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In My Opinion

A Vision of Inclusiveness

President Obama's inaugural address set forward a new paradigm for religious harmony in America

By Aseem Shukla

The following essay was my response in the Washington Post to their question, "What was the most important religion story of 2009?"

President Barack Obama at his inauguration in January, 2009, said: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth....[we] believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace."

With those words, bracketing Christians with Hindus and Muslims with nonbelievers, the President set an epochal tone of inclusiveness. Every religious tradition and those without faith could join together and share in a "common humanity." That was, to me, the year's most important religion story.

We are indeed a nation of diverse faiths and a faith in nothing at all. Hindus, now numbering two million, may have been included in this context for the first time, but the presidential intention is clear: our majority Christian nation is not a Christian nation; no religion occupies a place of privilege.

In 2005, the Hindu American Foundation was repulsed by Shirley Dobson's

National Day of Prayer Task Force, when it sought to join celebrations throughout the country. This same task force joined with the likes of Focus on Family and others to enjoy official status and the aura of government sanction. Obama implied in his speech that the crass narcissism of these organizations was on the outs, and he came through this year. Ours is certainly a religious country, and this year, the National Day of Prayer belonged to all faiths, and so many of the most important days for every major religious tradition were celebrated by a sitting president for the first time, from Ramadan to Diwali--a major religion story in its own right.

I've seen many interfaith councils, interfaith meetings, interfaith prayers proposed and countless have manifested. Certainly, religious leaders meet, say prayers in their holy tongues, and inspiring pictures are taken. But I've often felt that these become exercises in nothing more than spiritually uplifting futility. For what is the fundamental basis of the meeting?

If religious leaders gather with the mind set that only they have the direct line to God, what is left to share? If an evangelical pastor comes together with a Sikh at an interfaith forum with the Biblical certainty that the person is an infidel or heathen doomed to hell, will the Sikh truly have an opportunity to share the greatness of Sikhism with a receptive partner? Understanding and tolerance are important, but are hollow concepts without the critical element of pluralism--defined as Hindu sages extolled a few millennia ago in the Vedas: "Truth is One, the wise know It by many names."

This is a critical point that should be the goal and common denominator for every sincere interfaith effort anywhere: to recognize that all religions are sacred and valid for their respective peoples. We believe that there is no inherent right embedded in any religion to denigrate or interfere with any other religion or with its practitioners.

Perhaps a Christian president of Muslim parentage is steeped in understanding that informed a presidency that has been truly pluralistic this year. Letting "old hatreds pass," asking "lines of tribe" to dissolve and building an inclusive, pluralistic America--realize all of this and we will usher in, no doubt, a "new era of peace."

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co-founder of the Hindu American Foundation.