

# Is Religion a Blessing or Curse to Mankind?

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*Sehr geehrte Bundes Präsident Prof Dr Roman Herzog, Herr Ernst Freiberger, Prof Dr Michael von Brück und meine Verwandte der Welt Religionen die hier versammelt haben! Schöne Grüße aus Indien!*

*Leider kann ich nicht auf Deutsch meinen Vortrag halten. Ich kann nur einfache Sachen unterhalten aber nicht die tiefe Gedanken ganz gut auf Deutsch ausdrücken. Verzeihen Sie bitte daß ich unbedingt auf English sprechen soll.*

**M**any years ago (1991), I had been to Costa Rica in Central America on the invitation of the University for Peace to give a talk at an International Conference on the theme “**Religions Responding to Global Threats**”. One of the participants was a Rabbi (Jewish priest) from Israel who had an interesting incident to narrate. At the time of his departure from his country, he met with an old man who lived in his neighbourhood and told him that he was going to attend the Conference in Costa Rica on the theme “**Religions Responding to Global Threats**”. The old man who had some problem with his ears, mistook the theme of the Conference and immediately responded nodding his head: “**Yes, Yes, Religions are the Global Threats!**”

We cannot simply laugh at the old man’s inadvertent behaviour and stop reflecting on his words. His remarks on religions cannot be so easily ignored in view of the murderous attacks, bomb blasts and other nightmare incidents that are happening across the world almost every day. Life has become very miserable and the suffering of the innocent people is ever increasing. How far religions are responsible for the evils of the world? We need to discuss this issue with an open heart and without airing our personal allegiance to a particular religion and above all as a critic standing outside our own religion. We should be prepared to listen to the objective criticisms made by others and be generous to admit if something is wrong with our religion.

Recently, I happened to read an exhaustive report on the topic “**Is religion still relevant in the modern world?**” discussed in the Easter-Sunday edition of *Talking Point*, the phone-in programme of the BBC World Service in April 2002. After reading the entire report which I found very interesting (the report runs into 17 pages in an A4 size paper), I noted down all the important remarks made by the participants across the globe. I have analysed these mixed reactions under three headings: 1. Negative Remarks, 2. Positive Remarks and 3. General Remarks, which need to be considered while discussing the topic of this seminar whether religion is a blessing or curse to mankind. I am quoting these remarks extensively in view of the global magnitude of the issue addressed in this seminar:

## **1. Negative Remarks**

- Religion is for the poor and ignorant. Intelligent people and secure people have no need for religion. Religion is obsolete. Religion is the cause of the world’s problems.

- Religions are usually exclusive: Most claim to be the one true faith. Only one of them can be correct. Therefore, since there are thousands of different religions, past and present, the likelihood is that all religions are wrong.
- Religion is essentially designed as a means of oppression: The rich (king/chieftain etc.), collude with the priesthood to create an environment that is safe for them to continue to exist in the lap of luxury whilst the poor endure bad living conditions, poor land rights etc. By telling the poor that God has placed them in their place and that their reward will come in the afterlife, revolution is avoided.
- God, as represented by organised religion, was created by man in his own image and has the sole purpose of maintaining the rich in their castles and the poor in the gutter.
- Religion is a lie that should be abandoned as soon as possible.
- Religion = War
- Just look around the world today. Religion is the cause of all war and hate.
- Religion is divisive, it has cost more wars, suffering, some teaches prejudice and bigotry. I believe this world would be better off without religion. Just obey the laws and constitution of your country.
- Religion is completely irrelevant in the modern age. Religion was created to abstractly explain what man could not understand, yet it has inadvertently caused much pain and suffering. Early scholars were murdered by the Church because they believed that the Earth was orbiting around the Sun.
- Religious differences are the root cause of many human conflicts - just look at the Middle East, India and Kashmir.
- Religions are now being run much as commercial enterprises complete with executive scandals. The appearance is that religions are saying keep giving us money; and do as we say, not as we do.
- The church is one of the biggest barriers between people and God.
- Religion has never been relevant. All religion is simply a tool used by powerful people to wield their power over, dictate and persecute people. Religion is evil and should have been abolished long ago.
- Religion simply goes against one of the most fundamental and admirable features of western secular thought: the ability and readiness to critique ourselves, to hold discourse.
- Religion is a waste of time and a fear propagator.

## **2. Positive Remarks**

- Of course religion is relevant. However, those of us who are secure in ourselves, those of us who are not frightened of doubt, those of us who have not been heavily influenced by someone else's set of beliefs, choose not to have a religion.

- The apparent decline of religion is as a direct result of the various institutions misrepresenting things of a spiritual nature.
- To anyone who thinks religion is the cause of all the problems in this world, let me point out that our laws are based on the ten commandments. Also, it was Jesus who told us to 'love thy neighbour'. Don't try and criticize religion until you know a little bit about it.
- Religion gives people a reason to live and...die.
- Without religion you have no purpose or path in life. With religion you have something substantial to stand on. Without it you're just waiting to drown in ignorance.
- It is extremely naive to think that without religion, hatred, prejudice and killing would not continue; in fact without religion there would be more as it does not come naturally to human beings to be altruistic and to deny self.
- Religion is relevant. More death and destruction world wide can and is attributed to sectarian intolerance than anything else. Believe in the sanctity of god if you must, but believe in the sanctity of life above all.
- A body without soul is as good as dead. So is humanity without religion.
- Religion is the natural answer to mankind's spiritual yearnings.
- Religion is not the cause of all the world's ills. Humans are divisive by nature, and if we weren't fighting over religion we'd just find something else to base our bigotry on.
- How strange that when things go well we don't need God but when things go badly he is the only one we can turn to?
- With a religion, life becomes meaningful.
- True religion, one that emphasizes treating our fellow human beings as we want to be treated, helping the needy, minding our words and actions, would help make our world much better than we have ever thought. Anyone who kills, maims or destroys another human life in the name of religion is doing that on their own not by the order of God.
- Christianity, Islam and the other major religions in their purest forms are not bad models by which to live ones life.
- Mankind is like a bird with two wings, and those two wings are religion and science. Can a bird fly efficiently with just one wing?

### **3. General Remarks**

- Unfortunately, those who have no religious faith to kill or die for, don't have enough faith in the liberal values of secular humanism to defend them - look at the reluctance to confront the challenge of Islamic extremism. Those who are guided by belief in their principles, no matter how perverted, will always successfully crush an opposition which has no such beliefs to sustain it.
- 6 billion insects crawling on a tiny rock in an obscure province of the cosmos hurtling through endless time and space argue and kill each other

over in which if their image god made them. Would they stop long enough to find out, they would see it was obviously in mine?

- Religion should only be taken for what it is: a comfort mechanism which provides a sense of order for people and helps them to not feel alone in the world. Children have imaginary friends and stuffed animals while some adults grow up to have religion and god. People have a need for an omnipresent being to relate to, whether real or invented.
- Religious fanatics have always taken a prominent place in history of nations and the world. The general population of countries might not be strong in any particular religion.
- I am sure God is still the same as when he created the world, but religion is becoming irrelevant when the so-called servants of God are found supporting the evil deeds.
- Some of the virtues expressed in religion today are very much relevant. It is the way they are expressed that is of no relevance what so ever. "religion and politics, when it comes together it's a lethal mix". Religion is responsible for so much factionalism in the world. Religion should be totally removed from politics.
- What we need now is belief and respect for ourselves, and for others.

When you read the above lines, the negative remarks seem to be more aggressive, provocative and realistic, whereas the positive remarks are cool, pacifying and philosophical. The negative remarks are perhaps the volatile reactions of the non-believers of religion prompted more by the human suffering than by the deeper knowledge of religions. The positive remarks seem to be of persons practising religion and who are sympathetic to human suffering. The general remarks seem to be emerged from those who are not practising religion but acknowledge the need of religion and have sympathy for religion.

Before passing any judgement on the topic of this seminar, I would very much like to draw your attention to the use of the words "Blessing" and "Curse". I have a basic question whether these words can be used with reference to religion at all. If you ask me whether science is a blessing or curse to mankind, I have no problem or hesitation in answering that question. Any one can easily list out modern inventions that are beneficial to mankind and those that are detrimental. The words "Blessing" or "Curse" are figuratively used for referring to what is good and what is bad which do not fall in the realm of science. That is why, often we see Governments putting restrictions on certain scientific research which they think transgress the limits of morality.

But I have a logical problem in using these terms with reference to religion because the words "Blessing" or "Curse" are the concepts that have emerged from religion. They are the contributions of religion to the language and beliefs of humans and not of science. I cannot understand how they can be used to evaluate religion itself without understanding the concepts behind them in religion or above all what religion is after all. This reminds me of the story of a demon called Bhasmāsura in Hindu mythology. The demon Bhasmāsura did a severe penance to the God Shiva. When Shiva appeared before him, the demon asked him to grant a supernatural power to him and that was: Any person on whose head he (demon) would place his hand, should be immediately reduced to ashes. Shiva not realizing the evil intentions of the demon, granted it to him. But the wicked demon wanted to test the supernatural power

granted to him by Shiva, on the head of Shiva Himself.<sup>1</sup> Using the words “Blessing or Curse” to evaluate Religion in a way amounts to the ignorance of Religion which taught these concepts or which taught the mankind about what is good and what is bad. The word blessing has a profound meaning in religion. A pious Hindu feels blessed when he touches the feet of his Guru or when the Guru gently places his hands on the head of his disciple. The word curse has a bad connotation. A pious man is afraid of indulging in any bad activities for fear of curse by God. If the people had that feeling of guilt or the fear of committing the sin, the question of asking whether religion is a curse would not have arisen. Upanishads, the ancient scriptures of Hinduism, call for the people to be always truthful and follow the right path (*satyam vada, dharmam cara...!*). The Kaṭha Upanishad says: “*śreyaś ca preyaś ca manuṣyam etastau..*”. The good (*śreyaś*) and the evil (*preyaś*) approach man at every moment of his life. He who selects the good will be blessed and he who selects the bad will be cursed. The Heaven and Hell are not the worlds existing outside. They exist in our own actions. ‘Heaven consists in good actions and the Hell consists in bad actions’ (*ācārave svarga, anācārave naraka*), says Basavaṇṇa. The question whether religion is a blessing or curse is illogical and a false allegation against religion. The actual question to be asked, therefore, is whether the people are faithful to their religion in following the lofty principles of religion, no matter which religion they belong to. How can you blame religion for the fault of the people?

I need to emphasize that there is a need to understand what a true religion is after all.

*“Man is an immortal, spiritual being. His experience extends well beyond a single lifetime. His capabilities are unlimited, even if not presently realized - and those capabilities can be realized. He is able to not only solve his own problems, accomplish his goals and gain lasting happiness, but also achieve new, higher states of awareness and ability.”*

Can you guess the name of the religion to which the above lines refer? I believe that your reply would be: “Hinduism”. But I have quoted the above lines not from Hinduism but from the pages of Scientology – a new religion founded in 1955 by the American Science-fiction writer L Ron Hubbard. If you ask me “Don’t you think that Hinduism also has similar thoughts?” I cannot say ‘No’, but I would rather straighten your answer with a personal remark that many of the thoughts contained in Scientology resemble those of Hinduism. I am afraid that the conflict between the two religions starts from this point onwards. Though my argument can be substantiated in the historical perspective as the Hinduism is comparatively older to Scientology, the members of the latter may not agree and they may claim that it came from their own experience. It may be true. As a matter of fact, the old religions of the world have many common teachings to offer although their founders who preached them lived in different parts of the world and spoke different languages and never met each other. But the problem is that every member of a religion is so obsessed by his own religion, he does not have the open heart to listen to what other religions have good things to teach.

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<sup>1</sup> The god Shiva took to his heels and later on the god Vishnu appeared before the demon in the form of a beautiful girl called Mohinī. The demon fell in love with her and forgot chasing Shiva. Mohinī made him dance with her and asked him to imitate her. In the course of dance, the demon was made to place his hand on his own head whereby he himself was reduced to ashes.

Once a rich man wanted to do some service to the people of the area, where he lived. He constructed a temple. Soon he noticed that only the Hindus were going there for Pūjā but not the Muslims. Then he constructed a mosque which was attended by Muslims for Namaj on all Fridays. But there was no sign of Christians in the vicinity of temple or mosque and then he constructed a church for the benefit of Christians who regularly attended their Mass on every Sundays. The rich man was disappointed to see that people were going to their respective places of worship only and nobody was stepping into other places of worship although they were nearby. The rich man wanted to do something where people of all community could go together and he finally decided to construct a public toilet...!

But I had a different experience about two years back (2004) when I had been to Australia to give lectures at the La Trobe University in Melbourne. At the end of my lectures, I wanted to go to wash room. As I walked down the corridors of the University, I was shocked and surprised to see two signboards in the washing area which read: “**Male Muslim Washroom and Female Muslim Washroom!**” So far I was under the impression that the washroom was the only place where everybody would go without any restrictions of religious affiliation. One can understand and appreciate providing separate wash rooms for men and women. But here is a University where separate wash rooms are provided for Muslims and non-Muslims. There must have been a demand from the Muslim community for providing such a facility which has been met with by the authorities of La Trobe University in Melbourne. The above signboards triggered off the thoughts in my mind that if a similar demand is made by the students of different communities in India, I am afraid that the Indian University buildings would be full of toilet blocks than the teaching blocks!

Religions were meant to overcome one's weakness but ironically they themselves have become one's weakness. To be religious does not mean just going to a temple, mosque or church. The younger generation of all religions all over the world in recent days are turning away from these shrines and do not care to observe religious practices. Though they are labelled as heretics or irreligious, I have often found them to be more religious in their daily life than a person regularly going to a temple or church. These youths observe certain principles of religion like feeling guilty inwardly if they make any mistake. On the contrary, people who appear to be religious least care for the lofty principles of religion and do not hesitate to do things prohibited by religion. Their religious activities are undoubtedly mechanical and restricted to *Pūjā* rooms only. Once they come out of the *Pūjā* room, they indulge in doing all sorts of irreligious activities. They care more for materialistic values than for ethical or moral values! As a result, the religious symbols or signs they wear, to my mind, appear to be like gorgeous and fashionable ornaments or dress put on by an old lady who looks ugly! What is the use of red reins for an old horse? (*būdhī ghodhī, lāl lagām!*)

The word for religion in Indian religious tradition is “Dharma”. But it is not synonymous to religion. The word Dharma in Sanskrit has a variety of meanings: It is used in the sense of Justice, moral values, pious obligations to others, right conduct, giving alms, natural qualities etc. As a matter of fact, the word Hinduism is not at all used in any of the old texts of what we understand by Hinduism. I must admit my ignorance of Christianity, Judiasm, Islam and other world religions. But I do admit that all the religions of the world lead to the same reality which I am aspiring for to reach. There is a famous saying in Sanskrit: “ākāshāt patitam toyam yathā gacchati sāgaram.....” like the rain waters falling from the skies take different names and

forms of rivers but ultimately reach the ocean, all the religions of the world if you have true faith, take the respective believers to the same Divinity.

The word for philosophy is “Darshana” meaning the Insight of the world – within and beyond. There are six systems of Indian philosophy: 1. Sāmkhya, 2. Yoga, 3. Nyāya, 4. Vaisheshika, 5. Pūrva Mīmāṃsā and 6. Uttara Mīmāṃsā. You may be surprised to know that one of them i.e., Sāmkhya does not believe in the existence of God. It admits only the Purusha and Prakriti (the Matter and Spirit).

Religion, region and language play an important role in one’s life and in the society we live. They influence our thoughts, our behaviours and our relationships with people around us. We identify ourselves with the religion to which we belong, with the region where we live and with the language in which we speak. We feel proud of each one of these. A villager in a far away country like Austria in Europe claims his village to be the best place in the world as he sings and rejoices in the following folksong in German:

*“Wohl ist die Welt so groß und weit  
Und voller Sonnenschein  
Das allerschönste Stück davon  
Ist wohl die Heimat mein!*

(Surely, this world is very big and wide  
And full of Sun’s Light  
But the best part of it  
Is surely the place where I live!)

The native speaker of Kannada feels proud of his language by singing the following poems of the renowned national poet Kuvempu:

*Bārisu kannaḍa ḍinḍimava  
O karnāṭaka hridaya śiva!*

*kannaḍa ene kuṇḍāḍuvudennede  
kannaḍa ene kivi nimiruvudu!*

(Beat the drum of Kannaḍa  
O God in the heart of Karnāṭaka!

(My heart rejoices on hearing Kannada  
My ears stand up on hearing Kannada!)

The deep emotions recorded in these poems can be cherished by people all over the world towards their own hometown or language, be they German or Kannadiga. While hearing these songs, your heart unknowingly brings back to your memory those nostalgic experiences of your own hometown and of your own language, whether it is Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam or Hindi! There is nothing wrong in feeling proud of one’s religion, region or language as long as you do not develop hatred towards people of other religion, region or language. But in our practical life, things are indeed quite different. Persons belonging to the same religious group or speaking the same language who are living in far away places, whom we seldom know or who may not be seen at all during our whole lifetime, receives more sympathy than our next door neighbour belonging to a different religious faith or speaking different language.

Religions in principle preach love for mankind and are meant for transforming our hearts and taming our minds with a view to realize the divine spirit within us. But in

practice, religions have generated hatred and have become divisive forces and harmful to mankind. Day in and day out, we hear gruesome attacks and killings of hundreds of innocent lives in different parts of the globe – one such incident in the recent past being the brutal and barbarian attack by the terrorists from Chechnya on a school in Russia where more than 200 innocent young children and teachers were killed. Very recently there were bomb blasts in Mumbai at five different railway stations simultaneously killing and injuring several hundreds and thousands of innocent people. If the love for our own religion or region generates hatred towards the people of other religion, then the question arises: “What is the use of religion at all?” There is no wonder in what Dr Ram Manohar Lohia once remarked: “Politics is a short term religion; and religion is a long term politics”. To this, I have no hesitation to add that we, the religious leaders, have become more politicians than religious leaders and the politicians, in turn, have become more criminals than politicians. “Politics without principles is a crime!” once proclaimed Gandhiji. Religions are being misused and religious sentiments are exploited by politicians to usher into power in India.

The festival days in India have become a big headache to the Police. What a shame that the religious festivals which are meant for rejoicing and gaining spiritual strength have turned out to be deadly warfare and street fights! Instead of becoming an expression of deep devotion to God, they have become an expression of religious chauvinism and hatred towards other communities. Religious practices aim at bringing self-discipline and are, therefore, purely personal. They should be observed for spiritual advancement (*ātmonnati*) killing one’s own ego within and not killing people around us.

*martya-lokavembudu kartāraṇa kammataṇṇa  
illi salluvavaru alliyū salluṇṇa  
illi salladavaru alliyū sallaraṇṇa  
Kūdala Sangama Deva!*

This world is a mint house of God  
Like a good coin imprinted in the mint  
You should lead a good life  
Imprinted with good actions  
To be honoured both in this world  
And the world hereafter!  
Do not be a fake coin to be thrown out by  
Our Lord Kūdala Sangama

Religions were founded for finding peace in this life and in the life hereafter. But in practice, they have become the causes for unhappiness and unrest in the world. Religions should not be like attractive commercial ads in the market and religious institutions should not act like rival companies trying to popularize their own products!

There are two things before every religion: 1. Life on this earth and 2. Life hereafter. The issues related to the other world should not make this life miserable. We can discuss the metaphysical issues in a conference like this and I am sure that Mr Ernst Freiberger will be more than happy to host. If possible thrash out the disagreements and if not agree to disagree.

The primary aim of all religions is to make man happy both in this life and in the life hereafter. “*Yato'bhyudaya nihsreyasa siddhiḥ sa dharmah*” (True religion brings earthly happiness and heavenly paradise), says the **Vaiśeṣika Sūtra**, a treatise on one



of the six schools of Indian Philosophy. Religions propagate mutual trust, peaceful co-existence and humanism among people of the world. No religion preaches any violence to its followers. But there is no country in the world where there has been no violence or blood-shed in the name of religion or God. Basavaṅṅa who led a great socio-religious movement during 12th century AD in Karnataka (South India), strongly condemns the acts of violence in the name of religion. He stresses the need for being kind and gentle at heart towards all living beings, if one really wants to win the grace of God:

*dayavillada dharmavadevudayyā*  
*dayave beku jagada prāṅigalellaralliyū*  
*dayave dharmada mūlavayyā*  
*kūḍala-sangayyanantalladollanayyā*

What is the use of Religion  
If it does not teach compassion?  
Be compassionate to all living beings in the world  
Compassion is indeed the root of all religions  
Lord Kudala Sangama  
Does not like it otherwise!

As you all know, the young school children in the West are affiliated to one sports team or the other at the national level. Like the Cinema syndrome in India where boys and girls have their own favourite cine stars, the youths and even the grown up people in the West have their own favourite sports team to support – as, for example, the rival baseball teams of New York’s Yankees and Boston’s Redsox in US. Once I had been to Netherlands leading a group of 150 disciples on a World Peace Tour. As we walked down the main street of Amsterdam, I found many Dutch people seated outside the restaurants sipping a glass of beer or apple juice with their ears glued to the Radio/ TV news. A football match between the Dutch team and the French team was going on in this famous city of flowers. The orange coloured dress of the Dutch players matched with the saffron colour of my dress. A group of Dutch fans looked at me curiously and jubilantly remarked: “Wow! You are supporting our team!” I just smiled at them and did not say anything. But one of our disciples piously replied to him: “You have the blessings of our Swamiji; your team will surely win!” After a while, the Dutch team really won the game. But to my dismay, some of our disciples lost their purses – and one of them even lost his Passport – in the melee that ensued in their eagerness to grab the models of colourful footballs being freely distributed by the Dutch fans in their jubilation! What I intend to say here is: As long as you enjoy witnessing the sports and support your team, it is okay. But if your team loses the play and you resort to hooliganism – pelting stones, throwing rotten eggs and hand grenades etc., – then the sports has no meaning. Similarly, religious fanatics have made their religions meaningless, chaotic and ruthless by their irreligious activities detrimental to the lofty principles of their religion. If the adherents of all religions make sincere efforts to understand their own religion in its proper perspective without any prejudice to other religions and try to practice its true teachings to kill the monstrous enemy within themselves, then the religious harmony is not far off to achieve. We should work together in that direction for peaceful co-existence and save the humanity from all the brutalities committed in the name of religion and God. In conclusion, **I can only say that religion as preached by its founders is a blessing**

**but as practiced by some of its followers is a curse.** If no religious principles govern the mankind, it can still be worse.

We the Peace loving people belonging to divergent religions of the world assemble, talk, discuss and depart to our places after the conference is over. But we do not have the courage to stand before the roaring guns in the battle field of Israel and Lebanon. There is a great need of all the peace loving religious leaders of the world to come together and do something to educate their respective followers that such outrageous acts are not committed in the name of religion and God and remove the rolling tears of thousands of innocent people and make this world an earthly paradise to live!

Let me conclude with a poem which I wrote for a book on World Peace:

*God is one, but His names are many  
Reality is one, but its ways are many  
Spirituality is one, but religions are many  
Humanity is one, but human beings are many*

*There cannot be one religion for the whole world  
Religions are like flowers in a beautiful garden  
Every flower has got its own individual beauty  
Adding to the total beauty of the garden!*

*Enjoy the beauty of the flower of your choice!  
While enjoying the beauty of the garden!  
Let not your choice be thrust on others  
Nor be it a cause for coercion and conflict!*

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