

Preservation of Religious Diversity

(Address at the “World Congress for the Preservation of Religious Diversity” on November 15, 2001 at Hotel Intercontinental New Delhi)

This Congress of all religions and faiths, meeting in this ancient land of ours with objective of achieving Religious harmony in the entire globe, is thrice blessed.

We have with us the esteemed Prime Minister of India, the head of Government of a country with a population of over one billion people, belonging to all major religions of the World, to advise and guide us on the laudable objective of preserving religious diversity. If despite his strenuous engagements in three countries including his address to the United Nations and talks in America, extending over a fortnight, he was pleased to accept this engagement with a smile, it is because of his deep seated interest in Religious harmony and peace within the country and in the World. His broad mind, human sympathy, fairness and objectivity towards all faiths stems from our oldest scripture *Rig Veda* which proclaimed several millennia ago that the world is a family, *Vasudeiva Kutumbakam*. The Congress looks forward to your counsel and guidance.

His Holiness The Dalai Lama is the most respected spiritual leader today. He is the embodiment of the Buddhist doctrines of *Ahimsa* and Compassion.

Pujya Dayananda Saraswati Ji is an eminent scholar with a complete mastery over Sanskrit language and grammar. He is today the greatest interpreter of the Hindu scriptures, the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Brahma Sutras* etc., he is deeply devoted to the peaceful coexistence of all religions and faiths. In short, his passion in life is to establish a real Brotherhood of all religions and faiths. For over three years, he has been planning the kind of Congress we have today. He would regard his life - mission completely fulfilled if the objective of this Congress succeeds.

Besides, the Sankaracharya of the most ancient seat of the Adi Sankara, whom millions of people follow, will be addressing the public meeting tomorrow at the Siri Fort Auditorium at 0600 pm. His Jana Kalyan Movement which renders service to weak and the deprived, regardless of caste, creed, religion or sect, has been one of his major activities.

The presence of these eminent leaders itself augurs a bright prospect of success to the Congress. In addition several scholars and theologians from renowned Universities are participating in the discussions.

Basically all religions and faiths are paths to salvation and therefore entitled to respect as yet another path. Once, Swami Vivekananda was asked whether he would prefer to have only one religion in the world, the Swamiji replied in the negative and said that if there was only one religion and a person did not like it, he would become an atheist. He further said that even as the drop of rain ultimately reaches the Ocean, the worship of any God, leads only to the one Supreme Being.

Respect for other religions implies that one should not disparage, or denigrate other religions. One may extort all the virtues of one's religion and freedom of religion stops there. Freedom of religion does not extend to decrying other religions. When one decries other faiths there is resentment, retaliation and worse. The second rule is “tolerance” towards all other faiths. If one accepts the principle of equal respect for all religions, tolerance must automatically follow. But if any conflict arises in respect of the religious practices of two

religions, the leaders of those religions should meet and reconcile the differences. Given the good will, it is not impossible for arriving at a compromise. The third rule is “non-intervention” in others’ religious traditions. It is here that differences assume ugly proportions. The endeavour, to convert people of one religion to another, leads to animosity and bitterness. It also leads to retaliation by way of reconversion of the converted and consequent conflicts.

No doubt, the freedom of a person to follow a religion of his choice is recognised by all civilised societies. This implies that a person should exercise his option voluntarily without any inducement monetarily or otherwise. Besides the person should be an adult, capable of taking a decision under the law of the land. By this token minor children cannot be converted until they attain majority under their law and voluntarily choose the religion.

I would like to place this aspect before this august body for consideration. Furthermore the International Association for Religious Freedom has deplored, “offering of financial gain as an inducement to join a religious group”. The very fact that an International Body had to take note of this malpractice and to come forward to deplore it shows that these practices exist on a noticeable scale. Religions should abjure such irreligious practices in the interest of purity of their religion.

While I was perusing the Holy Quran, I came across a passage which is apt to the occasion.

Chapter 11 V – 115 runs as follows:

“There is no good in many of their conferences
except such as enjoin *charity*, or *goodness*
or making of *peace* among men;

And whosoever does that
Seeking the pleasure of Allah,
We shall soon bestow on him a great reward.”

Since this Congress is seeking peace among men, it has also the blessings of Allah.