

Religious Tolerance – Spiritual Perspectives

This seminar took the form of a panel discussion moderated by Brice Balmer, who chairs Interfaith Grand River – an organization of people of different faiths in Kitchener, Waterloo, and the surrounding area; and focusing on promoting tolerance, understanding and cooperation between different faith groups. The panel consisted of Bob Chodos (Jewish), Steve Higgins (Buddhist), H. K. Kesavan (Hindu), and Saleem Bhimji (Muslim). The panel along with the moderator, Brice Balmer (Christian), represented five different faiths. This discussion took place at the University of Waterloo with approximately 35 people in attendance.

Brice opened the discussion with remarks to the effect that all people are created by God in his own image and, thus are deserving of not mere tolerance but understanding, love, and respect as well. However, scriptural interpretations regarding tolerance of differences vary depending upon the reader. The scripture has been used to justify various diverse points of views and facts of history such as the crusades just as well as it has been used to engender brotherly love, respect and understanding of all human beings.

Steve said that it is ironic that religion that is supposed to unite humanity, in fact, it divides one from the other. Unity is heaven, but uniformity is hell. Backgrounds and the environment of different people are different, which requires different approaches for different people. Feelings of negativity have to be avoided. The intolerant are in fact suffering. He urged compassion for the suffering.

Kesavan said the Hinduism has no single prophet, no single scripture, no exclusivity, no claim that it is the only way, no religious conversion, no conflict between faith and science and two levels of reality – transcendent and immanent. There is a gap that exists between practice and precept, but that gap has not assumed huge proportions. Secularism in the sense of religious inclusiveness is the norm.

Sameer recounted three Quranic instances wherein those people of the book who refused to answer his call to Islam issued by the prophet were tolerated and allowed to co-exist in the conquered cities. He stated that forcible conversions are not in keeping with the Quran. The prophet never forced Islam on others. There are brothers in faith and there are brothers in humanity. Ignorance of others is the main barrier to tolerance. People should understand other religions and be educated in an effort to inculcate tolerance of other religions.

Bob said that the scripture teaches both tolerance and intolerance. Instances of intolerances are many, but one has to search for the instances of tolerance in the scripture. Having been victims of religious intolerance, Jews should not subject others to intolerance.

The panel presentations were followed by an intense and long question period. One of the major issues raised from the floor was that of religious conversion. Coercive religious conversion using the tools of fear and greed was described as an act of violence, while free choice as a result of personal spiritual quest and based upon an honest interchange of ideas in the spirit of harmony and autonomy is a legitimate human activity leading to human development. Using religion as in colonialism to subvert a culture is destructive cultural genocide and morally wrong. It was pointed out that while judging religion, one has to be mindful of forces other than religion that use it to their ends.

The question period strongly suggested that religious values and spiritual values are distinct and often opposed to each other. One can live without religion, but one cannot and should not live without spirituality. Religions should be vehicles to communicate spiritual vehicles that unite all humanity, but they often don't.

What can an ordinary citizen do to be tolerant? One can be educated about other religions by learning and understanding, be a good and law-abiding citizen, and develop spiritual values that embrace the entire creation transcending religious values where they are divisive, narrow and parochial.

Spirituality, Health & Activism

Dr. Neil Arya offered this seminar at the University of Waterloo with an audience of approximately 35 persons. Dr. Arya linked spirituality and health through personal experience with the major spiritual traditions, with which he has been closely associated. He then shared his experience as a health activist on environmental, peace and disarmament issues. Finally, he concluded with an interactive reflection on the relationship between spirituality and activism. For him spirituality is primarily expressed as a deep concern for the outer world – he does not see any conflict between inner development and outer involvement. Dr. Arya tried to demonstrate that activism is integral to spiritual advancement expressing the highest ideals of respect for other humans, compassion, non-violence, reduction of human desires, in short: living in harmony with the planet.

Towards Oneness - An Academic Approach

Dr. Shiv Talwar offered this seminar at the University of Waterloo with an audience of approximately 10 persons. Shiv presented a curriculum concept for education in the spiritual heritage of humanity – defined as that body of human understanding which is related with human essence, essence of the universe and its relationship with the former, search and fulfilment of the purpose of human life. The curriculum is based on the Oneness of the ultimate cause irrespective of how we perceive it. It is inclusive of the whole humanity, and affirming, diminishing or denying of none. It is also based on the totality of human experience, multi-disciplined and complimentary to the traditional education.

Realizing the value of education in orienting human lives, it is hoped that an implementation of this curriculum will contribute in enhancing human condition through understanding of differences in the light of the underlying spiritual oneness through the cosmic reality.

Basic Concepts of Vedic Philosophy

Dr. H. K. Kesavan offered this seminar at the University of Waterloo with an audience of approximately 35 persons. Dr. Kesavan discussed some of the basic concepts that frequently appear in all the branches of Vedic philosophy. Wherever appropriate, he drew on insights gleaned from science to enhance their understanding. The seminar was addressed specially to university students who are interested in getting an exposure to the meaning of spirituality, which is the central core of religions indigenous to India.