium urgently needs peace. The twentieth century was, by far, the most violent century in human history. Its first half saw two major World Wars and the unimaginable destruction they brought upon the human family. The second half saw the death of more than 30 million people due to wars, small and big. The last decade of the century alone witnessed more than 100 armed conflicts in different parts of the world. Added to these are the innumerable acts of terrorism and violence that go on every day in various countries.

The year 2000 was an important landmark for all humanity, ushering in not only a new century, but also a new millennium. In order to take stock of the achievements and failures of the past and to seize the unique opportunity of-

ferred by the year 2000 to give renewed impetus to the work of building a peaceful world, the United Nations declared it as 'International Year for the Culture of Peace.' The U N also organised a 'Millennium World Peace Summit' of the religious and spiritual leaders from 28th to 31st August 2000 in which more than 1000 religious and spiritual leaders from all over the world participated. This was the first time that the United Nations organised such a meeting of religious and spiritual leaders to seek their co-operation and support for building a culture of peace and non-violence in a strife-ridden world.

Peace in the world is impossible without peace among religions in the world. Global Peace will also remain a mirage without the active support and involvement of religions. Moreover, without religious motivation one may not find the courage and the inner strength to sustain one's efforts for peace. These three facts are to be taken seriously by any one who strives for peace in the world. The U N O was acknowledging these facts through the Millennium World Peace Summit.

The political leadership cannot by itself bring about peace in the world because they can only function at the level of 'Law' and 'Justice'. True peace comes from unity and harmony. 'Love' and the ensuing righteousness constitute the basis of lasting unity and harmony and hence of peace. It is here that religion and spirituality have to play an important role. The initiative of the United Nations to involve the religious and spiritual leaders in its quest for world peace is sure to lead humanity into an era of greater unity and harmony.

Inner and Outer Dimensions of Peace

'Peace within the individual' is the basis of peace in the world among individuals, nations and religions. If there is no peace within individuals, there cannot be peace in the world. This truth is dawning upon thinking people in a very profound way all over the world today.

Peace within needs forgiveness and reconciliation. Most of us are 'wounded beings' in need of healing. Without forgiveness and reconciliation, there cannot be inner healing. Forgiveness can be very difficult at times, especially when the 'wounds' are deep. These are the times and occasions when we need the 'grace' of the Divine. Thus 'grace' can be seen as the deepest source and basis of lasting unity and peace in our lives and in the world.

Grace is given to us freely and unconditionally by the Divine, just as the light of the Sun is free and unconditionally available to all. But if our doors and windows are closed, there will not be light within. Similarly, if our hearts and minds are closed, prejudiced or contaminated by anger, hatred, resentment, suspicion etc., grace cannot take root or bear fruit in our lives. Thus grace, though freely given and available, requires a positive endeavour from our side in the form of forgiveness and reconciliation. 'Repentance' is a precondition for forgiveness and reconciliation. It is through repentance that the 'Kingdom of God' dawns upon us and becomes an experienced reality in our lives. This is the inner dimension of peace which is built on the basis of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Religion can play an important role

in helping us to find this inner basis for peace.

Peace in the world, though needing the strong foundation of inner peace, also has to encompass the economic, social, political and ecological aspects of human existence. Governments and political leadership have to play their roles effectively in these areas. Hence, what we need today is an integral approach wherein the religious and political leadership can join hands in humanity's quest for lasting peace in the world, integrating the inner and outer dimensions of peace.

Emerging Integral Vision of Reality

The mystics of world religions share a common vision and understanding of the unity underlying all apparent diversities that form part of the physical world. This unitive vision inspires them to preach and promote the higher and nobler ideals of human solidarity and unity of all life. They understand and experience the all-pervasive nature of the Divine Spirit and the sanctity of all creation. For them every one and everything is 'sacred.' They see the Creator in and through the creation. Creation for them is God's self-expression bound up with space and time.

A correct understanding of creation is essential for a correct understanding of the Creator. We tend to develop the qualities and attributes of the 'God' we worship. Hence, knowing the 'one True God' becomes the first and foremost quest of a seeker of truth and peace. In this process science plays an ever increasing role because it is through science we that can understand the se-

crets of creation. Thus, science and religion constitute the 'two wings' in humanity's 'flight' to truth and peace.

The discoveries of new science are opening up to us an integral vision of reality. Creation is seen as an 'interdependent organic whole in the form of a network of relationships.' Matter, mind and spirit are found to be interdependent and interrelated. Matter becomes conscious, and spirit reveals the divine potential in human beings who are seen as catalysts and conduits for the spiritualisation of the material world. In, with and through the human person, matter enters into the realm of the spirit. Harmony is achieved when matter and mind are subjected to the all-pervading presence of the Divine Spirit in, with and through the human spirit. This communion of the Divine Spirit and human spirit is the source and basis of lasting harmony and peace in our individual and collective existence. Both science and religion are needed for this 'peace which the world cannot give or take away from us.'

Integral Peace

'Integral peace' implies peace that comes from an integral vision of life. It also means peace that is the fruit of an integration of the human with the divine, of the secular with the sacred, of the masculine with the feminine, of science with religion. It encompasses the personal, societal and ecological dimensions of human life in which the economic and political dimensions are very important.

The economic dimension of integral peace assumes the greatest impor-

tance today in a world suffering from poverty and hunger. 30% of the human population cannot afford to eat one square meal a day, 25% of human beings are illiterate! Poverty, illiteracy and sickness go hand in hand. There cannot be peace in the world unless these basic issues are addressed effectively. Religion and spirituality may mean nothing to those suffering from poverty and hunger.

15% of human beings control and consume 85% of the world's resources. They live a life of affluence and over-indulgence without caring for the vast majority of their brothers and sisters in the human family who live in utter poverty and hunger. The world has enough resources to meet the needs of all but not the greed of a few. Economic justice is basic to world peace.

The exploitation and deprivation of the majority of humankind by the minority of the rich and powerful are facilitated by a political system where power is concentrated in the hands of the rich and influential few. A centralized political system is necessary for the centralization of power. Centralization of power leads to deprivation, oppression and violence. Rich nations of the world today spend more than a trillion U.S. dollars a year on weapons. A mere 25% reduction in the annual 'defence' budgets of these nations can eliminate poverty and hunger from the face of the earth.

A centralized political system needs and supports a centralized economic system. Hence, a decentralized political system is necessary for the decentralization of the economic system.

Only a decentralized economy can meet the 'needs of all'. Centralized economy meets the greed of a few. Political system and economic system are like two sides of a coin; they are interdependent and interrelated. Transformation of the one without transforming the other will not be possible.

Centralized economy promotes large-scale industries with greater profit motive. Human labour and human beings are often used and disposed of without any thought for their dignity. Nature is exploited, air and water are polluted; mother earth is raped in this mad rush for profit. Violence is inevitable in such a world. Peace will remain an elusive reality in a society with centralized political and economic systems.

World Peace needs environmental health and ecological well-being. Environmental degradation and ecological imbalance are often the fruits of large-scale centralized industries. Hence, environment-friendly technologies and small-scale decentralized industries that respect and uphold the dignity of the human person and human labour are prerequisites for ecological health of mother earth and for peace in the world.

Essential Requirements for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence in a Multi-religious Milieu

85% of the people in the world follow one religious belief system or another. Religion plays an important role in the lives of these people. A religious motivation provides them with the strongest driving force in their life and work. Hostilities and conflicts among religions have also led to great wars and terrible

acts of violence. Peace in the world is impossible without harmony and co-operation among religions in the world.

We are fast discovering the fact that lasting peace and unity on earth needs a religious motivation. Also, peace activists can sustain themselves in their tireless pursuit of world peace only if there is a spiritual dimension to their work. The UN was acknowledging these facts by organizing the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. Wars and violence are products of human self-aggrandisement, greed, lust, fear and insecurity. Poverty and hunger are also products of these evils inherent in human nature. These forces of evil can be fought and overcome only with the help of religion and spirituality. Laws and political revolutions cannot liberate humankind from the clutches of these forces of evil. History bears witness to this truth. Hence, religious and spiritual leaders will have to play a very important role in humanity's quest for lasting peace and unity in the world.

My own experience and the experiences of many who are sincerely working for peace based on a religious motivation have shown that in an interreligious milieu an abiding culture of peace and non-violence will need:

1. A foundational spirituality of peace that respects the unique contributions of all religions,
2. A holistic and ecological philosophy,
3. An integral and unitive vision,
4. A comprehensive and constructive action plan

5. And a cadre of committed workers and enlightened leaders.

An Interreligious Approach to Peace Promoted by Dharma Rajya Vedi

Inspired by the insights gained through experiments and experiences we initiated 'Dharma Rajya Vedi' (D R V) on 02 October, 1990, as a socio-spiritual federation for a New Indian Renaissance and Global Peace based on an integral vision of life and reality.

D R V presents and promotes a foundational spirituality of peace termed 'Pratyasa' for a New Indian Renaissance and Global Peace. The holistic ecological philosophy presented and promoted by Dharma Rajya Vedi is termed 'Dharmodaya'. The integral and unitive vision promoted by Dharma Rajya Vedi is that of Dharma Rajya, the kingdom of God built on the Trinitarian foundation of Love-Unity-Peace. In the specific and multireligious milieu of India this vision is contextualised in terms of a 'Bharatiya Dharma Rajya' (Dharma Bharathi in short). The comprehensive and constructive action plan of Dharma Rajya Vedi for a New Indian Renaissance and Global Peace consists of a Spiritual Revitalisation Programme (S R P), a Moral Regeneration Programme (M R P) and a National Reconstruction Programme (N R P).

The spirituality, philosophy, vision and action plan of D R V together constitute a 'Peace Culture Paradigm'. A cadre of committed workers and enlightened leaders for Dharma Rajya Vedi is being prepared in the form of a new type of Consecrated Society termed 'Dis-

ciples of Christ for Peace' (D C P), which was started in 1998.

Dharma Rajya Vedi was invited to the Millennium World Peace Summit held at the United Nations in August 2000 as one of those NGOs involved in promoting a culture of peace and non-violence in the world.

'Dharma Bharathi Module' and Dharma Bharathi National Institute:

The foundational spirituality of peace, the holistic and ecological philosophy, the integral and unitive vision and the comprehensive and constructive action plan of Dharma Rajya Vedi together constitute what is termed a 'Dharma Rajya Paradigm' or 'Peace Culture Paradigm.' This Peace Culture Paradigm is presented and promoted in educational institutions across India since 1991 as 'Dharma Bharathi Module' for Peace and Value Education, wherein 'grace' and 'endeavour' are integrated with 'grace' given the primacy of place.

A Dharma Bharathi National Institute of Peace and Value Education was established in 1993 to promote the Dharma Bharathi Module. The Institute functioned from Indore, M.P., from 1993 to 1998. In December, 1998, it was shifted to Hyderabad, A.P., from where it is functioning now.

A Post Graduate Diploma in 'Peace and Value Education' was started under the Department of Interreligious Relations, Madurai Kamraj University, Tamil Nadu, since the academic year 1997-98. This is the first course of its type in India in which science and reli-

gion are integrated in an academic course to prepare teachers for 'Peace and Value Education'. Dharma Bharathi National Institute of Peace and Value Education and its founder played an important role in initiating this P.G. Diploma Course. The Institute provides practical training facilities for the students undergoing this one-year course.

Salient Features of Dharma Bharathi Module

The 'Dharma Bharathi Module' has, as mentioned earlier, four integral components: a foundational spirituality, a holistic philosophy, an integral vision and a comprehensive action plan. The salient features of each of these 4 components are given below:

a) The Foundational Spirituality for Peace (*Pratyasa*)

The foundational spirituality for peace that constitutes the basic component of the Dharma Bharathi Module is termed '*Pratyasa*'.

The word '*Pratyasa*' implies hope which is an attribute of the spirit. Hope for humanity lies in a scientific spirituality that can promote a culture of peace and non-violence on earth, hence the name '*Pratyasa*' for this spirituality of peace. '*Pratyasa*' has as its basis, five principles

1. Rootedness in one's own religious tradition and spiritual experience.
2. Openness to the truth, goodness and beauty present in all religions and cultures.
3. Simplicity of life and minimizing of needs.

4. Prayerfulness and awareness of the all-pervasiveness of the Divine Spirit.
5. Non-violence in thought, word and deed, and strict adherence to vegetarianism.

These five principles of *Pratyasa* are also termed 'Pancha Tatva' of the foundational spirituality.

b) The Holistic Philosophy for peace (*Dharmodaya*)

The holistic and ecological philosophy within the Dharma Bharathi Module is termed '*Dharmodaya*'. The term '*Dharmodaya*' implies awakening of dharma. It is an awakening of the sense of duty and righteousness. This leads to unity and peace in the world based on love.

'*Dharmodaya*' is built on a set of seven principles, which together are also termed 'Sapta Rishis.' They are:

1. Grace is the basis and source of lasting peace.
2. Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation are pre-requisites for grace to take root and bear fruits in our lives.
3. All religions, scriptures and saints are recipients of grace. Hence, by following their noble teachings one can come to experience grace.
4. Grace once received, can be nurtured and nourished best by working for unity and peace in the world.
5. The path of forgiving, enduring and self-giving love, Sahana Yoga,

is the most effective way to promote unity and peace in the world.

6. Peace in the world begins with peace within individuals and families.
7. Peace in the world is impossible without intra-religious and inter-religious harmony and co-operative action.

c) The Integral Vision for Peace (*Dharma Rajya*)

Interreligious co-operative action needs a shared vision and mission. The vision presented within the Dharma Bharathi Module is termed 'Dharma Rajya' implying a world of love, unity and peace. This is the 'Kingdom of God' preached by world religions.

The vision of 'Dharma Rajya' is contextualised as 'Bharatiya Dharma Rajya' in the multi-religious milieu of India.

'Dharma Bharathi' vision is presented in the form of 2 models integrating the unique contributions of all 9 religions present in India (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Bahai). One model is known as 'Whole-person Model' and the other model is known as 'Nava Ratna Model'.

d) The comprehensive action plan for peace (Shanti Yagna, Chatur Guna and Ashtanga Yagna).

The comprehensive and constructive action plan for peace within the Dharma Bharathi Module consists of 3 levels of action – spiritual, moral and social. A peace meditation termed 'Shanti Yagna' constitutes the Spiritual

Revitalization Programme (S R P) within this comprehensive action plan. This is a simple form of meditation leading to healing, reconciliation, wholeness, and communion.

A four-point programme termed 'Chatur Guna' constitutes the Moral Regeneration Programme (M R P) within the Dharma Bharathi Module. These four virtues are to be practised first by individuals who wish to work for unity and peace in the world. After they have themselves experienced the truth of this programme, they can promote it among the others.

An eight-point action programme termed 'Astanga Yagna' constitutes the National Reconstruction Programme (N R P) within the Dharma Bharathi Module. Individuals, institutions and groups can take up one or more of these eight points and be instruments of national reconstruction for unity and peace in the world.

Disciples of Christ for Peace (D C P) and Dharma Bharathi Open University

A new form of 'consecrated life' is being promoted through an interreligious society termed 'Disciples of Christ for Peace' (D C P) founded in 1998. Dharma Bharathi National Insti-

tute is training members of D C P in the Dharma Bharathi Module. Trainees are also advised to undergo the 1-year P.G. Diploma in 'Peace and Value Education' conducted by the Department of Interreligious Relations, Madurai Kamaraj University.

After their training with Dharma Bharathi National Institute the members can establish Dharma Bharathi Institutes and Dharma Bharathi Centres in different parts of India and the world in affiliation with the Dharma Bharathi National Institute (Hyderabad). These institutes and Centres together will be linked up to form a 'Dharma Bharathi Global Open University of Peace and Value Education' that will help to usher in a culture of peace and non-violence on earth.

Education is the basis of integral human development and meaningful social transformation. A culture of peace and non-violence needs education systems and institutions that will help promote unity and peace within the individual, within the family, within the nation and within the whole world. We need teachers and leaders with courage, character and commitment to take up this great challenging task of the era. D C P and Dharma Bharathi Open University are prayerful efforts in this direction.