

Challenges Facing the Church in the Twenty-First Century
Gurukul Theological Seminary
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Greetings from the National Council of Churches in the USA, a community of 37 communions, including the Mar Thoma Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (partner to this seminary), and all of the traditions that formed the CSI. The last time the NCC paid an official visit to churches in India was for a small consultation in Madras in 1983. It is time for us to rejuvenate the relationship between ecumenical councils in our countries.

In this address, I want to suggest, along with Shashi Tharoor, that India stands at the intersection of the major challenges facing this planet in the twenty-first century. In the next few minutes, I will try to name five of those challenges as a way of naming common agenda for the churches in the US and India.

1. **Pluralism – Fundamentalism.** There is, as you know, a struggle underway to define Hinduism that is also being played out in other faith communities around the world. For many Indians, if I'm not mistaken, the crucial thing about India is its embrace of otherness. As Tharoor puts it, Hindu fundamentalism is an oxymoron. Hinduism, he argues, is the ideal faith for the twenty-first century because it is inherently eclectic and non-doctrinaire. For others, however, the crucial thing about India is its adherence to a particular culture, to particular forms of worship, to particular political allegiances – all associated with Hinduism. For the first group, India's defining characteristic is pluralism (which they see imbedded in the worldview of Hinduism); for the second group, the defining characteristic is Hinduism as distinguished from other faiths and worldviews.

Sunil Khilnani, in his book, The Idea of India, describes this as a conflict between two different conceptions of Indian history. One sees India as the victim of recurring invasions by outsiders, especially the Mughals and the British. The other sees India as an arena of cultural encounters involving groups that have all left their mark. The

first group seeks a return to an original purity associated with pure Hinduism; the second seeks to celebrate the mixture of cultures and faiths and to strengthen India's ability to transform and absorb outside influence. It is obvious which view Indian Christians favor!

The latter perspective (celebrating the mixture of cultures) was clearly that of Nehru, and it shaped government policy at least until the 1980s. After the violence of Partition, he took great pains to affirm religious minorities. The former perspective (seeking a return to original purity) obviously finds political expression in the BJP. Hindus associated with it are increasingly resentful of privileges granted to minorities in the name of "secularism" (religious pluralism). The best known manifestation of this is the battle over the mosque in Ayodhya; but, as you know far better than I, violence against Christians has also increased in recent years in some parts of the country.

Jonathan Sacks, Britain's chief rabbi, argues that the great tragedies of the twentieth century came when politics was turned into a religion, when the nation itself was absolutized, as was the case with Nazism and, in some places, with Communism. The risk for the twenty-first century is that the opposite will occur: that religion will be politicized. My fear is not that churches will get involved in political affairs. How can we not address the issues of the day from the perspective of faith? My fear is that fundamentalists – Hindus in India, Jews in Israel, Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Muslims in Indonesia or Iran, Christians in the United States – will seek to create community through commonality. India, it seems to me, is a case study in why it is so important for progressive religious communities to insist on the religious value of pluralism.

2. **Globalization – Self Reliance.** This is a major tension for Africa, parts of Latin America, as well as South Asia. Let me put it in the form of a question: Has India been correct to open itself so fully to the world economy, an economy dominated by transnational corporations, in an effort to modernize, or is the cost of doing so simply too high? The issue is very complex. The world is becoming economically linked;

and participation in the global economy has raised living standards for many. India has clearly experienced tremendous growth since the 1990s after abandoning Nehru-style socialism; and the expanding middle class benefitted greatly.

But the gap between rich and poor, already wide, has also grown dramatically in the past 15 years. 40% of the population in this country still lives below the poverty line. In addition to this, Indian products and culture are under assault from western media, culture, and transnationals. As you know, there are new malls around New Delhi and other Indian cities with outlets for such corporations as Nike, Levi, Nokia, CitiBank, McDonalds, Motorola, Reebok, Subway, and Pizza Hut. Bhopal is an indication of the environmental and human damage that can result from unregulated growth.

The growing disparity in wealth that seems to be a byproduct of globalization is not, of course, limited to India. More than 80 countries have seen per-capita incomes drop in the past 15 years. At the end of the millennium, the top one-fifth of the world's population had cornered 86% of the world's GDP, while the bottom one-fifth had one per cent. As the new century began, the assets of the three richest billionaires were more than the combined wealth of the 600 million inhabitants of the least developed countries.

Both globalization and fundamentalism raise the question of the one and the many that is at the heart of ecumenism. To put it another way, fundamentalism and globalization both represent forms of unity that most ecumenical Christians find problematic. The challenge for the churches is to articulate a compelling alternative understanding of communal unity and global inter-connectedness.

I will add, parenthetically, that in India there is a surprising connection between globalization and fundamentalism in that financial support for the BJP is coming from the massive group of non-resident Indians (NRIs). They have left India to pursue jobs in the West but want India to remain "Hindu." Many NRIs seem to care less that

India is Coca-colonized than that it is becoming less Hindu in the way they remember.

3. **Bread – Freedom.** Can democracy be the context or vehicle for alleviating the desperate poverty of India (or Africa and Latin America)? To put it another way, is the instability and inefficiency of political contention, the hallmark of democracy, a luxury that a country such as India can't afford? Dr. Ambedkar, you will recall, pointed out after independence that in political life Indians now had equality, but in economic life, radical inequality. And he asked rhetorically: Is this freedom?

This was ostensibly the question that gave rise to the Emergency in 1975. One government official, defending the Emergency, said: “We are tired of being the workshop of failed democracy. The time has come to exchange some of our vaunted individual rights for economic development.”

In his widely-praised book, The Future of Freedom, the Indian scholar, Fareed Zakaria, argued that every economic success story in the developing world – Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Chile, Indonesia, China – has taken place under a “liberal authoritarian” regime. No democracy, he argued, has produced such results because, at least in India's case, their political leaders have been unwilling or unable to inflict temporary pain for the sake of long-term benefits. India is now seen as an economic success story; but, as you know, the growth has not touched a large segment of the population. In 2010, India, often touted as the world's largest democracy, ranked 119 (out of 169) on the UN's human development index, which measures life expectancy, infant mortality, health, literacy, and education. So, asks Zakaria, what price freedom?

This question, by the way, is being posed in the United States not as a tension between freedom and bread but freedom and security. The question being raised in our political debates is, “Can we sustain an open democracy in an age of terror?”

These tensions – freedom/bread, freedom/security – pose real challenges for our churches.

4. **Cultural Diversity – Liberation.** Or, perhaps better, acceptance of diverse cultural forms – oppression as a limit to diversity. When I brought a group of students to India in 2003, one of them raised this tension in a cobbler’s village where, as he put it, the communal solidarity is enviable even as the poverty and lack of health care are utterly unacceptable. But what if addressing those problems destroys the culture of communal solidarity?

The bigger issue in India, of course, revolves around Hinduism and liberation from caste oppression, which some commentators call “the largest single case of continuing institutional injustice in the world today.” Western liberals, like me, want to affirm the importance of interfaith dialogue and to refrain from the kind of religious/cultural imperialism that marked the colonial period. But can we legitimately affirm a faith tradition that includes caste and has led to the radical diminishment of one quarter of a billion persons?

Our travel seminar encountered different answers from Christians in India, and I would be interested in your perspectives. Bishop Azariah, former CSI bishop in Chennai and well-known to persons on this campus, told us, in no uncertain terms, that Hinduism must be “defeated.” The theological issue, said Bishop Azariah, is karma. If you affirm this, caste follows. Reject it, and Hinduism crumbles. There is no middle ground. By contrast, Mohar Larbeer, principal of Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, distinguished between Brahmanic Hinduism, which must be opposed, and indigenous, lower-caste Hinduism which can be affirmed as a potential ally in the liberation struggle. The question for both of them is whether Hinduism is reformable (an issue for Christianity or western culture as well). Gandhi’s answer was yes. Ambedkar’s answer was no. They represent answers comparable to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X in the United States during the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.

One of the most striking tensions encountered by our travel seminar was the demand for liberation and the risk of pursuing it through violent means (the old problem of the ends and the means). This was raised directly in the rural project of Deenabandupuram, where a dance/song was performed for us that told the story of an upper class land owner who apparently ordered the death of 41 Dalits. He was, in turn, hacked into 41 pieces. This was offered as an example of Dalit empowerment or, at least, of Dalits claiming their own history. Was it justice? The dancers said yes, since the system (itself violent) was not working on behalf of the oppressed. This kind of question is being raised around the world in the early years of this century. It is a real challenge for a religion that follows the Prince of Peace while also hearing God's call to let justice roll down like waters.

5. **Interrelateness – Particular Identity.** This is an overriding issue for at least the early decades of the twenty-first century. Numerous commentators have observed that while the twentieth century was dominated by ideology, the twenty-first seems likely to be dominated by identity as groups, artificially lumped together by colonialism or the Cold War, struggle to define their sense of community. People need to know where they belong, even if it seems to reinforce patterns of oppression. This leads to a curious schizophrenia: a push for ethnic particularity alongside a push for globalization (with attendant homogenization of culture).

All of this is also played out at the national level, with India as a prime example. The colonial administrator, John Strachey, put it most offensively: "There is not and never has been an India ... no nation, no people of India." In one sense, of course, he was right – ironically so, since the idea of a unified India came from the British who introduced the national railroad, the national telegraph, and the national postal system. They then tried to undermine any sense of cohesion, playing religious communities and regions off against each other once they realized how budding nationalism threatened the jewel in Victoria's crown.

Khushwant Singh writes of how he grew up defining himself a) by caste or sub-caste, b) by religion (Sikh), or c) by region (Punjabi) – and it wasn't until he went to school abroad that he was defined, and defined himself, as Indian. Let's put it graphically. If Europe from Finland to Italy were one nation, it would be more ethnically, linguistically homogenous than India. As Tharoor writes, the singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural. The United States has been described in different periods with the images of the melting pot or the salad. In India the better image, it seems to me, is that of the thali, dishes in separate bowls that somehow belong together on one big plate but don't necessarily mix.

So what holds India together? There have been numerous attempted answers. According to the Hindu nationalists, Indian unity is based on religion. According to Gandhi, religion is a source of India's unity, but he in effect created his own religion! According to Nehru, unity is not based on religion but on a shared historical past of cultural mixing and a future project of common development. But everyone knew that national identity would be a great challenge. One of Nehru's ministers, in the days after independence, reportedly said, "We've created India; now we must create Indians." It was a new thing: Tamils were linked to Kashmiris, but Bengalis were separated from Bengalis and Punjabis from Punjabis.

Not surprisingly, in an era that has seen the breakup of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, when Sri Lanka's unity was sorely threatened and Sudan's is about to be, all of this is now being greatly tested. And, ironically, democracy has contributed to disunity by fostering consciousness of particularity. Politicians have found that they can mobilize voters by appealing to narrow identities – although the victory of Nitish Kumar over Lalu in Bihar was, I think, a hopeful sign.

This has raised enormous questions and problems for Indian Christians (for Christians throughout Asia). I have often argued, including to my students when I taught at UTC, that the ecumenical church demands that we see "Christian" as the noun that defines us, with all other identities as adjectives. For my UTC students, however, this

is problematic a) because Indian Christians are already under suspicion for being allied to foreign nations and cultures, and b) because there is such a need to create a national identity that will transcend, hold together, the various pieces of India's mosaic. So, are you an Indian first and a Christian second? Or are you a Dalit first and other things second? Such questions of particular identity are certainly understandable, but they are also creating havoc for Indian Protestant churches. All tribes and ethnic groups want their own theology, their own seminary. What does it mean to be one body of Christ in such a setting?

There are many other lessons from India that could and should be named – ecological destruction, nuclear weapons, and, perhaps especially, the issue of “terrorism.” India's incredible diversity makes it fertile ground, in this era of fragmentation, for secessionist movements, including periodically violent ones in Kashmir, Bihar and the northeastern states.

The problem is that I don't quite know what lessons to draw. It does seem clear to me that the U.S. “war on terrorism” makes conflict more difficult to resolve as governments throughout Asia use U.S. actions as a cover for a less conciliatory stance. Perhaps all I can say now is that we live in precarious times when peacemaking must be central to the church's agenda and when ecumenical solidarity with sisters and brothers in places such as India and the U.S. is more important than ever. What I've tried to suggest is that we have a common agenda – whether we like it or not.

As I close, let me note that this is not a very theological lecture for a theologian! I hope, however, that it will be useful for our deliberations. Mission in the twenty-first century, as participation in what God is doing in creation, must face up to the challenges posed by fundamentalism, by economic globalization, by the chaos of democracy, by cultural and racial/ethnic oppression, and by fragmentation. Put positively, the church must 1) envision a unity that affirms the diversity of the human family, 2) articulate a life-giving vision of global solidarity, 3) wrestle with the question of authentic freedom, 4)

acknowledge the limits to diversity represented by oppression, and 5) affirm identity through interdependence. May God bless you in your efforts to deal with these things.

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