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Reports and Interviews: Interview with Mr. Subramanian

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Interview with Mr. Subramanian

Co-editor, Anand Amaladass

MR. P.N. GANAPATHI SUBRAMANIAN (born in 1938) is at present First Secretary (Ecom) at the Indian Embassy in Vienna and India's Alternate Permanent Representative to UNIDO. He has been serving the Indian Mission abroad in various capacities for several years, including as interpreter in Chinese for India's Defence Department.

What follows is not strictly an interview with Mr. Subramanian, but rather an attempt at Hindu-Christian dialogue, a free conversation over common concerns with specific reference to Indian situation. The Bulletin is meant to promote conversations of this type, though scholarly articles on specific themes will also find their due place in its columns.

Learning to Dialogue

Amaladass: Mr. Subramanian, could you say a few words about your first encounter with the Inter-religious dialogue initiative in your life? Perhaps you may recall any book that you read or person you met who struck you as an instance of dialogue initiative.

Subramanian: First of all I would like to recall to mind my first encounter with dialogue initiative. Fifteen years ago (1975) when I was Press Attaché in Nairobi, Kenya, I attended a meeting of the World Council of Churches on behalf of the Indian High Commission. It was basically an ecumenical Christian meeting. But it also involved other religions. There were representatives of various religions: Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs apart from the Christian groups from India, Jacobites, Syrian Christians as well as Catholics and so on. Meeting these representatives from India made me realize that there were many people who were keenly interested in arriving at religious peace in the world, a peace which would not in any way hamper one's personal convictions, and that man is a religious and civilized person. After

all the thrust of any inter-religious dialogue is to live peacefully, harmoniously, but *religiously*.

I come from a village in the South (Pattamadai) where one third of the community was Muslim. Students came from neighbouring villages to study. There was no problem in relating to one another. The language was a common factor (Tamil) which overrode religious considerations. We did not ask which religion they practised and we moved as human beings.

I cannot mention books or persons who struck me most on inter-religious dialogue. I have read books which reeked of religious disdain or attacked other religions. But of course after reading them I was more than ever convinced of the need for inter-religious dialogue rather than living in our own world without understanding the principles and foundation of other religions.

Amaladass: When you look at the Indian scene—or any problem that is facing our country—your response could be described as Hindu which is different from that of a Muslim, Sikh or Christian and for that matter every Hindu response could also be nuanced. It only means that we all have our prejudices (prejudgement) by which we view things, evaluate, and offer solutions. Nobody is free from it. Will it be possible to articulate your response as an individual...

Subramanian: To have a view is to be prejudiced. To the extent that I have been a Hindu, views of other religionists as well as their effect on the world of mine and my religionists in India are totally mixed up. For me religion is a personal experience, belief and way of life which includes a lot of things—views on present life, after-life, inculcation of certain values into our offspring. All this is in the micro-level. But existence at this level presupposes now a number of things. One is the tolerance level, which I perceive as peculiar to Hindu ethos, which would be necessary for those

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complex of beliefs to be freely held. I am stating here a self-sustaining atmosphere of freedom which should be automatically available in any society which claims to respect human rights.

The modern Hindu in India on the one hand hopes for the continuation of such an atmosphere in India conducive to peaceful observance of the religion in which he is born. Although a member of the majority community in India, the Hindu is secular as he is basically reluctant to 'convert' other religionists to his religion. On the other hand, he fears the departure of commitment to secularism in the current situation.

Amaladass: In every country the question of majority-minority consciousness is present to some extent at least, in terms of race, religion or language. There are ethnic minorities in China or Russia. There are religious minorities in India and so on. As a member of the majority community in India, how do you respond to the dialogue initiative coming from a minority community?

Subramanian: I am greatly appreciative of the dialogue initiative coming from whatever quarter. And I am honoured to be associated with your journal on Hindu-Christian Dialogue Studies. Without claiming any profundity on questions that you are raising here, I just share with your readers what I believe. I have lived abroad for years. In many places religion has lost its status. Even Christmas does not have Christ in it, as I perceive it. It has become just a festival. But Indians are much more religious-minded. However, the majority-minority equation in India is politically and economically motivated rather than having any deep religious consideration.

Amaladass: Even if there is no conflict in India or in other parts of the world at the moment, dialogue becomes a process of growth for human beings. Being closed to one's own way of thinking and believing can lead to stagnation and any change will be seen as a threat thus leading to fundamentalism and fanaticism. After all fanaticism can be anywhere when there is no culture of communication and when the joy of being in contact with others is lacking. Where a healthy rationality does not prevail, fanaticism takes over and it does not have any

scope for a sense of humour but ends up with cynicism. Would you like to comment on this from the point of view of the Indian situation...

Subramanian: Historically, every religion has evolved. And Hinduism has also evolved for the better because of the advent of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and above all because of the advent of Christianity. India feels proud to call Christianity its own religion and this is an important point to be noted. One has to be receptive to ideas. As Gandhi remarked, let not my windows be shuttered up. Let the winds of new ideas blow about my house but I refuse to be blown off my feet. I think what he meant was this: I will evaluate and accept what is good and discard what I think is not. This process has to happen even in my own culture. That is what a dialogue is all about.

Amaladass: Dr. Halbfass in his book *India and Europe* (1988) points out that India always displayed an attitude of self-sufficiency in contrast to Europe which went always in search of wisdom, making new discoveries to find fulfillment. India discovered Europe in the process of Europe's quest for India. How do you react to this?

Subramanian: I would like to disagree with this. Look at our saying in Tamil: *Tirai Kaṭal Oṭiyum tiraviam teḍu*—"Find fortunes even by going overseas". Indians did go out in search of wealth. Indians went up to Vietnam, Malacca, Java, Champa, Kampuchea, Thailand and so on. Indian cultural tradition, Indian impact is visible even now. Of course Indians did not go West but went East. After sometime when the country had achieved some political stability, culturally self-sufficient it reached a point of saturation and did not allow anything new. That probably brought India its downfall. When India stopped being recipient of new influences, it became a bit stagnant. But after the Islamic arrival there was a revival in India. Slowly they also fell into the autarkic type of thinking. Then came the colonial masters of Europe and India had to take an adversarial position.

Amaladass: In inter-religious dialogue we must also highlight a right perception of history. One has to accept the historical development in a country with all its short-sighted decisions and manipulations. Today one cannot reverse

the process and settle account with the present generation of people for what happened centuries ago. It was the right of all the colonial masters to destroy and build according to their whims and fancies. But today to think in terms of retaliation after reading history does not help very much. The conflicts that we witness today in India, Sri Lanka, Africa or Israel have to be somehow attributed to the wrong notion of history.

Subramanian: If in the past there were religious atrocities, injustice, there is no reason to repeat the same course of action today. Ours is a multi-religious, secular society, giving a common dignity to all religions and believers. How can we divert ourselves from building a secular society? Ayodhya is to be seen as an example of wrongly perceived notion of history. It is not a purely religious issue. It has its economic and political background especially when India is struggling to find its identity.

Amaladass: Another result of the right perception of history which is important for our inter-religious dialogue, is a spirit of forgiveness. We learn from history what each religion has contributed to the mass-killing, destroying or humiliating of others. Unless we are ready to forgive and rise about our past, we will not make progress in inter-religious dialogue. So a readiness for reconciliation is a pre-condition for the dialogue.

Subramanian: As a Hindu to quote Christ, "the one who has committed no sin may throw the first stone," and nobody dared to lift it.

A good Hindu cannot think of destroying a Mosque, in any case.

Amaladass: That is why the question of enlightened leadership is very important especially in matters of religion. People are emotional and they are carried away by the immediate things. If the religious leaders themselves are motivated by narrow loyalties, then we have a difficult situation to handle.

Subramanian: We must heed only religious leaders imbued with a right perspective. After all what is the purpose of religion? I always think that the purpose of religion is to ennoble the soul. Different religions have different world-views, views about after-life and so on. This life may not be the end of everything. It may not be my only life. I may be born again

depending on the deeds I do for my family, my friends, tribe, countrymen and for the whole world. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is my world-view, which means: look at the whole world as your family. My religion is to anchor me in this life, to live well morally and in a spirit of service.

Amaladass: Of course we cannot always talk in terms of majority-minority in a nation today. After all peace or personal security does not depend on belonging to the majority community. We need learn to live together with people who are different from us. Dividing the country for each religious group or language or ethnic group does not make sense. Would you like to suggest some means of training our people in general and the younger generation in particular? After all we impart our value systems to the people around. I remember Dr. Munis Raza, then Vice Chancellor of Delhi University, pointing out a text book on history to the school children. The book had only three chapters on Indian history. The first chapter is about the Advent of Aryans, the second chapter is the invasion of the Muslim and the third chapter is the impact of the British. The titles already presuppose a value judgement.

Subramanian: But in Tamilnadu when I studied as a boy of six I did not have such tendentious textbooks. We had exceptional ones. Some forty years ago, in a privately run school, the textbook I read contained the story of the conversion of Saul, the Good Samaritan and so on and they are the enduring memories of my early training.

I have an idealistic suggestion. Everybody should tell his/her children what he/she tells the strangers. Hypocrisy should go from our dealings—saying one thing to the children, another to the friend and a third thing to the stranger. We are totally split personalities in matters of religion. Children should be taught truth both inside and outside.

All religions place truth at a very high pedestal. Our national motto is *Satyameva Jayate*—Truth alone triumphs. Let us take religion back into the school, not out of it. Let us read the facets of truth in all religions.

Secondly, we should learn to solve our problems without violence. Violence has been

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condemned by all religions. Christ had asked that we should turn the other cheek. *Ahimsa* is the cardinal principle in Hinduism and the most important name of Allah is *Rahim*, the

most merciful and the compassionate and I cannot understand how people ignore this basic principle in all religions.