

Religious Tolerance and Respect for the Sacred

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The outrage that has been shown by our Muslim brothers and sisters around the world over the depiction of the Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon Him) in a cartoon, is not unexpected, given the central place the Holy Prophet holds in Islam and in the hearts and lives of all Muslims. One might question the legitimacy of the manner of expressing the outrage but not its reason and motivation. Religion is a very deep and fragile phenomenon. It reaches down to the deepest level of our human aspirations and also touches each person in a fundamental way. Religious sentiments are also different based on our unique personal experiences and encounters with the divine. Thus, the passion for religion even among people of the same faith manifests itself in different ways. Religious sentiments in most cases are largely unpredictable. But religious acts manifest the self-consciousness and the self-identity of the adherents of particular religions in reference to the divine. They are also the clearest evidence of the face of particular religions. It is not so much what people claim about their religion but the way they live it out that offers the greatest evidence of what that religion represents. It was the Prophet Muhammad himself who said that religion is the way we conduct ourselves towards others. It is important that religious people no matter their affinity become conscious of this truth: they represent by the manner of their lives, the face of their religion to those outside their religious tradition. It is also important that writers and artists and indeed everyone that has a public responsibility be sensitive and respectful of the religious beliefs and practices of other people.

The violent manner in which some Muslims have expressed their outrage however raises fundamental questions on the morality of the means to be used to defend one's religious faith and symbols. It is never legitimate to use violence to defend a religious truth. Nor is it expedient even in the short run to use violent means to press for respect for religious objects and personalities in one's religion. It is important that we emphasize the need for respect to objects and persons considered sacred in different religions. This has become imperative especially in multi-cultural and multi-religious contemporary societies, where people all too easily forget the highest esteem to which people of different religious affinities hold their religious objects, persons and symbols.

The unfortunate thing is that sometimes it is the adherents of particular religion that are often guilty of irreverent acts against their religion, not only by destroying holy places and symbols but above all by a lifestyle that gives a counter-witness to all that their religion represents. How many religious people today, in their grand standing can proudly show that their lives are modeled after the examples of the founder of their religion? How many religious men and women today who claim to be defending God are living examples of godly lives? In terms of respect for external monuments of religion, we could ask: Is it not the Muslims in Iraq that carry out acts of destruction in mosques and Islam's holy shrines? Is it not the Christians who produce the works of arts that insult the Christian religion? In India for instance, who were the perpetrators of terrorist acts in Hindu temples within the last two years? Most often the enemies of each particular religion are often found within the religion in question.

However, when the same irreverent act is carried out by people outside a particular religion, hell is let loose. Religious symbols (churches, mosques, temples, pictures and statues) are external monuments that reflect the inner faith of the adherents of particular religion. They should inspire people to inner conversion and personal and group transformation. What is more fundamental than

is the quality of one's spirituality and not just the external monument and magnificence of religious objects, symbols and persons that religious adherents are ready to defend or die for. What should be defended today are the values of each religion, especially those that help in building a culture of love, tolerance, happiness, progress and peace. Religious adherents should incarnate these values in their lives over and above mere externalities.

In the mists and swamps of our troubled times, the world must tow the time-tested path of religious tolerance. Religious tolerance is the capacity to accept others as unique human persons, who have the right to be different, especially in religious beliefs and practices. It entails the loving acceptance of the other person as an image of God, who has a destiny with God. For there to be religious tolerance, no religion should absolutize itself or impose a religious totalitarianism which fails to recognize the right of some people not to have any religion at all. At the same time, it must be admitted that that even if we do not agree with the religious convictions of other people's religion, we have a moral obligation to respect their esteemed personalities, founders and religious symbols. We ought to respect that which is revered as sacred in various religions. The often held argument of freedom of expression does not mean license to insult or caricature the religious beliefs of others. However, advocates of different religions must understand that the human heart seeks truth, love and inner conviction and not compulsion. No amount of provocation could justify the destruction of lives, property and national symbols for action executed by some errant newspapers.

Tolerance demands the common conviction that all human beings are equal in dignity and rights, and that one's religious affinity confers no right of supremacy over others. The passion for aggressive theocracy or religious totalitarianism being advocated by some religious extremists from different world religions should be condemned in all its entirety. They do not have a place in the world of today. The Koran, for instance, calls for restraint in promoting the cause of Islam when it says; "Believers: conduct yourself with justice and bear true witness, even if it be against yourselves, your parents, or your kin." (Quran, 4:135).

Furthermore, a sense of the sacredness of the individual human person, and his or her conscience and of the value of the human community conduces to tolerance. Added to this, is the recognition of the supremacy of love and of the force of inner truthfulness in the spreading of religion. Indeed, the measure of the value and validity of any religious act is whether it stems from love and transforms the individual into a loving and lovable subject of divine and human action. Any religious acts should be judged by how it promotes the ideal of love, create conditions for human development and makes true and lasting peace and happiness a more realizable goal in our human world.

In the light of these, genuine effort should be made to use the occasion of the crisis generated by these regrettable cartoons as opportunities to call on men and women of goodwill to appreciate the sense of the sacred once more. There are obviously some merchants of violence who are using this occasion to advance political and ideological agenda that are well hidden in the cumulus of the present uncertainties. The logic has always been: God is on our side and not on the side of the other religions. Thus unrestrained violence and caustic hatred, which result in burnings, destruction and loss of human lives, are permissible in the name of God! God is however not on the side of violence. Nor will the Holy Prophet Mohammed endorse the violent actions of those who claim to be defending him in the present circumstances. God is on the side of peace and love. We must respect the sacredness of religious persons and symbols as well as the sacredness of human freedom, human lives and the sacredness and integrity of people's property and estates.

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