



Director of the Institute
Prof Roddam Narasimha, my friend and colleague Dr Raja
Ramanna, distinguished members of the faculty, ladies and
gentlemen:

Let me say at the outset how happy I am to be able to make this, my second, visit to this very fine Institute, founded by J R D Tata, a true visionary. Mr Tata and I worked very closely together. He was a friend of my father's. When I became the Minister for Civil Aviation, he was the Chairman of Air India. In that capacity we worked closely together for the seven years that I was in that Ministry. He always deeply impressed me with his tremendous vision and dynamism, and he was a great institution-builder. I asked him once how he had managed to build such fine institutions. He replied that he never built an institution and then

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Karan Singh

looked for a person to run it, but that he first found a person and then built the organization around him. I think perhaps that is the reason why all his ventures, whether the one in Jamshedpur, which I visited earlier this month, or Air India, where he assembled a team of outstanding leaders, or whether it is any of his other industries, the Tata signature and emblem have always carried a very special ambience. I would like to take this opportunity to pay my tributes to his memory.

I came here first four or five years ago when Dr Ramanna was the Director. I got to know about this Institute and I was particularly impressed by its holistic nature and its multidisciplinary ambience, which are so important in this age of specialization. More and more specialization is taking place, and as the saying goes, a specialist knows more and more about less and less, and ultimately ends up knowing nothing; the generalist knows less and less about more and more, and he also ends up with nothing! So what is required is that we must have a constant interface between the various disciplines. I am so happy that this Institute has this multidisciplinary nature. It is very important that the three streams of the so-called pure sciences, the social sciences and the humanities gather together like the *Triveni* – the Ganga, the Yamuna and the invisible Saraswati; that they mingle and merge; only then will knowledge really come to us.

What is beginning to happen, as I see it, is that the hard sciences have become so predominant that the social sciences and humanities are relegated to the back. Most of you here are scientists and so I would not want to affront you, but the fact remains that the social sciences and humanities are treated very

The Interfaith Movement

much like poor cousins. Here we have an institution trying to bring these three strands together in our cultural and intellectual life, as I found out when talking to the Director about the different projects you have. This itself calls for celebration.

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When Dr Ramanna asked me to speak, I had several options, but I have chosen to speak on the Interfaith movement. I would like to put it in the perspective of the human condition today. We are now clearly in the cusp of destiny, between a disappearing past and an indeterminate future. For the past is disappearing in front of our eyes, and the old structure and the old formulations are collapsing; at the same time no new certainties are emerging. So we are in an extraordinarily interesting and exciting, yet dangerous situation. Unless we are able to make some sense out of the typhoon of change that is sweeping across the world, and unless we have some guidelines, we will be totally disoriented. This has been happening in many parts of the world. There is an increasing number of crimes, and greater violence, disorientation, and social tension. One of the reasons for this is that people are no longer able to make sense of what is happening around them. The speed of change has accelerated. In our own life time great changes have occurred that have transformed our life. When Yuri Gagarin broke the space barrier we were astonished. I remember how we used to watch every evening in

Karan Singh

Kashmir, the Sputnik moving majestically in space: the sight thrilled us. When Armstrong walked on the moon, we were watching that on television.

Other astonishing changes are continuing to take place. For example, the IT revolution today plays a predominant role. So, on the one hand, the human being has for the first time the knowledge to be able to make his life better and safer – and the capacity and technology for doing that. On the other hand there is a lack of wisdom. As the poet says, knowledge grows but wisdom lingers. Knowledge is growing apace, but the Wisdom is not keeping in touch with it. The Upanishads talk about *parā vidyā* and *aparā vidyā*: *aparā vidyā* is growing but the *parā vidyā*, the wisdom, the transmutation of consciousness that is necessary in order to take creative advantage of knowledge, is lingering. So we have this extraordinary and contradictory situation where on the one hand, there is tremendous wealth and affluence unheard of in human history, and, on the other, we still spend billions of dollars on armaments, drugs, smuggling, terrorism, traffic in human beings, there is crime individual and collective, and there is cultural, racial and religious conflict. This is the ambiguous situation that we find ourselves in as we enter the third millennium AD.

In this context, what has been the role of religion? Religion has a mixed record. On the one hand, great human civilizations can be traced back to one or the other great religions of the world. Whether it is art or architecture,

The Interfaith Movement

music, dance, literature, philosophy, spiritual practice – all these can be traced back to great religions. The great Brihadeswara temple, the rock-cut caves of Ajantha and Ellora, the dancing Nataraja, St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, the Pieta of Michealangelo – such wonders of the world owe their origin to the religious impulse. Without great religions human civilization would have been much poorer than it is today. On the other hand, more people have been actually killed, tortured, burnt, persecuted and ill-treated in the name of religion than for any other cause. So how is it that on the one hand, religion can produce such great gifts, and on the other, it can produce so much suffering and disaster? It is very clearly a double-edged thing, rather like science. Science can also give tremendous benefits, but the gas chambers of Hitler were also an application of science. Religion thus has a very mixed record, but the religious impulse remains strong and deep.

We belong to a whole generation which was brought up in the Fabian, socialist tradition, in which religion has no important place. Religions were supposed to be some kind of hang-over from a primitive past, and to disappear as people got educated.

Within this framework, there were two attitudes to religion. One was the Marxist-Leninist attitude, the communist attitude, which was condemnatory and hostile to religion. My wife and I visited Moscow in 1959 on an invitation by Mr Khrushchev. Mr K P S Menon was our Ambassador. I was interested in religions even at that time. At the dinner hosted by

Karan Singh

Mr Khrushchev I asked him, 'Mr General Secretary, can a person in your country be both a believer as well as a member of the Communist Party, the CPSU?' He said categorically 'No, we respect religious traditions but in order to be a member of the CPSU one has to be an atheist.' Virulently anti-religious Marxists and Leninists ruled the Soviet Union for three generations. And when that regime collapsed there was immediately an upsurge of religion.

Let me give you two examples. I was in Moscow in 1990 when the thousandth anniversary of the advent of Christianity in Russia was being celebrated. The zeal was tremendous. The churches were decorated, icons repaired and millions of people took part in the celebration. Although three generations were brought up in that Marxist-Leninist tradition, the Communist Party had not 'destroyed' religion in the Soviet Union, the craving for religion had remained.

Again, I was in Mongolia later. The Soviet Union, before it collapsed, had killed the monks, destroyed their monasteries, and burnt their scriptures; and yet when the Indian Ambassador, Amir K Bacola from Ladakh, went there, he could become virtually the re-establisher of Buddhism there, like Padma Sambhava for Tibet. He set up and rebuilt the temples, and he brought back their texts. What I am saying is that the communist attitude does not work.

The other attitude is that of the socialist (say, London School of Economics), which dismisses all religions as not

The Interfaith Movement

sensible. Some scientists think that religion is a hang-over of the past and it is unfashionable to talk about it, and that they are enlightened persons. In India, we have the combination of both these dismissive views of religion, the Marxist as well as the socialist attitudes. I must point out here that the Indian intelligentsia has been guilty of serious dereliction of duty for half a century in either ignoring religion or treating it with hostility and disdain. As a result we have left religion in the hands of the most fundamentalist, backward-looking and unenlightened sections of society.

So, before I talk about the Interfaith Movement, it is my first plea to an enlightened audience like this here, of both social and natural scientists, to have an impulse for religion, regardless of your own religious affiliation. Please understand that I am not talking about a new religion. Einstein had said that the deepest impulse one can have is the religious impulse. Great scientists are more religious, not less. I have talked to several scientists, very famous and important scientists; each one of them has reiterated that though they might not subscribe to any particular formulation of religion, they certainly had an impulse for religion. The deeper impulses built into human consciousness are significant and they have to be taken into account. I humbly submit that this change of attitude should come from academia, from the intelligentsia.

The Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi started a school for the study of languages. It teaches Russian,

Karan Singh

Chinese, Japanese, German, Spanish, but they refuse to open a department for Sanskrit. I asked them how there could be a school of languages in India, that refused to teach Sanskrit. Sanskrit across the world is appreciated for the sheer beauty of its structure and for the resonance that surrounds it. Progressive academia has nothing to do with it and they feel it is not fashionable. I would like that there should be a change in this attitude – it should come from Bangalore, from the Indian Institute of Science and the National Institute of Advanced Studies.

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Now let me get on to the Interfaith Movement, which is aimed at bringing about better understanding between various religious traditions of the world.

There are four Indian religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism; there are five from West Asia: Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahai faith; and three which are East Asian: Daoism (indigenous Chinese), Shintoism of Japan and Confucianism. These are the twelve accepted major religions. Each one of them, of course, has several sub-religions. As you know, Hinduism has thousands of Mutts and other schools. The idea of the Interfaith Movement is not to create a new religion or to try to establish the superiority or otherwise of any particular religion, but simply to bring together people who believe in different religious traditions to harmonious, creative dialogue.

The Interfaith Movement

The first major event in such an endeavour in modern times was the First World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. It was a very significant meeting and was attended by five or six thousand people. It happened by some extraordinary process of synchronization, or divine will, that Swami Vivekananda was able to take part in the meeting. He had not even been invited to it, but thanks to the Raja of Ramanad and the Raja of Kethri, he could make his way to America – and indeed he made a very great impression at the meeting.

In the 20th century, several interfaith organizations have arisen: the International Association of Religious Freedom, the Temple of Understanding (of which I happen to be worldwide Chairman at present), the World Council of Religions for Peace (WCRP), the United Religions Initiative, and several others.

The second Parliament of World Religions was held once again in Chicago – in 1993, exactly a hundred years after the first Parliament, to commemorate the earlier event. Six thousand people attended the second meeting, and I had the privilege of leading the Indian delegation. People from all over the world participated. Unfortunately, however, there was little interest, not only in academia but even in the Press. We see that even when there is a small clash between boys playing cricket it appears in headlines in our Press, but when six thousand people belonging to different faiths get together for five days in a creative dialogue, not a word appears. Not a single Indian correspondent attended

Karan Singh

the meeting – although we pride ourselves as the land of religions. The third Parliament was held in Cape Town in December 1999, at the end of the last century.

I am mentioning all this because, while the Interfaith Movement is slowly beginning to gather momentum, it is still on the periphery of human consciousness. Take for example the issue of environment. I was in the Indian delegation to Stockholm in 1972 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi led it. There were only two heads of government, Indira Gandhi and the Prime Minister of Sweden, Olaf Palme, at the Stockholm meeting. Twenty years later, at a meeting on environment held in Rio in 1992, 116 heads of government attended. That shows that the issue had moved from the periphery to the centre of human consciousness. That is what we are hoping will happen in the case of the Interfaith Movement too.

The problem is that everybody is interested only in his own religion. Lots of temples, mosques, churches and gurudwaras are being built. There is no shortage of money for these. But nobody is prepared to put in the energy, time, money and the technology needed to develop the Interfaith Movement, which to my mind is as essential for a sane and sustainable global society as education. I am not proposing a religious educational system – instead, what I am proposing is that extracts from different religions should be brought into the educational system under different heads like fearlessness, respect for elders, cleanliness, punctuality, helpfulness etc. If you actually read the texts of

The Interfaith Movement

different religions, there is no difference on such issues. There may be tremendous theological differences. Buddhism, for example, does not believe in God, but look at their stress on meditation, their temples. There is a common ground which must find its way into our educational institutions.

Assisi is a beautiful town in Italy where there is a cathedral of St. Francis. In 1986, there was an Interfaith Movement meeting organized there, where we produced declarations on man and nature. I was the author of the Hindu declaration; there were Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Jewish declarations, and subsequently for other religions as well. If you read the declarations, despite the different theological underpinnings, the net result is the same: for example, nurture the earth, look after the earth, do not over-exploit resources.

We must use the educational system and the Internet, that new tool which has tremendous power, to propagate the Interfaith Movement. On environment we have marvellous television programmes – on the National Geographic and the Discovery Channel, for example. There is nothing like that on the Interfaith Movement. That needs to be developed. We can use the media of film and television. There is now so much negativity in films, so much horror and violence, which are absolutely unbearable and intolerable; yet we go along merrily and nobody is worried about it. Our children and grand-children are exposed to this poison. If the water tank is poisoned we

Karan Singh

protest, write letters to newspapers, gherao the chief minister and so on, but when the springs of consciousness of our children are being poisoned day in and day out by violence, horror, ultra-consumerism and hyper-permissivity, nobody is worried; and the human consciousness is getting distorted. The Interfaith Movement is very important for doing something about it.

Every religion has two aspects, one particular and the other universal. The particular aspect would be valid at the time the religion was born, but the universal aspect is not tied down to any place, person or period. I am sure we can abstract universal principles from all religions. I would like to place before you some of these universal principles from Vedanta. Hinduism is the religion I have studied best, although I have led a multi-religious life. I come from a Muslim majority State, I went to a Christian school, and we have an excellent relationship with Sikhs – the gurudwaras are as sacred as our own temples – but Hinduism is the religion I have studied best. The principles of Hinduism are the following:

1. The concept of the all-pervasive divine, (*Īshāvāsyam idam sarvam*), over whatever has existed, not only this tiny speck of dust we call the earth, but the billions and billions of galaxies in the endless universe. Whatever has existed and now exists, or will exist, in the marvellous endless universe around us, has been illuminated by the divine fire – which, if I may say so, is the spiritual and philosophical correlate of the unified field theory which scientists talk about. A single force

can explain all the multifarious manifestations of the universe. This all-pervasive Brahman is the basic concept of Vedanta.

2. The second concept is that Brahman is reflected in all beings, especially in human beings: *Īs'varah sarva bhūtānām hridayeshu tish'hati*. We have reached a stage in evolution where humans have the capacity for self-consciousness. The human being is encapsulated by a spark of the divine consciousness, the Atman, which is a reflection of Brahman. The Lord resides in the hearts of all human beings, regardless of race, colour, and nationality. It is the fanning of this spark of the divine into the blazing fire of spiritual realization, which is the ultimate goal of human existence. The joining of the Atman with the Brahman is what we call *Yoga*. The word *yoga* comes from the same basic root as the English word 'yoke', which means 'to join'. *Yoga* is the joining of Atman with Brahman, the eminent human divine with the transcendental divine.
3. The third concept is that all human beings are linked by the divine spark: the world is a family. When we enter Parliament through Gate 1 there is this beautiful inscription, *udāra caritānām tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. To think in terms of mine and yours is a narrow way of addressing reality; for those with a higher consciousness, the world is a family. This is the concept our *rishis* realized thousands of years ago, when they could hardly travel ten

Karan Singh

miles on foot. But now with satellite technology and the IT revolution the world can be linked as a family – one can now talk to anybody anywhere in the world, any time.

This universal and basic concept of Vedanta is the central theme of the Interfaith Movement, namely the essential unity of all religions: *Ekam sat viprāh bahudhā vadanti* – Truth is one, the wise call it by many names. This can in fact be found in all traditional religions, but it is the fundamental insight of Hinduism – long before any other religion was born, Hinduism had multiple paths to the divine. We can go through either *sākāra* Brahman (the divine with form) or *nirākāra* Brahman (without form). In *sākāra* Brahman there are different ways: Shaivism, Vaishnavism, the Shāktas and so on, and there are many permutations and combinations. But all of these ultimately have to lead to the same consciousness. When a person looks through a window he can see only a part of the reality; the entire scene is not visible through the window.

The basic, essential concept in the Interfaith Movement is *bahujana sukhāya, bahujana hitāya*: work not only for your own salvation but also for the welfare of the world. This concept can be interpreted by each religion in a different way.

Look at what is happening in Afghanistan, this Talibanisation, which is so dangerous. But it is a fact that the Buddhist statues destroyed recently in Afghanistan had survived centuries of tolerant Islamic rule. Indeed, Islam has produced some of the most broad-minded scientists,

The Interfaith Movement

artists and thinkers. I have a quote from Ibn al-Arabi, a great scholar of the 12th century: *beware of confining yourself to one particular belief, denying all else, for much good will elude you, indeed, the knowledge of reality will elude you. Be in your self a matter for all beliefs.*

For God is too vast to be restricted to one belief or another: this is a Vedantic statement. Even in the Quran it is said that wherever you turn, there is a face of god. Ultimately it seems to me that we have to find this inner light which illuminates the consciousness that all the religions speak about. Hinduism says it is the light of Atman, *Vedah Metham purusham mahāntham, āditya var'am tamasah parastāt* – I have seen that great being shining like the light of a thousand suns, beyond the darkness; Christians call it the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world; Muslims talk of the all-merciful *Noor-ul Anwar*, the *Roohani Noor*; there is the *Ek Onkar* of the Sikh gurus; in Buddhism it is the *Bodhi-citta* – the light of consciousness. I think if we are able to come into contact with that, we will have transmuted our consciousness.

In conclusion, the Interfaith Movement is an idea whose time has come. We need to see how much each of us can get along with other human beings – human beings of various other religions. The growth of the Interfaith Movement is the only way, and will provide ultimately the index with which to judge the calibre of human consciousness. We have to see whether we will be able to make it together or not: this togetherness, the networking,

Karan Singh

the holism – the interaction and the oneness which this Institute is committed to. This is what is needed in the field of religion. I shall therefore end with a Vedic prayer that says: let us meet together, let our minds be of one accord, let our hearts be in unison; common our prayer, common our intention, common our assembly, common our thoughts, so that there may be no hatred between us:

Sahanāvavatu,

Sahanau bhunaktu,

Saha vīryam karavāvahai;

Tejasvināvadhītamastu,

Mā vidvisāvahai ;

Om s'āntih s'āntih s'āntih.

Dr Karan Singh, member of the Rajya Sabha, was born into the ruling family of the State of Jammu & Kashmir. As a central cabinet minister, he has held the portfolios of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Health and Family Planning, and Education and Culture.

He has been Chancellor of Jammu and Kashmir University as well the Benaras Hindu University, Chairman of the Central Sanskrit Board, Chairman of the Indian Board of Wildlife, and head of the Project Tiger programme. He is Chairman of the Temple of Understanding, a major global interfaith association.

His interests cover global consciousness for a global society, education, religion and the interfaith movement, conservation and the environment, Hinduism and Sanskrit studies, and music and art.