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Religious Intolerance as a Source of Violence

translated from the German

by

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The world has not become a more peaceful place since Mahatma Gandhi, shot down by an assassin, surrendered his spirit on 30 January 1948. Violence, something as old as mankind itself, has taken on a new dimension in modern industrial societies - it has become an integral part of our lives, an ordinary, everyday, even trivial occurrence. Just as fever indicates sickness in the body, so also do the increasing tendency towards conflict and the readiness to settle conflicts by violence point to a serious malady in society. It is a society lacking orientation, in which traditional value-systems have lost their authority. It is a world characterised by nihilism and hedonism, in which fear and hopelessness are spreading - ideal conditions for the growth of individual and collective violence. In a world so overshadowed by darkness, the figure of Mahatma Gandhi with his message of non-violence, his unshakeable faith in a future world of justice, peace and harmony, is a ray of light, a sign of hope.

One of the most ancient and apparently ineradicable causes of violence is religious fanaticism. From Cain's murder of his brother right up to the present day one can trace throughout human history a trail of blood resulting from religious persecution, religious wars, "Holy Wars" and religiously motivated acts of violence. The Enlightenment, it is true, brought about the postulation of religious freedom as a universal human right, a right now written into the Constitution of every democratic state, thus removing claims to religious truth from the domain of state power. Yet, at this very time, bloody conflicts are being conducted in the name of religion in Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Sri Lanka and Sudan. Religious fanaticism periodically flares up in riots and massacres, as in India and Egypt, and it is not seldom to hear of atrocities committed under direct invocation of God and in His name. In the name of the "true" religion minorities are

subjected to persecution, oppression and harassment - the violent persecution of the Bahā'īs in Iran is, still today, a sad example of this phenomenon.¹

The tragic end to Mahatma's life demonstrates that it is the promoters of peace, in particular, that provoke the hatred of fanatics.² In his case it was his co-religionists who could not bear the fact that he took the children of the "Untouchables" in his arms, that he believed in Hindus and Muslims living together in harmony and mutual respect. They considered his murder an act of piety, praying in the Temple prior to the crime for the blessing of the Deity. Hatred is never so profound and irreconcilable as when its motives spring from the deepest levels of consciousness, from religious belief. "*Jamais on ne fait le mal si pleinement et si gaiement que quand on le fait par conscience*".³

There is, however, no basis for committing such deeds with a clear conscience: none of the religions legitimises violence against those who think or believe differently. Religious fanaticism, the bitter fruit of narrow-minded dogmatism, is the worst deformation of religion, the perversion of one of the most noble virtues, that of steadfastness in faith. Its psychological roots lie in vices such as arrogance, pride, and tacit envy, attitudes which are condemned in all religions as "sin" or even "mortal sin". Intolerance, fanaticism and religious hatred are "destructive to the foundation of human solidarity"⁴ profoundly contrary to the spirit of true religion: Bahā'u'llāh⁵, the Founder of the Bahā'ī Faith, called it "a world-devouring fire", "a desolating affliction"⁶, and impressed upon his followers that "The religion of God is for love and unity; make it not a cause of enmity or dissension."⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahā even went so far as to state that: "If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act. For it is clear that the purpose of a remedy is to cure; but if the remedy should only aggravate the complaint it had better be left alone."⁸

1 Cf. Douglas Martin, *The Persecution of the Bahā'īs in Iran*, Ottawa 1984 (publ. by the Association for Bahā'ī Studies); Kamran Ekbal, "Die Verfolgung einer religiösen Minderheit: die Bahā'ī im Iran", in: *Gewissen und Freiheit*, Bern no 31 (1988), pp. 36 ff.

2 Other examples include Dr. Martin Luther King, who modelled himself on Gandhi, Anwar al-Saddat etc.

3 Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Flammarion 1973), no 813 ("Never does one commit evil so thoroughly and so joyfully as when one does so out of conviction.")

4 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette/Ill.,²1982), p. 455.

5 1817 – 1892.

6 *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette/Ill. 1962), 19.

7 *Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh* (Haifa/Israel 1978) 15: 9.

8 *Paris Talks* (London¹¹1969 repr. 1971) 40: 3.

Fanaticism is incompatible with the commandments of justice and love. Love requires tolerance, and this noble virtue means respect for the opinions and beliefs of others, not out of religious or moral indifference, but, irrespective of one's own standpoint, out of respect towards one's neighbour as a free and equal person with the inalienable right to his own convictions.

For numerous centuries the spirit of irreconcilable rejection was reflected in the behaviour of one group of believers towards members of other denominations, or, worse still, of other religions. Yet in all religions, from the Emperor Ashoka⁹ to the present, there have been individuals who have defied the dominant *Zeitgeist* and stood up for understanding and tolerance towards other faiths. Cusanus, a Cardinal of the Catholic Church, who in 1453 coined the sensational phrase "*Una religio in rituum varietate*", the Protestant theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher and Friedrich Heiler, the Lutheran Archbishop Nathan Söderblom, the Indian religious philosopher Savarpalli Radhakrishnan, the Catholic theologians Raymondo Panikkar and Hans Küng, among others, have raised their voices for the overcoming of dogmatic claims to exclusivity, for a fraternal relationship between the religions, for the spirit of love and tolerance in keeping with the demand in the Qur'ān: "Let there be no compulsion in religion!"¹⁰. Among these protagonists of religious tolerance, Mahatma Gandhi was undoubtedly the most significant.

The "Declaration of the Church to non-Christian Religions" of the *Second Vatican Council* and the "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies" produced by the *World Council of Churches* in 1979 were both of epochal significance in providing a new orientation based on the spirit of reconciliation. They marked the beginning "of a serious dialogue of the World Religions", "a slow awakening of a global ecumenical consciousness" which, according to Hans Küng, is "one of the most important phenomena of the twentieth century"¹¹. This development is a sign of hope that in our world of violence, genocide and religious discrimination, the spirit of tolerance and respect for the inalienability of human dignity and human rights will triumph over the spirit of irreconcilability, prejudice and hatred. World peace depends upon it: "There

9 (272 - 237 BC) His famous edicts are remarkable testimonies to religious tolerance. Having converted to Buddhism, he announced that he no longer desired to change the world through the sword but through the power of the moral law, the *Dharma*. He calls above all for respect towards believers in other religions and the promotion of all forms of belief.

10 2: 256.

11 *Christianity and the World Religions* (London 1990), p. XIV.

will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions."¹²

The formulation of sublime principles alone is, however, of little benefit. The significance of Mahatma Gandhi lies above all in the fact that he did not stop at well-meaning appeals and the formulation of his principles but in that - despite long years of incarceration - he exemplarily lived out his principles of all-embracing love for mankind, religious tolerance and non-violence, engaging his whole personality fearlessly in corresponding political action: "The world is tired of words; it wants example."¹³

12 *ibid.* p. 443.

13 Shoghi Effendi, *Living the Life* (London 1974), p. 26.