

THE HUMANIST APPROACH TO INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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I have been placing my views regarding inter-religious dialogue for the last seven years at various forums. In all my dissertations I had highlighted the need for unifying humanity on a sound footing, and offsetting attempts by the vested interests to divide it, ideologically as well as socially into innumerable sections on the basis of religions, sects, creeds and nations. These efforts, however, have not gained ground so far.

We, in the twenty-first century, are luckily that we are passing through an era of enlightenment and scientific and technological advancement. Yet we have failed to differentiate between the concepts of “faith” and “religion” and their resultant effects on social development. We have been unable to comprehend the negative effects of “religion” and understand the positive aspects of “faith” in our day-to-day relations. Faith, in fact, unites people of different colours, races, and nations, and lends them clarity and vision about various concepts, while religion divides the people and disarranges concepts. Such an understanding has a direct bearing on bettering our social relations, effecting economic development, and improving governance.

True faith, consists in believing fully, and without reservations, in One God who is Almighty, the Highest Ruler over the worldly rulers, the Creator of the universe and mankind and all other creations, and the Framer of the Laws of Nature that are unchangeable. It consists in obeying His command of serving human beings irrespective of caste, creed, and ethnicity, and building societies on the basis of tolerance, justice, fairplay, amity and harmony. We must understand that God is for all peoples, not of the Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others separately. Another relevant thing that must be kept in mind, while attending to our worldly affairs, is that God has created man with inbuilt

qualities of creativity and productivity, as well as with inherent guidance in the form of conscience, that are required for living a fruitful and successful life. Hence God is part of the human self, and runs in his blood. A man should, therefore, look inwards in himself rather than up to the heavens, while performing his daily tasks and facing the challenges of life.

This concept of "faith", in my view, entails the following obligations upon man: -

1. To do people good to the people, and to build the society on positive lines.
2. To remove illiteracy, and promote education. To emancipate man's consciousness, and secure his release from delusions, superstitions and dogmas.
3. To create political consciousness among the masses, and to engender leadership qualities among them.
4. To develop the concept of "collective leadership" and dispel the ideas of "charismatic leadership" and "life-presidentship" in political parties constructed by the vested interests.
5. To secure firmly the representative character of the Parliament by fully safeguarding its members from intrusions by the unelected civil or military bureaucracy in the form of dissolution by them of democratically elected Assemblies of the sovereign people. To get introduced foolproof electoral rules.
6. To prevent the religious elite, the self-appointed interpreters of the word of God, from misguiding the people in the name of Islam, and from interfering, as a class, in the political process and in state management.
7. To work for alleviation of poverty, hunger, backwardness and other imperfections, and to improve the standard of living of the common man. To effect cultural and spiritual development of Pakistani citizens.

Let us, people of all denominations, Christian, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and other work unitedly as faithful servants of God for allaying injustice, oppression, exploitation, terrorism and wars for ushering in progress and prosperity in our countries, and establishing peace and amity globally.

Let us not forget that God's pleasure can only be sought by behaving as a worthy human being engaged in pleasing his fellow-beings, providing them with a safe, pleasant and beautiful haven in this world, and giving them a touch of love, happiness, confidence and comfort. Let it be known to all that adherence to one's religious customs alone, while not discharging the rights of the people, is of no consequence in the eyes of God.

Having said all this, let me also say that there is yet a role for the clergy and the ulema to play, provided they change their mindsets by giving due importance to building up a world of happiness, beauty and progress. This they could do by developing the intellectual capabilities of man, and satisfying his material and cultural needs. Thus, these dignitaries would be able to counter man's alienation from society and enable him to enjoy the material, scientific and technological developments accomplished so far by the society, by applying these advancements for the good of humanity.

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