

# Call to Restore Human Dignity

## A Theological Response to the attacks against minorities in India

### Context

The ancient Indian civilization shows religious tolerance as its hallmark. Various religious traditions have lived in India in harmony and peace for centuries. The plurality of religions has been viewed as richness of the nation. Hindus of different traditions, Buddhists of both Hinayana and Mahayana traditions with their variants and offshoots and Jains of various schools, Muslims of more than one lineage, Christians of many denominations, different groups of Sikhs and Parsees and several Tribal communities have lived in India side by side for many centuries. However, that situation has been changing in the recent years as religious intolerance has emerged as a dominant factor in conflicts. In contemporary India religions are manifesting a disturbing tendency to intimidate one another. To a certain extent it is true that in India there are problems of Islamic fundamentalism, Hindu revivalism and Christian conservatism.<sup>1</sup> Politicians and political parties exploit such communal feelings to their advantage and win votes. Religious violence has increased in recent years in several parts of India.

The history of India after independence in 1947 has been marred by religious and communal riots. The early phases after independence witnessed communal riots between Hindus and Muslims, which led to the division of the country and the formation of Pakistan as a home land for Muslims. The tension between Muslims and Hindus has been very high for centuries and still continues to exist today. By the way of illustration I would like to add two major incidents.

1. The demolition of Babri Masjid (Babri Mosque). The Babri Mosque was located in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh in northern part of India, a site traditionally regarded as the birthplace of the Hindu God Rama (*Ram Janmabhomi*). In order to build a temple for God Rama in that place, the Babri Mosque was destroyed by Hindu activists on 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1992. *Ram Janmabhomi*-Babri Masjid controversy sustains the tension between the Hindus and Muslims.

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<sup>1</sup> Somen Das, *Christian Ethics and Indian Ethos* (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1989), 51.

2. Gujarat riots of 2002 were another horror story where thousands of Muslims were burnt alive, raped and slaughtered by Hindu extremists.

There are also accounts of violence against Sikhs in India. The new wave of attacks is against Christians. In January 1999 an Australian Baptist missionary, Graham Staines, was burnt alive along with his two sons inside a locked car. Graham Staines and his family had lived in India for the greater part of his life, and he was working among lepers in Orissa, one of India's most deprived regions.

The recent attack against Christians happened in 2008 in Orissa. It was triggered after a Hindu political party leader had been killed on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2008 in Kandhamal District in Orissa. His supporters blamed the Christians for his murder and started persecuting the Christians in the region. The Christians of Orissa have not only been unable to celebrate the birth of Our Lord, but also were forced to flee their homes into forests for fear of life. The reports indicate that besides various institutions in the towns and villages, a good number of village churches have been destroyed. The violence lasted for almost three months and even now the situation is not changed in Orissa.

The increasing violence against Christians and other religious minorities in India is putting the credibility of Indian constitution at risk. The Constitution of India (1950) recognizes the right to freedom of religious worship. The Article 25 of Indian Constitution says: "Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion.-(1) Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion."<sup>2</sup>

The communal violence can be looked at from different angles. That means, there may be various reasons behind. Even though the political and social factors play a prominent role, they are often kept in the background and religious issues are brought to the forefront. "Experience has shown that the communal and fundamental forces, aided and abetted by external elements are challenging our basic values of nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://indiacode.nic.in/coiweb/coifiles/part.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Somen Das, *Christian Ethics and Indian Ethos*, 53.

The undisputed fact is that enormous harm is done to the human lives due to the communal conflicts in many parts of India. The growing atrocities against human life can be viewed as a serious threat to the human dignity. The denial of the dignity of the other is the first casualty of any form of violence. Violence, therefore, is not only physical harm but also violation of the rights of the other.

In this context, this article reflects theologically upon human dignity and the experience of violence. Affirming human dignity also includes ensuring the rights of peoples to live in freedom. The reflection on human dignity is intended to harness the proliferation of violence.

In this scenario the main focus of this article is that human dignity presupposes the right to religious freedom. Firstly, drawing inspiration from Christian anthropology, I shall try to establish a theological foundation for human dignity. Secondly, I shall point out how religious persecution is a violation of human dignity. Finally, I shall discuss some of the possible responses the Church can make in defence of human dignity and religious freedom.

### **Basis of Human Dignity: A Christian Anthropological Perspective**

The book of Genesis affirms the dignity of humankind in the story of creation. The climax of the first creation account (Gen 1-2:4a) is the creation of the human beings. “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). So the Christian tradition sought the basis of human dignity in the creation of the human being in the image of God.

The idea of human beings as image of God is not new as other cultures and religions around Israel spoke of specific persons as image of God, for example, Kings. But what is new is, as written in the Book of Genesis, all human beings are in the image of God. This means that it is the vocation of everyone, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, race, etc., to be the image of God, not just of some special categories of people. God, by creating us, has shared his life, love-ability, creative power and freedom with us. We can even say that he raised us from nothingness to the level of children of God. Therefore, we can rightly say that by the very fact of creation, we are daughters and sons of God. It is this inherent quality that is given to us by God that gives us human dignity. It is this that distinguishes us from other created beings.

The Psalmist also affirms the dignity of human beings as creatures “crowned with glory and honour. The Psalmist says: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour” (Ps 8: 4-6).

The emphasis on human dignity is reinforced and intensified in the New Testament in the Incarnation, in God becoming a human being in Jesus. Human dignity, rooted in the Genesis account of the creation of the human being in the image and likeness of God, fulfils in Christ the perfect image of God. In Jesus the dignity of human person is substantially enhanced. Jesus recognized the divine dignity of all people, especially the outcasts of his society, lepers (Mk 1:39-45; 14:3), tax collectors (Mk 2:15-17), and so on.

The mission of Jesus can be looked upon as a mission of restoring the dignity of human beings. Johannine theology, especially in comparison to Pauline tradition, Christ did not come primarily to put away human sin, but to restore in humans the image of God and give them life. As John 10: 10 says: “I have come to give life, life in abundance.” The healings of Jesus, his table fellowship, etc., can be looked upon as a mission to restore the dignity of human beings, especially the marginalized of the society. And this is also the mission of the Church, to enhance human dignity and to restore it when and where some damage is done to it.

## **Call to Restore Human Dignity**

The Christian theology has a vital role to diagnose when and where the human dignity is threatened in contemporary society. The Catholic Church has given a notable importance to the theme human dignity in her social teachings, especially in the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*. According to the Christian theology the human dignity is conferred by God. And therefore it is always seen in relation to God, the Creator. Since human dignity is from God and its measure and norm is to be seen in God’s action toward humankind in creation and redemption in Christ. In other words, divine dignity is the foundation of the human dignity and latter is the revelation of the former.<sup>4</sup> It consists in reaching out to others in love.

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<sup>4</sup>Kendall R. Soulen and Linda Woodhead, “Contextualizing Human Dignity,” in *God and Human Dignity*, ed. Soulen R. Kendall and Woodhead Linda, (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co,2006), 8.

## Religious Freedom

Human beings, in so far as they are transcendent beings, have a capacity to relate with God. “The human person carries within oneself a spark of divine and is constituted with a basic orientation towards the divine. This gives the human person an incentive and call to commune with God which is absent in subhuman creatures, and which at the same time accounts for person’s inherent sublimity.”<sup>5</sup>

Human beings have not only the capacity to relate with God but a need to relate with God. This explains the presence of different religions in the world. Secondly, in so far as human beings are social beings or community oriented beings, they have certain rights and duties. One of such rights is religious freedom. It is the human dignity that presupposes freedom. Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* by quoting the words of Pope Leo XIII says: “true freedom, freedom worthy of the sons of God, is that freedom which most truly safeguards the dignity of the human person.”<sup>6</sup> In *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Second Vatican Council also emphasizes this aspect so clearly. “(T)he right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person.”<sup>7</sup> The term “religious freedom” is ambiguous and can be differently understood. Here it would mean the freedom to practice and propagate the religion he/she wants to. *Dignitatis Humanae* or Human dignity says:

They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth. However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom. Therefore the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature. In consequence, the right to this immunity continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it and the exercise of this right is not to be impeded, provided that just public order be observed.<sup>8</sup>

India being a democratic country has ensured certain religious rights to the person and communities so that they freely practice their religion. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has also ensured the same rights to different communities. Article 18:

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<sup>5</sup> Jose Koodapuzha, *Human Dignity* (Vadavathoor, Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India, 1998), 174.

<sup>6</sup> Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae* 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Dignitatis Huamanae* 3

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”<sup>9</sup>

However, the number of communal violence that India witnessed is a clear example of how this freedom is denied to communities. As far as Christians are concerned, it has been at the receiving end since independent India. This is a grave deprivation of human dignity and violation of religious freedom. In this kind of scenario, what kind of response is the Church is called to make.

### **Christian Response to Defend Human Dignity**

It is true that Jesus had warned his disciples that he is sending them like sheep among the wolves. He had further cautioned that the disciples will be persecuted in his name. (Mt 5: 12-13). Therefore, we are called to pray for those who persecute us. We have also been commissioned with the divine obligation to pray for our enemies. It is also believed that the seed of the Gospel grows with the blood of the martyrs. This the Church has been doing all through. On the other hand, as we have seen the mission of Jesus was oriented towards protecting the dignity of human beings. I am of the opinion that denial of human dignity is also a question of justice. Therefore, it is important that the Church within its capacity should fight to get justice done to the victims. This does not mean that the Church is called to take up arms. The disciples of Jesus can never justify violence of any kind. However, it has to find creative ways to give visibility to its protest and its concern for human dignity and religious freedom.

The Church through the different kind of its ministries has been actively involved in defending the various human rights including the right to human dignity. However, when it comes to denial of human dignity in the case of religious persecution, the church has been very much inward looking. In other words, the Church has not shown sufficient interest when people of other communities were denied the same rights. Therefore, the church, with renewed enthusiasm and energy should resolve to defend human dignity where ever and whenever it is denied.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#atop>

## Conclusion

We recognize the importance of religious freedom and the vital role it plays in spreading liberty and ensuring human dignity. The violence against Christians and other minorities in India should be seen mainly as the denial of this human dignity. As the Church continues her mission, the defence of human dignity has to become one of her top most priorities so that all, irrespective of one's religion, can live truly with the dignity of being the children of God.

But now-a-days enormous harm is caused to human dignity by the number of communal violence that erupt in India and other parts of the world. It could be said that India and also the world at large manifest a culture of violence. This situation of incredible violence demands from each one of us a responsibility to build a society of peace and harmony.

The papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris* calls upon the churches to work towards building a culture of peace in a world pervaded by a culture of violence. These mark a significant movement through engagement in analysis of violence to an active pursuit of the resources for and possibilities of peace and justice.

“Finally, may Christ inflame the desires of all men to break through the barriers which divide them, to strengthen the bonds of mutual love, to learn to understand one another, and to pardon those who have done them wrong. Through His power and inspiration may all peoples welcome each other to their hearts as brothers (and sisters), and may the peace they long for ever flower and ever reign among them.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Pacem in Terris* 171.