

“Living with Religious Diversity,” February 18 – 19, 2013  
International Seminar, India International Centre  
Seminar Report by Leo Van Arragon

“Living with Religious Diversity” was a two day seminar co-sponsored and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Ottawa and hosted by the India International Centre in Delhi. It brought together scholars from India and Canada to share comparative research and insights into the challenges and opportunities of religious diversity in their two countries.

The seminar opened with introductory presentations by the organizers, Dr. Sonia Sikka (University of Ottawa), Dr. Lori Beaman (University of Ottawa) and Dr. Bindu Puri (University of Delhi). Dr. Sikka addressed the complex and often conflicted nature of debates about religious diversity by identifying the multidisciplinary nature of the seminar and its emphasis on the ways in which religious diversity is successfully lived. She invited participants to adopt a gracious stance without piety or prejudice. Dr. Beaman reminded participants that the intent of the seminar was to focus on the non-state everyday negotiation of difference, observing that the vast majority of interactions are conducted in a spirit of respect, love, friendship and the ability to forgive. Contrary to much of the media reaction, most negotiations are non-events. Such events raise challenges for researchers but are important stories which balance a prevailing picture of religious diversity as a problem. Dr. Puri observed that diversity has been problematized along a number of axes: solutions, which she saw along a continuum between “modus vivendi” and “principled agreement”; liberal citizenship balancing faith and reasoned scepticism; and epistemological issues along with the question, “Can people (always) be reasonable about tolerance?”. Much negotiation in living with religious diversity, she suggested, occurs at the intersection of true belief and tolerance in the practice of loving the dissenting other.

The first panel, “Negotiating differences in practice”, included papers by Alam Arshad (Jawaharlal Nerhu University), Linda Woodhead (Lancaster University) and Sebastian Velassery (Panjab University). These were respectively titled “Indian Islamic Perspectives on Religious Diversity”, “Diversity in Religious Practice: Examples from the UK” and “Faith, Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Case of St. Thomas Christians”. Dr. Arshad drew on a distinction between “pluralism” and “plurality” or “diversity”, saying that pluralism implies the whole-hearted embrace of difference while plurality or diversity suggests an acceptance of difference out of necessity. His research indicates that “reform” within Indian Islamic communities has meant a crystallization of identity and ideology which, while it may accept diversity out of necessity, actually reduces room for genuine pluralism. His fieldwork indicates that community activities and festivals which, at one time, included participation across religious lines, have increasingly been labelled “un-Islamic”, reducing opportunity for religious pluralism.

Dr. Woodhead, making distinctions between “strategic” uses of religion in interests of maintaining power and privilege and “tactical” responses by religious groups, suggested that, while the trends are complex and nuanced, space for religious diversity is opening up in the UK. Pointing to legal cases and social interactions involving *hijab*, *niqab* and *kirpans*, increasing diversity in chaplaincy services, the development of multi-faith spaces and the widespread use of the internet, she demonstrated the surprising ways in which potentially divisive issues can become “non-events” or ways that the impact of negative stereotyping can be diffused. Her conclusion included questions about:

whose religion is represented and whose voices are heard in negotiations over religious diversity; in what spaces do these negotiations take place; and whether or not the state always supports the “Olympian” religion of religious establishments.

Dr. Velassery, introducing his research on St. Thomas Christians, suggested that the three identities of faith, ethnicity and nationalism have been both sources of social capital and social turmoil in India. The difference does not depend on people discarding their identities since identities are not roles that can be adopted or discarded at will. Rather, the issue is fundamentalism which, to Dr. Velassery, is the separation of the self and the other and the marginalization of the other in society and community. He asked why religion is so easily used for nationalist purposes and what the connection is between religious faith and religious fundamentalism. Applying his introductory comments to the case of the St. Thomas Christians, he suggested that this group, with its long apostolic history in India is not monolithic. It has lived in symbiotic relationship with other religious groups but has made its own unique contributions in health, education and care of marginalized members of Indian society. He concluded by identifying four issues in religious diversity: how can the uniqueness of each religion be maximized; similarity of religions based on our common humanity; complementarity among religion, including inclusivity, unity and variety and interdependence; convergence of religion on the basis of shared interests, values and practice, particularly prayers.

The second panel, “Postcolonial pluralisms” included Rinku Lamba (Jawaharlal Nehru University), presenting her paper, “Bhakti and the Shaping of Social Imaginaries in Colonial India”, and A. Raghuramraju (University of Hyderabad) presenting on “Engaging with Diversity between Buddhism and Hinduism: Radhakrishnan, Ambedkar and T.R.V. Murti”. Dr. Lamba proposed that Bhakti has absorbed and adapted liberalism as a way to frame an Indian imaginary, finding a third way between individualism and communitarianism to include respect for the individual and for the social whole which protects marginal groups. The Bhakti principle of a human fraternity created by God provides a basis to resist power structures and create an “elastic expansiveness” and social equality. The Bhakti understanding of loving devotion as active participation is the most plural form of Hinduism, spread throughout India by saints, transmitted in poetry rather than doctrinal text.

Dr. Raghuramraju’s interest was in the politics of the ways in which the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism is conceptualized. In the view of some scholars, Buddhism is a parasitic derivative of Hinduism and therefore is of marginal significance in Indian identity. However, others take a more moderate view of the relationship, suggesting that Buddhism has its own history and unique contribution to Indian modern society, pointing to mutual interaction and learning with Hinduism. He concluded with the question, “How are the relationships between religions conceptualized and adjudicated?”.

The third panel, “Religion and Caste” featured papers by Pralay Kanungo (Jawaharlal Nehru University) and Charu Gupta (Delhi University). Dr. Kanungo, in his paper “‘Untouchables’ and the Temple Entry Movement in Odisha”, examined the collusion between upper castes and the state to restrict access to the Keradgarh Temple. Despite myths in Jagannath tradition in which inclusion and integration are important features, such as Lord Jagannath sweeping the temple courtyard, temple construction and temple entry practice indicate that a social order based on caste continue to be entrenched. While Gandhi insisted on equal access to temples for all, evidence suggests that there is, at

best, inconsistent will to address issues of caste, one result of which is that Dalits have developed a parallel religion within Hinduism.

In her paper, "Inter-Religious Intimacies: Conversions, Desires and Dalit Women in Colonial India", Dr. Gupta examined conversion and dress as an expression of agency by Dalit women in challenging prevailing upper caste Hindu power structures. Conversion in colonial north India to both Christianity and Islam created anxiety among upper caste Hindus and Dalit men, triggering a convergence of interests, resulting in a variety of mechanisms to control women of both upper and lower castes. At the same time, the intimate politics of religion and clothing gave women some leverage for the exercise of agency, choice and aspiration.

The fourth panel included Ratna Ghosh (McGill University), Rajeev Bhargava (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) and Solange Lefebvre (Université de Montréal) reflecting on the theme of Religious Education. Dr. Ghosh, in her paper "Religion, Education and Secularism" examined the creative tension between religion and education. Religion, with its emphasis on human mystery, has, since 2001, emerged as an important marker of difference and has been pushed to the social periphery in the interests of equity. On the other hand, education, in a drive to eradicate illiteracy, is a process by which people are socialized into global citizenship, one feature of which is critical thought. Drawing on the theoretical work of Paulo Friere in developing critical pedagogy, she contrasted "religious education" which she suggested is objective, neutral and critical with "religious learning" which is emotional. Secular critical education, in challenging the assumptions of religion, is an important strategy in countering the effects of fundamentalism, making public schooling one of the most important public institutions.

Dr. Bhargava, in his paper "Multi-religious education and the Idea of Religion", argued that religion should be taught in public schools, being a fact of modern, diverse societies and that students in a multi-religious society should be exposed to all religions so they can benefit from religious modes of thought without being required to submit to any one of them.

Dr. Lefebvre turned the attention of the seminar to Quebec's Ethics and Religion Education course as a case study of "A Cultural and Dialogic Approach to Religious Education". Contrasting British and French models of delivering religion in education, she described Quebec's model as a hybrid by its requirement that religion be taught but only by relating it to "culture". Her historical overview included reference to key Canadian and Quebec charters which provide the legal and constitutional framework within which religion in education is conceptualized and delivered. She also described the legal challenges by both individuals and schools to the mandatory requirement which has denied them the right to opt out of the program. She concluded with a survey of some of the objections to the program, including questions of the religious neutrality of the program, its pedagogical shortcomings and its potential to undermine Quebec's identity by being a cover for multiculturalism.

The fifth and final panel, "State policies: equality and freedom" included papers by Gopal Guru (Jawaharlal Nehru University), Ashwani Peetush (Wilfrid Laurier University) and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (Northwestern University). Dr. Guru's paper, "Religious Diversity and the Politics of Overlapping Consensus in India", examined the idea of "not living with religious diversity." Overlapping consensus, he suggested, constitutes a political compromise or bargain for the sake of achieving agreement which leaves no one entirely satisfied. Secularism is a type of overlapping consensus designed to address communalism but, in his view, the primary issue in India is caste rather than communalism. He

questioned the effectiveness of secularism in addressing the real issues in India suggesting that, while democratic and secular principles are espoused by both politicians and academics, there is more promise in new Buddhism as a way to address entrenched social and political inequalities.

Dr. Peetush, in his paper “Diversity, Secularism and Religious Toleration”, argued that secularism and liberalism are not an essential requirement to achieve a society with constitutionally protected values of equality and freedom. The challenge for all societies is to establish positive values without being concerned about the philosophical or religious principles on which they might be based. Separation of religion and the state is a Christian conceptualization of toleration but other societies have their own ways of formulating and exercising toleration, respect and peaceful cohabitation among religious groups. Further, religion is not the only exclusivist human construct. Liberalism and secularism have their own coercive impulses, placing unfair burdens on believers. In fact, fundamentalisms of various kinds are, in part, reactions to liberalism’s myth of neutrality and its claiming ownership of toleration and freedom.

Dr. Hurd’s paper, “The Politics of International Religious Freedom”, examined the rise in religious freedom as a new theme in the foreign policies of Western nations. She argued that the recent emphasis on religious freedom may have the paradoxical and unintended effect of exacerbating conflict by emphasizing difference among people groups. Religious freedom has become the latest in a long history of formulations which create a moral hierarchy among nations, allowing foreign policies which further entrench Western power over nations arbitrarily identified as nations of concern. Religious freedom, strategically deployed for political purposes, is a project of religious and political establishments which may, in fact, undermine both freedom and democracy around the world.

Concluding remarks were offered by Dr. Bindu Puri and Dr. Lori Beaman. Dr. Puri suggested a reduced role of the state in favour of praxis and a *modus vivendi* approach to the challenges of religious diversity, acknowledging that, in cases where religions engage in oppression the state may need to take a more aggressive mediating role. Dr. Beaman’s concluding questions, based on papers presented during the seminar, were an encouragement to further reflection and research. What are the frameworks within which differences are negotiated? What are the transformations that emerge as a result of people working out differences in the myriad non-events that occur in daily life without being noticed? What do blurred boundaries and contaminated diversity look like in the constantly changing shape of religion? What might be the implications of looking at similarities rather than difference? And how are gender and women’s bodies narrated in the engagements with religious diversity?