

Education for Peace in a Multi-Religious World

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“The enhancement of peace through education from the standpoint of Hindu educational ethos and philosophy”

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- 1 One can speak about religion and peace only from a place of profound humility and self-criticism. Although our traditions commend peace as an ideal, and offer valuable resources for peace-making, these traditions are also sources of theological interpretations that have been employed to justify violence. As far as peace is concerned, the gap between ideal and reality in our traditions is a vast one. Our commitment to peace requires us to acknowledge the reality of violence, past and present, in the structures and practices of our traditions. Such discernment requires a willingness to be less defensive and more self-critical and to hold our traditions accountable to their highest teachings. Our calls for peace from our religious traditions will have more credibility if we acknowledge our failures to be consistent peace-makers.
- 2 Although peace as an ideal is assumed, it is also useful to step back and ask why is peace commended as a foundational value in our traditions. Why does violence contradict the core teachings of our traditions?
- 3 The Hindu tradition affirms the intrinsic dignity and equal worth of every human being. The value of human beings is not derived from the state and is not reducible to economic or political considerations. It is not limited by gender, age, ethnicity, culture, religion or national identity. In the Hindu tradition, the dignity of every human being flows from the equal presence of God in everyone. There are no exceptions to this core teaching. It is the source of the respect and reverence for all beings and the reason that all must be accorded equal rights. It is the antidote to any effort to deny the personhood of others. Such denial, as we know well, is often a condition and pretext for violence. ***Violence is a callous desecration of human dignity. There will be no sustainable commitment to peace without a profound respect for every human being and the affirmation of their intrinsic equal worth and dignity.***
- 4 The ethical value, in Hindu teaching and ethos, that most eloquently expresses this affirmation of the dignity and sacred value of every human being is non-injury (*ahimsā*), regarded as the foremost of virtues. Non-injury is accorded a higher value than truth. In his understanding of the meaning of *ahimsā*, Mahatma Gandhi explained that in its negative form it means abstention from injury to living beings. In its positive form, *ahimsā* is the practice of love and compassion for all. For Gandhi, *ahimsā* also meant justice towards everyone and abstention from all forms of exploitation.

- 5 In spite of Gandhi's best efforts to amplify the meaning of *ahimsā*, however, it still commended as and remains largely a personal virtue. Peace and non-violence are too often commended and practiced within overarching institutional structures and frameworks that are violent and oppressive. We succumb to the temptation of speaking in enticing ways about personal virtues while ignoring the challenges of identifying and transforming violent structures. This is where the real challenge lies if our religious traditions are to become positive resources and agents for peace. ***We will not achieve peace if we do not commit ourselves both individually and institutionally to the practice of non-violence as an expression of our respect for human dignity.***
- 6 Although not underestimating the challenges to peace-making, the Hindu tradition values education as an indispensable resource and means for a peaceful and just world. "There is no greater purifier in this world," says Bhagavdgita (4:38), "than knowledge." The reason for this confidence in knowledge is the understanding that our propensity for violence and inflicting suffering on others has its roots in ignorance (*avidyā*). Human nature is not intrinsically flawed or corrupted, but our thoughts and actions arise from a false understanding of ourselves in relation to other beings and the world. In the condition of ignorance, we regard ourselves as existing separately from other beings and the world of nature. We fail to understand our interconnectedness and, most importantly, to know the single divine reality that is present equally in all beings and that unites us in our splendid diversity. Missing this truth of our shared identity, and clinging to the idea of separate selfhood, we become subject to greed, selfishness and violence. We instrumentalize human beings and nature to satisfy our insatiable desires. ***Violence is a denial of the unity of life and our shared identity as human beings.***
- 7 The seeds of peace, compassion, generosity and empathy, however, are within us all. Under the condition of ignorance, these seeds do not germinate but when ignorance is dispelled by wisdom, the potential in human nature for goodness manifests itself in these virtues. We become, in the words of the Bhagavdagita (5:25), beings devoted to and rejoicing in the happiness of all. Through knowledge, the circle of our shared identity expands to include all beings. ***The highest purpose of education is to bring forth the inherent goodness of human beings. There is no hope for peace without knowledge that awakens us to the truth of our shared identity, interdependence and commitment to each other's happiness.***
- 8 One of the important marks of wisdom and learning in the Hindu tradition is humility. Theologically, humility has its roots in the acknowledgement of the limits of human language and understanding. The one divine is always more than can be defined, described or understood with finite symbols and language. Our ways of speaking will, of necessity, be diverse as we use finite symbols to speak of the infinite. The consequence is an epistemological humility and an openness to learning from those who speak differently from us. When encountering the traditions of our neighbors, we would do better to assume that they endure because they speak wisely and meaningfully to the human predicament and ask how we could learn from and be enriched by their distinctive ways of speaking. We will not learn, however, unless our disposition to these traditions is humble and we cease condemning those who are different.

- 9 Humility, however, is not relevant only for peaceful relationships in the religious sphere. In the public sphere, humility means that we resist possessive claims about the ownership of truth, and that we exemplify an openness to the voices and insights of others that fosters mutual learning. We must resist the denunciation of other voices merely because these are not the voices of our community. We learn to profess our commitment with openness. Mahatma Gandhi commended dialogical relationships of giving and receiving. He emphasized the fallibility of human knowledge and taught that one of the roots of violence was, in fact, the denial of this truth. Arrogance blinds us to our limitations, while feeding attitudes of self-righteousness and the devaluation of others. ***True learning is dialogical, and peace requires a culture of dialogue, humility and a willingness to give and to receive.***
- 10 Let me conclude with a final point about the significance of education and peace. A study by the Pew Research Center (2010) about religious knowledge in the United States discovered that Americans are illiterate. I am not certain if any surveys of this kind have been done in Europe. Those without knowledge of other traditions were more likely to be disposed negatively towards practitioners of those traditions. Religious illiteracy and ignorance contribute to hostility and to the weakening of relationships in the civic sphere. Interfaith understanding and cooperation, on the other hand, strengthen communities and reduce civil conflict and hostility.
- 11 In this context, we may do well to consider another suggestion offered by Mahatma Gandhi. In one of his well-known statements, Gandhi spoke of the “duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others’ religions, as we would have them respect our own, a friendly study of the world’s religions is a sacred duty.” In calling for a sympathetic and friendly study of other traditions Gandhi, I think, was trying to counter our human tendency to see our own tradition in ideal terms and to speak of the flawed reality of other traditions. All traditions revealed a gap between ideal and reality. In his own time, Gandhi understood well the connection between ignorance, stereotyping, hostility and violence in communities of diversity. For Gandhi, however, it was not just a question of learning about and gathering information. This is necessary but not sufficient for peace and for strengthening civic life. Accurate knowledge of other traditions must be complemented by the development of relationships of friendships between people of different traditions. The ashrams or communities founded by Gandhi in South Africa and in India intentionally included persons of different faiths: Hindus and Muslims, Christians and Jews. They became friends and learned about each other’s traditions by participating in daily prayer meetings that included readings from the Qur’an, the Bible and the Bhagavadgita. They labored side by side with each other in the service of the community. ***There is no positive peace without accurate and empathetic understanding of each other’s traditions and, most important, deep friendship in the midst of our diversity.***

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