

# Religious Diversity and Interfaith Relations in a Global Age

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It is generally agreed that the process of globalization has been with us from the beginnings of human history. “Indeed the capacity to globalize has been encoded in our genes,” says Carlo Fonseka, a Sri Lankan scientist: “Biological evolution has not fitted humankind to any specific environment. Roses cannot bloom in deserts and chimpanzees cannot thrive in the north pole, but Homo Sapiens can. In other words, humankind has the capacity to survive in any environment, including even outer space. This unique capacity – the capacity to remake the environment, if need be, to make it livable – makes humankind the only truly global creature on earth.”<sup>1</sup>

Globalization of human life was set in motion when human communities first began to migrate from one location to another in search of water, food and shelter or to escape natural calamities; it made significant advances when technological innovations made it possible to travel and communicate more easily across national boundaries and to move goods and services in large quantities over long distances. It has intensified over the past several decades as technology has advanced by leaps and bounds.

If globalization appears to be a normal and perhaps an inevitable process within human civilization, why has it attracted so much attention in recent times? Much has been said and written on this subject and much more would be said at this conference from the specific angle of the relationship between religion and globalization. I would, therefore, not dwell on the facts and figures but point to four elements of the way globalization is ‘experienced’ in our day, as the point of departure for our discussion on ‘Religious Diversity and Interfaith Relations in a Global Age.’

## The experience of globalization

First, even though globalization has been an ongoing process, today there is a *new consciousness* of this reality. The direct, immediate, and decisive impact of the effects of globalization on people’s personal and social lives has made them more conscious of its presence and operation: When four thousand people lose their jobs over night, or a number of villages are forcefully relocated to make room for a mega factory of a global corporation, or when a person’s life-time savings are wiped out because of the collapse of the money market for reasons that are mysterious, globalization ceases to be a topic for the experts. When it becomes a ‘bread and butter’ or a ‘rice and curry’ issue even common people take note of the reality and begin to ask questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Carlos Fonseka, *Globalization and Universality of Humankind in: Dialogue*, New Series Vol. XXIV, 1997, p.2.

Second, today there is a *new awareness* of the gravity of the negative impact of economic globalization. Many have become acutely aware that economic globalization of the kind we witness in our day is creating unacceptable levels of economic inequalities between and within nations; that it is insensitive to the irreversible environmental disorders that threaten life on the planet. There is genuine fear that uncontrolled quest for prosperity, unconscionable exploitation of earth's limited resources, growing poverty and deprivation of large sections of human community, and the renewed willingness on the part of the rich and powerful nations to conduct outright wars to protect their economic self-interests are a recipe for an impending global disaster.

Third, many have come to a *new realization* that globalization is not just an economic issue - as many would have them believe. In fact, much of the disquiet about globalization in many sections of the human community has to do with its social and cultural consequences. Many fear the use of mass media, which is controlled by economic interests to spread and instill a materialist, consumerist culture, which turns violence into entertainment and the pursuit of pleasure as the goal of life, as the greater threat in the long term. The unstoppable lure and the hold of the culture of Mammon on the lives of young people frustrate those who seek to preserve at least some of the religious and cultural values developed over centuries. Much of what passes for 'terrorism' has to do with venting frustration turned into anger and hatred.

Fourth, there is a *new level of comprehension* that, even though globalization of human life is an inevitable process, it can be directed in ways that enrich rather than impoverish human life. This new comprehension includes the realization that globalization is not a force of nature but in large part a process facilitated and directed by human activity, and therefore human beings can take concrete steps to bring about changes of its directions and goals. The social and environmental movements, the recent massive world-wide anti-war demonstrations to protest the war in Iraq, and wide networking, thanks to the Internet, of people who share alternate information are all signs of a new awakening to the realities of global forces at work and of the need to confront them. Our own conference here is an illustration of the kinds of links people have begun to make to understand and more effectively deal with the directions of this global process.

Our discussion of religious diversity has to be set in this context, and what I hope to do is to explore the challenges, opportunities, and problems that the processes of globalization bring to interfaith relations.

### **Uniqueness and universality of religious traditions.**

There is no need to argue the uniqueness of each of the religious traditions. The specificity of each tradition is self-evident because each of them has an inner cohesive vision (or visions, as in the case of Hinduism) of Reality that is peculiar to the place of its origin or to the prophetic figure whose intense experience marked its beginnings. This specificity is further entrenched when the expression of that religious vision is enveloped

in the philosophic, cultural, linguistic and geo-political realities of the place of its origin. One only needs to compare Islam and Buddhism or Hinduism and Judaism to realize how the prevalent political realities, cultural traits of the periods of origin, and even geography shape the way religious experiences find articulation as systems of beliefs, observances, and culture. In this sense there is an irreducible diversity that goes with the particularity of being religious traditions.

At the same time, there is also either an implicit or an explicit claim to universality in each of the religious traditions. In religions like Christianity and Islam belief in the universality of the respective faiths is built into their own self-understandings. It finds expression in the claim to validity of their faith-experience for all people, which is backed by the intention to bring the message to all human beings. The Jewish claim to universality is eschatological in that it holds up the hope that in the 'last days' nations will come to Zion, the City of God, to confess the Lord as God and to walk in the ways of righteousness and peace. Even though Buddhism has been one of the most successful missionary religions of the world, its claim to universality, as in the case of much of Hinduism as well, is 'implicit' in that it believes that all human beings would be liberated from their bondage to *tanha* (craving) or *avidya* (ignorance) if only they 'see' what they have seen to be the truth about the nature of Reality. Universality of religious traditions can also be argued on the basis that most of them emphasize common human values like love, compassion, justice and peace, even though diversities would emerge if one were interpret these concepts in concrete situations.

Despite these universalistic tendencies diversity has been the hallmark of the religious history of humankind. The universalism offered by them are often mutually exclusive to the point that at different stages of their history they have seen each other as rival or alternate communities, often in open conflict and sometimes at war with each other. In our own day, even though religious sentiments are very much used, misused, and abused to incite conflicts over other issues, there is an uneasy truce among religious traditions that allows them to live side by side in tolerable peace.

But what impact has the processes of globalization, with its pressures for integration, brought to religious traditions, and what are some of the challenges we face in a global age? It is to this question that we need to turn our attention.

### **Mutually excusive diversity under pressure**

Three important features of globalization have put the isolationist tendencies of religious traditions under pressure.

The first is the ease with which population movements have been taking place over the past several decades. Some parts of the world have been multi-religious for much of their history, but today almost all major cities of the world, including much of the sub-urban areas, have become multi-religious. To many peoples in the Western world responding

to religious plurality is no longer a theological or theoretical issue, but an issue of relationships.

Diana Eck, in her book *New Religious America*, points out that today the United States is the most religiously diverse country in the world. I had always looked upon India as the most multi-religious country, but Eck makes an important observation. She points out that it is not just Buddhism that has come into America, but almost all expressions of Buddhism - Sri Lankan, Thai, Burmese, Tibetan, Chinese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, Korean, Japanese etc. as well as most of the Modern Buddhist Movements – are represented in the country. Each community has built its own temples and has established the rituals and ceremonies that it brought into the country. This can also be said of all the other religious traditions. Almost all the branches of the Orthodox family of churches are in the United States, all brands of Islam, and Hindu temples dedicated to all the major deities of Hindu devotion.<sup>2</sup> The situation, in varying degrees, is the same in other parts of the western world. The global age is bringing the isolationist tendency of religious traditions to a decisive end.

The second feature, which stems from the first, is the increased knowledge among religiously inclined people of each other's religious tradition. Today it is impossible to walk into any major bookshop without stumbling into stacks of books on religious traditions that are aimed, not so much at the adherence of the particular religious tradition, but at others who wish to know a religious tradition other than their own. It doesn't stop there either. Many are attracted to the spiritual practices of other religious traditions and have gradually begun to make room for more than one religious tradition to impact their spiritual life. By remaining and practicing the tradition into which they are born and by adopting another to enrich their religious yearnings, they are becoming the new hybrids in the religious scene, throwing spanners into the smoothly oiled works of religious particularities.

Multiple religious belonging is not a new phenomenon. It has been a common feature among the peoples especially in North Asia. Many of them have found ways of holding together two or more of religious traditions like Confucianism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Shamanism, Christianity etc. as tributaries that feed their overall religious consciousness and practice. Double belonging has also been experimented with within Christianity but mostly by persons who make it a spiritual vocation. Swami Abhishiktananda, Bede Griffith and many contemporary contemplatives from the West in India, Tibet, Japan, Taiwan and other countries continue this practice of double belonging as their chosen 'spiritual path'. What is of interest is that the sense of double and even multiple belonging are increasingly become common among people who do not practice it as their special spiritual vocation. It is the bank manager who is at the fifth row in the First Presbyterian Church of his sub-urban congregation on Sunday morning, or at the

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<sup>2</sup> Eck's book is the result of the Pluralism Project she carried out of Harvard University. Having traced the religious diversity of the United States and the diversity of expression of each of the religious traditions, she thinks that United States may also well become the place for 'ecumenism' within the different groups of Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus etc.

synagogue on the Friday evening, who is also at the Buddhist vipasana meditation at seven on the Wednesday evening!

A conference of Christian theologians and Christians who practice double belonging, called to study the phenomenon at some depth, came up with three perspectives on the religious reality of our day that appears to contribute to this development. First, there is growing conviction that while it may be difficult to reconcile religious traditions at the theoretical and doctrinal levels, there is a unity of religious traditions at the level of ultimate religious experience. Second, many people who remain faithful to their tradition find the philosophical categories or the symbol system of another tradition the best hermeneutical framework to enter more fully into the insights of their own tradition. And third, which is perhaps the most common rationale, is that many have become convinced of the complementarity of religions and find it difficult to treat them as alternatives. In the concluding essay Raimon Panikkar holds that while multiple belonging may be seen as a problem it may also provide the opportunity for Christians to expand the horizon of their self- understanding and grow in faithfulness to the truth that lies beyond the boundaries of all fixed identities and exclusive sense of belonging.<sup>3</sup>

Some tend to look on these developments as aberrations and point to the rise of conservative sections within all religious traditions as proof that religions, as we have known them in mutual isolation, are very much alive and kicking. But, in my own view, a careful analysis of the overall changes in the religious consciousness of humankind in our day would show that Wilfred Cantwell Smith was on target when he discerned that the gradual convergence of the different religious communities has now reached the period of ‘a common religious history’ of humankind. There was a time, he says, when one could speak of a Christian, Islamic or Hindu religious history, but now they are all becoming ‘stands’ in the total religious history, “for we are now being pushed to a stage in which every religious person has been opened to the possibility of learning from all the religious traditions”. Therefore, he is convinced, that “however incipiently, the boundaries segregating off religious communities radically from each other has begun to weaken or dissolve,” so that “being a Hindu and being a Buddhist, or being a Christian and not being a Christian, are not so starkly alternatives as once they seemed.”<sup>4</sup>

Some have criticized Smith for his over enthusiasm for a ‘world theology.’ They accuse him of underestimating the tenacity and particularity of individual religious traditions, of ignoring mutually exclusive truth claims, and point to the conservative and even militant developments within many of the religious traditions, mentioned above, as proof that he has perhaps spoken too soon. My own feeling is that Smith, whose recent passing away we still bemoan, had always been ahead of his times, and had prophetic discernment of the impact of the emerging global age on the future of religious traditions.

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions? – Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002) p. 1-6. Includes ten essays on the issue of multiple religious belonging.

<sup>4</sup> W.C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1981). See especially his chapters on: “A History of Religions in the Singular,” and “Religious Life as Participation in a Process.”

The third, which comes out the first two realities, is the increased levels of actual interaction between peoples of different religious tradition. Not only the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Interfaith Dialogue, but many local churches have begun to sponsor dialogue activities as part of their ongoing ministries. There are also increased initiatives on the part of other religious communities to sponsor dialogue events. The proliferation of International Interfaith Organizations enable interfaith experience to many thousands of people at all levels of responsibility within their religious communities. Schools in several countries have begun to discuss multi-faith curricula; university courses on Interreligious Dialogue are being developed and offered; new discussions on the Theology of Religions abound; Dialogue Ministries, as professional activity, have come into vogue. Inter-Governmental organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations and even institutions like the World Bank are seeking 'interfaith advice' on how to deal with global issues like endemic poverty, ecological crisis, AIDS pandemic etc.

In other words, working on an inter-faith basis is gradually becoming the accepted way of operating in the new context. These wider interfaith involvements are further strengthened at the personal level by increased instances of inter-faith marriages, calls to 'pray together' on a number of occasions, and invitations to engage in common struggles for peace, justice, human rights etc.

The impact of the emerging global age in drawing religious communities together is too evident for us to over look. Smith is right in his observation that "the world has gone irreversibly interfaith." The global age is indeed creating a new religious reality and a new level of relationship between religious traditions.

### **Religious resistance to globalization**

There is also another side to this reality that needs to be taken seriously. The same global processes that draw communities together have also been experienced as a threat to the specificity and identity of religious communities. In response, some begin to build stronger theological or doctrinal walls to protect themselves from the impact of the global forces; others decide to contain their impact and the consequent disruption of their social fabric through active confrontation. In other words, religious traditions are also emerging as forces that resist several features of the emerging global age.

Unfortunately many tend to dismiss these reactions with labels like 'conservative', 'fundamentalist', 'extremist', 'militant', 'terrorist' etc. without searching the root causes of these developments. It is important to go behind generalizations to see where the resistance is coming from and for what reasons.

Three main concerns, among others, appear to motivate those who actively resist the forces of globalization from within the religious milieu.

The first relates to the issue of diversity. Many in the religious sphere see the forces of globalization as a threat to the richness of diversity. The success of the Industrial

Revolution, and the concept of 'mass production' that ensued to revolutionize world trade, it is said, was made possible by the scheme of 'standardization.' Standardization enabled Henry Ford to conceive the idea of the 'assembly line', which made it affordable to turn out numerous cars of exactly same design. This enabled common people to own cars. The concept persists. Global forces, especially those of the economic variety, have problems dealing with great diversity and they always try 'standardize' peoples' tastes, preferences and needs so that they can be catered to en mass. 'Standardization' and leveling down of many aspects of global life is experienced as a threat to religious diversity as well. This is further aggravated by the fact that those who hold the strings of power within the process of globalization come from predominantly one religious and cultural milieu.

The second reason, closely related to the first, has to do with the question of values. Each of the religious traditions is built around personal, family, and social values that help to hold the community together. There is an inalienable link between religious traditions and the values it upholds, and therefore, an attack on values cherished within a religious community is experienced as an attack on the religious tradition itself. In this respect, there are many perceptions of the difficult encounter between 'Islam' and the 'West'. Huntington's attempt to interpret contemporary history as the emergence of a 'clash of civilizations' has come under considerable criticism. It is seen as a very 'western' perspective which ignores larger and more pressing issues of the world. But what is true is that much of the active resistance to what is generally described as the 'West' comes from those who fear the subtle attack on the plurality of value systems through the use of the mass media, controlled by those who hold a particular set of values. Many also fear the cultural inroads being made into lives of communities under the guise of 'trade liberalization', 'free market economy', and 'democratization'. Again the hegemony of one particular religio-cultural symbol system as the only possible and universally acceptable value system is at the heart of the problem.

The situation is made worse by the reality that the culture and the values that are being promoted are not even 'Christian', as often accused to be, but of Mammon that puts its trust on wealth and power. One of the goals of religious life is to keep us more humane by keeping the lure of wealth and power under checks and balances; the global forces appear to be bent on lifting not only the trade but also the value barriers so that consumerism itself would become a value and goal of one's life.

Third concern, also related to the question of diversity, is identity. Of course every human being has multiple identities drawn from gender, family, tribe, language, religious affiliation etc. However, for a long time one's primary group identity was based on the 'tribe' or 'clan' to which one belonged. With the emergence of nation-states many had to partially sacrifice their 'tribal', 'linguistic' and 'religious' identities to give importance to overall national identities. However, large-scale population movements, dominance of one language as the prominent language for international transactions etc. have effectively undermined many of the identities nation, language, clan etc.

I could give a personal example to illustrate this point. I am a Sri Lankan, a Tamil, and a Christian, and all these three identities are important to me. In 1981, my church seconded me to work with the World Council of Churches, based in Geneva, Switzerland. My wife and I moved there with our three daughters of 5, 3, and 1 years of age. Much as we try to maintain our Tamil and Sri Lankan identity at home, our children began school in Geneva where the medium of instruction is French and the second language, German. People all around us spoke either French or English. We had to watch the vitality of Tamil as a linguistic identity for our children gradually diminish as they advanced in their school. If we minus the hours they slept, most of the rest of their lifetime had been spent at school! Having now spent over twenty years in Switzerland, despite our visits to Sri Lanka at least once in three years, our children's Sri Lankan identity is more emotional than real. Having begun school in Geneva, and working their way through the university there, they, for all intend and purposes are Swiss. With facility in many languages, having studied with and made friends with children of many nationalities, and living in an 'international city', they have become the products of the 'global age'.

Why do I bring this up? Because when I look at this issue more closely I realize that the only identity that has not changed radically since they came from Sri Lanka to Geneva is that they are still Christian. It did not matter whether they were 'good' or 'bad', 'practicing' or 'nominal' Christians; their Christian 'identity' remains untouched. They acquired it at birth, and only a conscious decision on their part would change it.

This is true at the global scene as well. In a global age where all other identities are under attack, religious identity, for those who have them explicitly or in the form of its cultural manifestation, has become the only identity that still gives them the sense of belonging. An attempt to disparage or subvert it is experienced as a threat to the very last straw of identity one holds on to.

This also means that religion has become, in some parts of the world, the one force that can be evoked to mobilize a large section of the population to bring about change or to resist it. Such mobilization calls for appeal to the fundamentals of the faith and to present them as stark alternative to others. Religious rhetoric is evoked to resist any and all threats to the coherence of the community – economic, social, or political. This has led to the remarkable re-emergence of religion, openly or covertly, into public life and discourse.

### **Implications for Interfaith Relations and Dialogue.**

The emergence of a new religious consciousness as also the different kinds of religious responses to the emergence of a 'global age', discussed above, have enormously complicated interfaith relations and dialogue. We are faced with the 'loss of innocence' in the dialogue enterprise and are entering a new stage in interfaith relations. Let me explain.

Getting to know each other, engaging in mutual interaction with the view of creating a community of conversation, learning from each other, mutual enrichment and correction etc. were among some of the goals when interfaith dialogue first came into prominence some decades ago. Some went further to envision the transformation of all religious tradition as the result of their encounters with others. Much of the subjects of dialogue were either doctrinal and theological or on common concerns that religious traditions faced together in the world, such as, issues of peace, justice, human rights, violence, environment, place of women in religion and society and so on. Interfaith relationships, by and large, were among those who were open to and had a friendly disposition to peoples of other religious traditions. We knew what issues to avoid in specific dialogue situations and whom to invite so that dialogue does not end as a shouting match, creating further alienation than before.

Looking at our past experience one would also realize that there were also three 'assumptions' in dialogue that have remained unexamined.

First, even though one recognized, in principle, that there was no separation between the 'religious' and the 'secular' in most of the religious traditions, much of our dialogue has assumed this separation. In most interfaith dialogue events we spoke as 'religious' people on 'religious' issues or as 'religious' people on issues that affected the world we lived in.

Second, even though we recognized that no one person or group can speak for a religious tradition we assumed that the persons in dialogue 'represented' their respective traditions; there is little evidence in our reports that we adequately and openly recognized the internal plurality of each of the religious traditions.

And third, we unconsciously equated interfaith relations to interfaith dialogue thereby ignoring the massive and difficult task of building interfaith relations at several levels of societal life.

The emergence of a global age is just beginning to cure us of our innocence; we are now faced with a much more realistic and yet a far more difficult task of building interfaith relations.

### **Interfaith relations in a global age**

I would like to highlight three dimensions that are central to the new stage of interfaith relations.

#### ***The resurgence of the importance of group identities.***

Based on the examination of many of the current conflicts around the world in which religion plays a role, (the Middle East, Nigeria, Sudan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, Chechnya etc), the Indian theologian, Michael

Amaladoss, points out that increasingly religious identity today “is a source, not of relationship but of conflict.” He holds that this conflict is a group phenomenon: “Though individuals may indulge in the violence, they act in the name and with the support of a group. Their violence is directed, not against particular individuals held guilty of some offence, but against another group. Many of them may be quite innocent individually. But they are considered guilty collectively.”<sup>5</sup>

Interfaith dialogue in the past has concentrated primarily on building interfaith relations through inter-personal encounters between individuals. The idea was to create a community of contact, communication, trust, and solidarity across the religious barrier. Those engaged in dialogues were considered “bridge builders” across the traditions. A certain “trickle down effect” was assumed in interfaith dialogue as well! Further, in most dialogue events there was little concern about the extent to which the individual in dialogue was able to truly represent the tradition, not only as a ‘religious’ system but also as a social, cultural, economic, and political manifestation. In some groups these dimensions were consciously suppressed “to keep controversies out” in the task of building a community of heart and mind.

Complexities brought about by globalization is, on the one hand, freeing the strong hold of religious traditions on the individual so that there is much more scope for engagement in dialogue and to cross religious barriers at the personal level. On the other, the effects of globalization on the lives of communities is strengthening group identities, polarizing peoples, creating enemy images, and using religious identity as one of the powerful forces to mobilize faith communities against each other.

This reality is perhaps the greatest challenge to interfaith relations in a global age. Today mending fences, healing of memories, reconciliation etc. needs to happen not so much between representative individuals but between communities themselves. This does not of course mean that we need to abandon inter-personal dialogues; they should continue to play the significant role they have played so far. However, we are under pressure to deal with interfaith relationship between communities. This is a different task needing different tools and strategies.

### ***The call for a comprehensive dialogue.***

We have the emergence of a global age; and we also have the experience of ‘September 11<sup>th</sup>’. It is not my purpose here to analyze the event, to try find the causes, or to scrutinize the motives of the equally tragic consequent events in Afghanistan and Iraq. One thing, however, is becoming increasingly clear: It is no longer possible to engage in interfaith dialogue ignoring the socio-economic and political realities. The widespread economic inequalities created by global economic forces and the over powering military might (and its ready display) have enormously complicated interfaith relations. Power is an important factor in interfaith relationships. And the increased sense of powerlessness and the experience of being dominated is a recipe for breakdown of relationships.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Amaladoss, “The Other as Enemy”, a paper presented at the Assises Pastorale Europeennes, Brussels, Belgium in May 2003. (To be published), p. 1.

I heard the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, Robert Edgar, say at a recent meeting (crediting someone else for the formulation) that there was indeed an “axis of evil” that threatens global peace and harmony: Endemic poverty, Degradation of the environment, and Weapons of mass destruction. What is intended is the statement that behind much of the conflicts in the world that are attributed to “rise of fundamentalism”, “clash of civilizations”, “religious extremism” etc. lie the stark reality of poverty, depravation and marginalization.

These are not new realities. Poverty and marginalization have been part of the social reality of all countries. But what is new is that all the advances in technology and the forces of globalization that can, for the first time in history, be harnessed to effectively deal with these problems, are consciously directed to enrich further and further one section of the human community at the expense of others. It is the same groups of people, coming from the same religious background that physically colonized and exploited large parts of the world that are also dominating and economically exploiting peoples and the earth in our day. Many see striking parallels between the anxiety of the market forces, using the instruments of global economic governance, to bring as much of the world under its influence and the zeal of the missionary movement that exploited the political and economic colonization of the world to bring the world to its own faith commitment.

These global realities have begun to impact interfaith relations. Conflicts between communities in which religions play a role can no longer be isolated as just ‘religious’, ‘social’ or ‘economic’. They have to do with the global forces that both bring human communities closer together and also accentuate the basic injustices that persist. Interfaith relations can ill afford to ignore this reality.

This means that in the global age those committed to interfaith relations also need to commit themselves to three other dimensions of human relationship:

- Justice and fairness in the use and distribution of earth’s resources;
- Life-centered values in the ordering of public life;
- Just and peaceful means of resolving conflicts.

In other words, we can no longer separate the building up of interfaith relations from the need to build a just and sustainable world in which peaceful means are employed to resolve conflicts.

### ***Role of religion in public life***

The shocking levels of the abuse of religion in political life during the Middle Ages led to the eventual conviction within the Western culture of the need to minimize or even to separate the role of religion from public life. Religion, thus, at least in theory, has been relegated to the private sphere. Those from within this tradition fear the emergence of what is loosely labeled as “political Islam”, “political Hinduism” etc. Two issues need to be considered here. First, there is increasing doubt in the minds of peoples from other parts of the world whether what is described as ‘secular West’ is in fact ‘secular’ in the

real sense of the term. Many consider the ‘secular West’ as in fact the old ‘Christian West’, even though many Christians would have considerable reservations about linking many aspects of Western civilization with the basic tenets of Christianity. The easy association of capitalism and a particular brand of ‘democracy’ with Christianity, the current close association between the US administration and the ‘Christian Right’, and the use of religious rhetoric to justify armed interventions have increased this suspicion.

The second, especially in the context of a Buddhist-Christian encounter, is a pivotal one, and goes to the heart of the assumption that the secular and the religious can be treated as distinct realities. This is of course an old discussion and we are well aware that most religious traditions do not respect such a distinction. The Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar and theologian, Aloysius Pieris, holds that especially in Asian religious traditions philosophy, religion, secular life, and spirituality form a single reality. He points out that in Asia ‘religion is a philosophy of life’ and ‘philosophy is a religious vision’. Within it true spirituality is the way in which we approach and lead our lives as a whole both as individuals and as community.<sup>6</sup>

Some have argued that it is the genius of separating the ‘religious’ from the ‘secular’ helped in the emergence of the ‘scientific world-view’ that had helped the Western world to develop with the speed it has to provide a high quality of life in terms of the material needs. Others argue that it is precisely this separation that has led to a concept of development that leave gaping holes in the understanding of humanity’s relation to nature, inter-personal relations, public values, and spiritual foundations. There is a new awareness that ‘quantity’ does not necessarily mean ‘quality’.

The debate over a separation between the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’, ‘material’ and the ‘spiritual’ is of course a false and sterile debate, for we are aware of their interdependence. At the same time, we have also the experience of the decadence that beset society when religious institutions grab hold of power and the unconscionable lack of compassion when material power and wealth begin to define the ‘quality of life’.

All these has resulted in a new quest for the meaning of life, and many who have had grave doubts about religious traditions are beginning to be open to what they may provide in the search for solutions. In other words, strange as it may appear, globalization has given a new lease of life to religious traditions. There is a new confidence, and a new sense of urgency of the need to seek resources from the spiritual traditions of the world to set the course of the emerging global community. However, no one is looking to any particular religious tradition to provide the answers, and we are only too aware that no one religion has the resources to do so. There is an unprecedented opportunity to build up interfaith relations for a new purpose and for a new level of contribution to the human community.

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<sup>6</sup> The concept is fully discussed in: Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (London: T & T Clark, 1999.)

What the global age requires out of interfaith relations is a new paradigm of a life-affirming culture in which compassion, responsibility, a sense of proportion, and the quest for justice and peace tempers and directs our quest for material well being.

Many years ago I first came across what Gandhi, the leader of the struggle for Indian independence, called the ‘seven blunders’ of the world: “Wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, and politics without principles.” At that time I looked upon it as ‘interesting’ and something worth noting down as a ‘quotable quote’. Now, as I look at them again, I begin to realize the richness of the wisdom that foresaw many of the problems that beset us as we grow into a global community. And the answer Gandhi had, which he himself put to the test in his political struggle, was to espouse the highest insights of religious traditions as the inspiration for organizing all aspects of life in community- at the village, national and global levels. He also found interfaith relations at the heart of this struggle; he held the Bhagavad-Gita on the one hand and the New Testament on the other.

The Lord Buddha’s intention in his words, “Let all beings be happy!” is perhaps the most succinct way of speaking about the inalienable inter-relatedness of all reality and an ordering of life that needs to have this at its central concern.

India’s philosopher-poet Rabindranath Tagore, in his poem *Gitanjali*, has this prayer for his nation:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
 Where knowledge is free;  
 Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
 Where words come out from the depths of truth;  
 Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;  
 Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;  
 Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening thought and action –  
 Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

(*Gitanjali*)

The lesson we learn from such wise longings is this: There is enough wisdom in our religious traditions to influence and shape the ethos of the emerging global age into a life-giving and life-affirming culture. Religious traditions, as partners and co-pilgrims, can together make that difference; and that very task can become the building blocks for interfaith relations in a global age.

We have the resources to do so. What we need is conviction, and the commitment to move forward.

Chiang-Mai, July 2003

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