



## **INDIA : Religions, Economic Development and New Humanism**

Speech by

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*Mr. Ulderico Maggi, Ms. Maria, other organisers of the MILAN DIALOGUE, Sisters and Brothers,*

I am truly honored to have been invited to speak at this prestigious forum in this beautiful city of Milan.

I thank the organisers of MILAN DIALOGUE for this invitation.

This Dialogue coincides with the Milan Expo 2015. Its theme is interesting: "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life."

I hope the conversations this evening are able to make an humble contribution to the 'Food for Thought', which is so necessary for both feeding the Planet and also saving the Planet.

The theme of the Dialogue this evening is, at first sight, intriguing - **"INDIA : Religions, Economic Development and New Humanism"**.

However, on deeper thought, it seemed to me that the organisers had a certain purpose behind formulating a theme like this.

The entire world is today facing a challenge of how to rescue the kernel of true religion from the confusion and conflicts created in the name of religions.

The entire world is also facing another challenge: What is the true purpose of economic development. How can economic growth promote, rather than poison, the all-round development of human beings and human societies?

How can economic growth protect the environment rather than pollute the environment and thereby threaten the delicate natural ecology and human ecology on Planet Earth?

In other words, is there an inherent contradiction between Economy and Ecology?

Hence, the next two questions:

Does the world need a New Humanism in order to simultaneously and effectively tackle these two challenges - the challenge of conflict in the name of religions and the challenge of mal-development in the name of economic growth?

If the answer to this question is YES, how can India help the movement towards the elusive NEW HUMANISM?

## **Why India?**

There is perhaps an added reason to why the organisers of this dialogue have attached India to this theme.

India today is the world's second most populous country in the world, with a population close to 1.3 billion.

Within the next 8-10 years, India's population will surpass that of China.

Therefore, if India does something wrong, if India falters, it means that a large section of the global population will suffer.

Similarly, if India gets something right, the benefit will accrue to a large part of mankind.

India therefore has both a responsibility and an opportunity to influence the march of humanity in a positive way.

This is how, friends, I have understood the meaning of the theme of this evening's dialogue.

### **The religious landscape in India**

The history of religions in India is, by and large, one of peaceful co-existence on the basis of mutual acceptance, respect and tolerance.

India is, and has always been, a land of multiple faiths. After India became independent from the British colonial rule in 1947, our Constitution has granted equal rights and freedoms to followers of all faiths. It does not brook discrimination on the grounds of faith.

Our Constitution has declared India to be a secular state. By secularism we in India do not mean simply the separation of the state from religion.

More importantly, we understand secularism in its Indian sense, as captured in the Sanskrit phrase: *sarva panth samaadar*.

It means "Equal respect for all faiths".

My country and my religion Hinduism, respect, accept and celebrate the diversity of faiths.

Our Vedas, the ancient sacred texts of Hinduism, say: *"Ekam Sat Viprah Bahudha Vadanti"*

That is, "Truth is One. Wise people interpret it differently."

I would like to emphasise here that Christianity came to India before it spread to many nations that are today Christian nations.

St. Thomas, an apostle of Jesus Christ, established the first church in India in 52 AD.

Similarly, Islam entered India immediately after the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad. When Arab traders, who had embraced Islam, came to the west coast of India in Kerala, the local Hindu king gave them land to establish a mosque.

India has also accepted those who became victims of persecution in their own lands.

When Zoroastrians were persecuted in Iran in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, they sailed to India. They found refuge, and they also found religious freedom, honour and dignity.

More recently, after China came under communist rule, tens of thousands of Tibetan Buddhists have come to India seeking refuge. The Dalai Lama, the most respected spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists, lives in India.

In these long and close interactions with various religions, Hinduism has been positively influenced by other faiths.

In turn, Hinduism has also influenced other faiths.

Hence, what you find in India is a symphony of spiritual traditions, each enriching the other.

*Friends,*

In saying this, I do not mean to claim that all is peaceful and harmonious on the religious landscape of India.

We do have problems, both within religions and between religions.

The problem of caste hierarchy is a blot on Hinduism, which is my faith.

The practice of untouchability, which denies basic human dignity and equality to people belonging to certain so-called "lower" caste Hindus, is on the retreat. Nevertheless, it has not completely disappeared from the social customs of upper caste Hindus, especially in rural areas.

The relations between Hindus and Muslims (who constitute the second largest religious community in India accounting for about 15% of the population) is not very harmonious.

There are several historical and contemporary reasons for this lack of harmony between Hindus and Muslims.

One of these reasons is the violent manner in which India got divided in 1947, and Pakistan was carved out as a separate Muslim nation on the basis of the dubious theory of "Two Nations" - that is, Hindus and Muslims constitute two different nations and therefore cannot live in one nation.

Nearly a half million people died in Partition riots - Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs.

Nearly 15 million were forced to leave their homes and seek new homes across the border - Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan coming into India, and Muslims going to Pakistan.

This was the large cross-border migration in human history.

It has left behind bitter memories.

Unfortunately, India and Pakistan have failed to overcome the hostility created by the Partition of India nearly 70 years ago.

The disharmony between Hindus and Muslims is worsened by the occasional eruption of communal violence which is sparked by the fanatical elements in both communities. Sadly, this sometimes has the backing of self-serving political elements.

These riots, in which innocent people belonging to both Muslim and Hindu communities suffer, are a blot on Indian culture.

Hindu-Christian relations are comparatively more harmonious. Nevertheless, these relations are marred by some unfortunate incidents in recent years.

Attacks on churches in different parts of India by extremist groups among Hindus are also a blot on Indian culture and the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion.

### *Friends,*

What I have said about the negative features of the religious landscape in India should not make anyone, especially foreigners, think that the negative overshadows the positive.

India is a land of continental size, with a population that is nearly double that of Europe. The civilizational unity, which binds together people of various religious, racial and linguistic identities, is unmatched anywhere in the world.

All the saints and mahatmas of India, irrespective of the religion they were born in, proclaimed the oneness of mankind.

This is true about the Buddha, Mahavir, Rama, Krishna, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi.

I should the many Christian saints, too, Mother Teresa in modern times being a good example.

All these saintly personalities continue to influence the minds and conduct of the broad masses of people.

We celebrate each other's festivals. Our common people share the sorrows and joys of each other in their daily lives.

For these common Indians, Inter-faith dialogue is not a matter of participating in seminars and conferences.

It is a matter of their culture and ethos.

Our togetherness also manifests itself in the functioning of India's democracy.

India has had three Muslim presidents so far.

A very large number of Indians have accepted Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, whose birthplace is Italy. She continues to be the president of the Indian National Congress, which is India's oldest political party.

Until a few years ago, we had a situation in which India's president was a Muslim, the prime minister was a Sikh and the most powerful political leader was a woman born into an Italian Christian family.

We proudly cherish this plurality and democracy.

Our duty in India is to strengthen this ethos of plurality and diversity, by fighting those forces of bigotry, extremism and exclusivism who pose a threat to all that is noble and precious in our national and civilizational heritage.

And as someone who is engaged in this struggle, I assure this gathering in Milan, and I assure all those who look at India with goodwill, admiration

and hope, that we shall not allow the forces of divisiveness, hatred and violence to prevail.

India has been, is, and will forever remain a messenger of peaceful religious co-existence.

It is a message the entire world needs to religiously obey and practice.

## **The landscape of economic development in India**

*Friends,*

How does the landscape of economic development look like in India?

The answer, unfortunately, is again contradictory.

There are some positive aspects, but these are counter-balanced by many negative aspects.

On the positive side, Indian economy is in reasonably good shape compared to the other major economies in the world.

India's GDP is growing at a rate of 7-7.5%, which is among the fastest in the world.

The Indian economy has become an engine of growth for the global economy.

Abject poverty in India is getting reduced.

Many sectors of the Indian economy are today globally competitive, both on cost and quality parameters.

Our software industry has grown robustly.

The achievements of our pharmaceutical industry are particularly notable.



It produces highest quality drugs, whose prices are often one-fourth or even one-tenth the prices of drugs manufactured in the West.

Yesterday, when I was returning from Tirana after attending a three-day Inter-Faith Conference for Peace, I was talking to an Italian fellow passenger who is a professor in a medical university in your country.

He was telling me that for several major diseases like cancer, HIV, blood disorders, etc., and for major, surgeries, Indian pharmaceutical and healthcare industry is a major source of hope.

The cost of these in Europe and USA is so prohibitively -- indeed scandalously - expensive that even the middle-classes cannot afford it with their own expenses.

Of course, hospital-based healthcare is becoming costlier in India too. And this is a matter of worry for us.

Therefore, the entire world has to think seriously about this question: health care is a fundamental right and necessity of every human being.

If the right to live is fundamental, then right to good quality healthcare must also be regarded as fundamental.

If so, why is it being denied for millions upon millions of people in the world?

Should healthcare be considered as yet another commodity in the market, available only to those who can afford it?

India also is being confronted with this question, in spite of the fact that our pharmaceutical industry has achieved some notable successes.

This brings me to the basic flaws in India's economic development.

India still has the largest number of malnourished children, the largest number of blind people, the largest number of physically and challenged

people, the largest number of patients with tuberculosis, the largest number of destitute people who are uncared for.

India also has the largest number of people deprived sanitation, which is a basic human necessity.

Our Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi has recently launched a Clean India campaign. This is welcome. But it will take many years of consistent and coordinated effort to see results on the ground.

*Friends,*

Another major weakness in India's economic development is that it is very poorly integrated with the economies of the neighbouring countries in South Asia and South-East Asia.

This is in stark contrast to the situation in the European Union or even ASEAN - that is, the Association of South-East Asian Nations.

India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and other countries in the region should integrate their economies for mutual benefit.

China is pivotal to the economic integration of this vast region,

When two big nations such as India and China cooperate in a regional cooperation framework, it generates confidence among other countries in the neighbourhood.

In terms of population, the South Asian subcontinent is the largest in the world, united by a diverse and yet common civilisation.

It is home to nearly 1.7 billion people.

By transforming itself into a zone of peace and progress for all, India and the rest of South Asia can make a huge contribution to a positive transformation of the entire world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **New Humanism: Need for India and the rest of the world to cooperate with a common purpose**

*Friends,*

After this somewhat disjointed presentation about the religious landscape and the landscape of economic development in India, I shall now endeavor to present some thoughts on how India can contribute to the evolution of what the organisers of this Milan Dialogue have called 'NEW HUMANISM'.

Actually, the term 'New Humanism' is somewhat misleading.

In human history, there is nothing new as far as ethical and humanistic values are concerned.

The age-old spiritual, cultural and intellectual traditions of every country in the world are full of humanistic teachings.

Why then are we talking about 'New Humanism'?

The reason perhaps is that the world community has forgotten, or only weakly remembers and practices, Old Humanism.

Non-violence, love, care, compassion, cooperation and sacrifice, respect for diversity, promotion of harmony through diversity, equal value for every human life, and the essential oneness of mankind - these are commandments of God's Law as articulated and taught to us by prophets, saints and sages from all faiths, from all around the world.

Yet, we have more or less banished these values from economic development, from the conduct of nations and governments with each other, and also from our attitude towards the environment,

Therefore, in my opinion, our search for 'New Humanism' should start with all the countries and all the communities in the world embracing the following principles. I am quoting here from a book 'PATHS TO PEACE - Religion, Ethics & Tolerance in a Globalising World' by Mr. Dirk Collier, a Belgian Indologist.

- Respectful dialogue at all times and under all circumstances;
- Consensus on shared values and norms, wherever possible;
- Tolerance, where consensus cannot be reached;
- And, when needed and absolutely unavoidable, collective and armed enforcement of internationally accepted minimum norms, as has become necessary in tackling the threat of ISIS and other evil threats to humanity.

Last night, Father Dominic and I, along with Ulderico, had gone to see the Shoah Memorial at the central railway station in Milan.

We also saw the commendable and godly work being done by the volunteers of the Community of Sant'Egidio in helping the refugees who are coming into Europe.

This kind of humanitarian service should be at the very heart of 'NEW HUMANISM'.

However, I believe that 'NEW HUMANISM' also requires all the countries in the world to unite to stop the deadly civil wars currently taking place in four Middle-Eastern countries - Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

ISIS, which threatens to create an Islamic State all over the world, is committing a genocide of Christians, other minorities, and also of Muslims.

ISIS is also committing a cultural-archeological genocide by brutally destroying the priceless and irreplaceable heritage of the Middle-East.

*My dear friends,*

'New Humanism' also requires us to unite against yet another genocide going on in our world, and it is not limited to ISIS or to the Middle-East.

It is the invisible genocidal violence that man is inflicting on Mother Nature in the reckless pursuit of the dogma of limitless economic growth and material prosperity.

The dumb victims of this genocide - animals, plants and micro-organisms -- cannot become migrants and refugees like the Syrian refugees.

Their plight does not become BREAKING NEWS on the global media.

Nevertheless, Mother Nature is reminding us that man has to pay the price for his violent behavior.

And mankind is indeed paying the price in so many ways - global warming, unpredictable changes in climate, natural disasters, etc.

Why is man's violence against Mother Nature boomeranging on him?

Because, the current paradigm of economic growth in almost all countries of the world runs counter to the warning sounded by Mahatma Gandhi, who said:

"Mother Nature has enough to satisfy every human being's need, but not everyone's greed."

We must realise that the universe came into existence 14 billion years ago.

Our Planet Earth came into being 4.5 billion years ago.

The modern form of our species, *Homo Sapiens*, emerged only 200,000 years ago.

And the modern industrial civilization is a mere 200-300 years old.

Yet, in this short period, our so-called modern industrial civilisation has managed to destroy many of the life forms and much of the bio-diversity built up over the life span of the universe.

This is truly a suicidal folly.

And the entire world community should be grateful to His Holiness Pope Francis for warning us about this folly.

The Pope issued a comprehensive Encyclical on Climate Change in May this year.

Through this Encyclical, which is instructively titled 'On Care for Our Common Home', the Pope has appealed to the collective conscience of the global economic and political elite to "integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor".

By cautioning against the clear and present danger of violence and mutual destruction, and by making a compelling case for a pro-poor and low-carbon reorientation of the global economy, the Pope has set the agenda for the crucial United Nations Climate Change Conference to be held in Paris this December.

The Milan Dialogue should strongly endorse the Pope's Encyclical and urge world leaders to reach a new agreement aimed at stopping and reversing ecological destruction.

We should reverse what Pope Francis calls the "Globalisation of Indifference" - that is, Indifference to wars, to poverty; to human suffering; to inequality and injustice; to environmental genocide - we should reverse this "Globalisation of Indifference" into "Globalisation of Solidarity".

Our commitment to 'New Humanism' must have three action points:

### **1. Outlaw wars between nation-states**

The legitimate right of self-defence of all nations in the world should be guaranteed by evolving a new system of bilateral, regional and global security.

Indeed, the bold and visionary initiative of the European Union shows that sovereignties of nations in a regional block can be pooled without threatening the interests of member-countries or extinguishing their national identities.

Now the UN system must be energised to think big and boldly by outlawing wars between nation-states.

### **2. De-militarise international relations by re-orienting War Economy to Welfare Economy**

The global military spending of nearly 1.70 trillion US dollars is one of the biggest moral scandals of our times. This has sustained a war economy that is mostly wasteful and unnecessary. The war economy has also marginalised the welfare economy, not only in poor countries but also in a rich country like the United States of America.

Peace-lovers in all ages have dreamt of beating 'swords into plowshares'. Realisation of this dream demands a drastic reduction in military expenditures of national governments, especially big powers, and

diverting the saved resources to eliminate poverty, hunger, disease and homelessness from our beautiful planet.

War economy, sustained and aggressively promoted by the military-industrial-political complexes in many countries in the world, must be dismantled.

### **3. Marry Economic Value to Ethical and Ecological Value**

It is no coincidence that the root words for ethics (value) and economics (value) are the same. Ethics is about values that guide us to live, and organise, life in the right way. Economics is about creating value through the agency of making and providing products and services that human beings need to live their lives. Therefore, there is an intrinsic connection and a human cognitive command for economics to follow ethics.

This ethic of creating humanistic economic progress must include protection of the priceless ecological wealth of our planet.

### **4. Big powers have a bigger responsibility**

A key requirement of New Humanism and Nonviolent Economics is the adoption of the virtue of cooperation, in the place of unhealthy, unscrupulous and destructive competition, in all economic activities. As Mahatma Gandhi had exhorted, big powers (which now includes China and India) should bear bigger responsibility than small and weak nations to promote nonviolence and peace in international commerce. **"Great nations (must cease) to believe in soul-destroying competition and to multiply wants and thereby increasing their material possessions"**.

Thank you.