

Celebrating Diversity

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It was in 1830. A Catholic priest with his companions and faithful was in search of a place in Kottayam District of Kerala, India to build a monastery. After their long pursuit they found a hilly area, a place conducive for building a monastery and church. There aroused an opposition from the part of local Hindus, stating that they have the plan to construct a temple in the same place. The prominent Muslim leaders of the place compelled the priest to continue his works for the church and they will help to suppress the opposition from Hindus. The priest said: “There is no meaning in constructing a Christian church creating wounds in the heart of my Hindu brethren”. Later he built a church and a monastery in a nearby hilly place called Mannanam, near Kottayam, Kerala, India. That priest was Bl.Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

Fr.Chavara was a great sage who played a pivotal role in deconstructing the times, making it a great age of enlightenment in cultural, educational, social and religious fields of India. He was the one who founded the first indigenous religious congregation in India for Men, CMI (Carmelites of Mary Immaculate) in 1831 and in 1866 another congregation for women. Women TOCD, now divided into two according to the Syrian and Latin Rites, viz, CMC (Congregation of the Mother of Carmel and CTC (Congregation of Teresian Carmelites). He was the man who started the first Sanskrit school in 1846 at Mannanam where all children irrespective of caste and creed were taught. It was the first Sanskrit school of such kind in India. He initiated also a home for the aged in Kerala in 1869 and it was open for people of all religion.

Fr.Chavara was inspired by the ancient tradition of India which accepted different religions and culture and he spread the message of tolerance and harmony through his words and deeds. He was the inspirational source behind the unparalleled initiatives of **Rev. Dr. Albert Nambiaparambil CMI**, who was the founding Director of *Chavara Cultural Centre*, Kochi, the Secretariat of WFIRC, *Upasana* Cultural Centre in Thodupuzha, *Sopanam* in Adimaly and *Sagamam* in Munnar and of course Bl.Chavara is the real source of inspiration for my activities also.

Everyone of this meritorious audience belongs to various sources of faith and each one is keen to practice his/her own religion diligently in accord with dictations laid down for it.

India - the land of Religious Pluralism

As we all know India is a land of varied sources of faith. In this land does exist the followers of almost all the major religions like the Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Zorastrians, Bahaiis etc. Followers of each religion are content or confident of their belief, observe the rituals and propagate its virtues alongside.

Fortunately this blessed assembly comprises of great scholars, spiritual leaders and influential personalities of major schools of faith dominating our world. As such any reassuring

development in the form of discussions held or decisions meted out would greatly influence the whole society. The reflections echoes in our fellowship and live- together will be wonderful experience and long lasting.

God's creation is a Celebration of Diversity

The entire universe has ONE supreme creator and sustainer who is sovereign, all knowing and all powerful. The concept of a supreme god in all religion is one in essence. His name may vary from one terminology to another. In Sanskrit He is 'OM' , He is God in English, *Easwar* or *Bhagwan* in Hindi whereas in Urdu he is *Khudha*. In Arabic He is Allah, Tamil He is *Aandavan* and in Malayalam He is *Daivam*.

God is the same in essence and attributes to all and it is an undisputed understanding among believers of all faith.

Bible and Quran mention the divine messengers as apostles or Prophets. The 'Avatar' in Geetha and similar ancient Hindu text denote the same.

Diversity in nature is felt in all forms of life on the planet. Variety among sections of mankind is part of creation process, hence God's plan. Diverseness in language, dress, variance in colour of skin etc. are examples. On the other hand belief and religion are matters of *freedom with responsibility*.

Celebration of goodness

Dialogue with different forms of faith is not always possible because the differences in faith are unique. Dialogue between different religions is possible and is very important in today's pluralistic society. Every man is created in the image and likeness of God. There is an element of goodness innate in every human being irrespective of caste, creed, colour, language or nation. When people of different faith or different nation come together for fellowships or live together, the goodness in their hearts flourishes and the flourishing of goodness brings a new culture in the society; the culture of love, truth ,justice, equality, forgiveness, tolerance and compassion. That is what we experience now. The feeling of togetherness is the celebration of goodness in us. It has a touch of divine. That's why we feel elevated. We get the warmth of love. The goodness in our hearts speaks to the other though we belong to different nationalities and of different faith. We are different. We celebrate the differences among us.

Celebration of Differences

Religious fanaticism comes from a closed mind that cannot open up to others. If one thinks that the 'other' is the error or enemy, as if Jean-Paul Satre, the existential philosopher says, he proves himself a non-believer. The real follower of a religion cannot negate the followers of other

religions. If you are an ardent follower of Christ you will respect your Hindu brethren and you will participate in their religious festival, even Ramayana Month Celebration and Ramayana Recital etc. You will be able to organize the Margrib prayer or Ifthar Dinner for your Muslim brethren.

If you really believe in your God why should you be afraid of anyone who believes in other gods.? If you are a strong follower of Christ why can't you accept your Hindu, Muslim or Sikh brethren? If you are afraid of them or if you make them afraid, you are not a real believer or a follower of Christ at all. So an ardent believer cannot become a fanatic or fundamentalist. Those who try to establish their religion by destroying people of other faith are having no faith in their religion at all.

So, if you believe in your God, you can respect the other religions. You can even celebrate other religious festivals too..!

This is the motivating principle of Chavara Cultural Centre, Kochi, the Secretariat of WFIRC - World Fellowship of Inter-Religious Councils. We are organizing celebrations of other major religions' festivals with people participating from all religious groups. So it becomes the celebration of the town. Thus we organize every year **Ramayana Month** for Hindus and **Ifthar Dinner, Magrib prayers** –breaking of the Lent- for Muslims. **Deepavali, Christmas** also are being celebrated. Hundreds of people attend the functions every year. We try to create a new culture, the culture of mutual respect, peace and harmony in the society. We consider the 'other' not as a problem to be solved but as mystery to be accepted, revealed and lived as the theistic existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel exhorts.

The sharing of the religious experience of each participant in the Live-together Fellowship conducted in the World Conferences Organized since 1981 onwards led by WFIRC, with the able leadership of Justice P.K. Shamsuddin (President), Rev. Dr. Albert Nambiaparambil CMI (Secretary General) and Mr. N.R. Menon (Treasurer).

World Conferences organized by WFIRC.

The World Conferences we organized under WFIRC paved the way for the study and better understanding of all major world religions and its teachings; the religions taken birth in the bosom of Mother India and the religions we embraced. The word *tolerance* is the language of the soul of India. Great people have commended on the richness of its cultural and religious diversity.

“India is, the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition. Our most valuable and most instructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only” (Mark Twain).

Cultural Diversity

The cultural diversity of India has the history of thousands of years. We will be astonished if we leap into the depth of India's five thousand year old civilization. We have 325 languages spoken and 1652 dialects, 18 official languages in this largest democratic nation since 67 years.

The cultural diversity of India has great treasure and it is unique. For example, Yoga originated in 500 BC and documented by Patanjali in 200 BC-300 AD. The Origin of martial arts, *Kalarippayattu* in 200 BC; we have 7 classical Dance forms and more than 45 folk dances. More than 15 vocal forms and more than 60 musical instruments and India- God's own country celebrates more than 65 festivals.

Unity in Diversity

Though there is variety in the languages, literature and art, all Indians feel oneness. It is this diversity which has created a sense of unity among all Indians. This diversity has enriched their social life. That is why the dictum "unity in diversity" gets the richest meaning and the motto of the nation'. "*Sathyameva Jayathe*" Truth alone triumphs — is always at the tip of the tongue of every Indian.

Swami Vivekananda says;

"I will quote to you brethren a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is everyday repeated by millions of human beings: "as the different streams having their sources in different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee"

India's contribution to the world.

India's contribution to the world is tremendous and commendable. Great persons like **Aryabhakta** who invented zero, **Mahatma Gandhi** - the embodiment of non-violence; **Swami Vivekananda**, champion of humanitarianism, **Ramanujan** –great Mathematician, the all-rounder who won Nobel Prize in literature for his 'Githanjali'; **C.V.Raman**, who worked on scattering of light and Raman effect -Nobel Laureate in Physics, **-Mother Teresa** the symbol of Christian compassion and mercy who won the Nobel Prize in Peace; **Har Gobind Khorane**, who worked an interpretation of the genetic code and won Nobel Laureate in Medicine, **Subramanyam Chandrasekhar** who worked on structure and evolution of stars etc.

A Journey to your Heart.

The world we live in will expand when we start journeying from our religion to other religions, from our own heart to the fellow pilgrims'. Then we will be able to celebrate the diversity, respect each other, relate to others as equals, recognizing that listening is important, treasure the

sense of wonder that comes surprising, be hungry for knowledge about the other persons culture and religion, be honest in our beliefs and will not try to water them down to accommodate, do not mispresent other peoples' beliefs and practices...

It is said in the Silver Jubilee Assembly of the WFIRC held at Renewal Centre- Kochi (14-17 September 2006)

"It is our conviction that in the multi-cultural and multi- religious context of our country, we must draw on the rich spiritual heritage- not only of our own particular religious tradition but from other religious traditions as well. For this purpose we highly recommend to our religious leaders a study of the essentials of the basic tenets and practices of different religious systems ."

Let us see one of the life experiences shared in the Declaration of the Inter faith Pilgrimage called SAMGAMAM 2002 organized by WFIRC.

'Once again our coming together confirms us in the belief that " *the bonds that unite us are stronger than the barriers that divide us* "'

Thus, celebrating the very presence of the other, one who is standing in front of me by giving a hearty smile, looking at his eyes and with a tender touch is the beginning of the real celebration - the celebration of the other.!

Let us say each other,

'I'm here to celebrate you..!'

Thank you ..! God Bless..!