

RELIGION A CURSE? – March 2005

— By Richard L. Kiniry

My recent trip to India has filled me with opinions. Each experience becomes a speech; each experience is analyzed and built into a position. At the March 6th Platform you will hear some of that analysis but since time is limited, I thought I should share one of my reflections here in the Newsletter.

There are times when all I want to do is scream that religion is a curse upon humankind. This is one of those times. I was surprised at the rise of fanatical religion in India - if not all fanatical, certainly more fervent, more robust. We experience fanatical religion here in the United States from the Christian Right and we know that Islam seems to have been hijacked by radical Islam. Well, it seems fiery, conservative religion is making headway in India also.

All those years ago as I was leaving India, religion was certainly a big presence but the issues of the day were progress, development and how to get a wristwatch and a radio. Now many citizens of India have television and much of the television schedule is religious broadcasting.

I have kept tabs on the news of India, so I knew about the rise of BJP political party. It is a Hindu nationalist party - India for Hindus. They have energized an old irrational prejudice. As in the United States, the powerful majority religion is supposedly under threat from powerless minority. In India this has resulted in a couple of massacres of Muslims and the retaliatory murder of Hindus. The nation is dividing on religious lines. And, as in the United States, this move to right-wing religion is more political than religious. Politicians grab power by encouraging the communal identities of the different religious groups.

Hindus may have started the religious push but Islam and Christianity have matched them in public devotion and power brokering. Since 1970 there has been a vast increase in public demonstrations of denominational faith. Everyone seems to be taking their beliefs right into the faces of opposing religious groups. There have always been Hindu and Muslim religious festivals, but now they are politicized events, declarations of control of territory.

While I was in the city of Mangalore, a Christian festival was held. It didn't fit any Christian calendar I know of, but it was a huge New Year Festival. The festival was spread over a city with a majority Hindu population and the Christians blanketed the city with their images and presence. I now understand why the Pope is so confident of his conservative direction. The future of the Catholic Church is in Asia and Africa and those are conservative places with masses of simple people. The Catholic Churches of India have the feel of Hindu temples with colorful images and loud devotions.

Thirty years ago, Muslim women could be identified by their distinctive dress - different from Hindu dress - but rarely did you see a woman in a burqa. Now, the all-enveloping black robe is common and Hindu women seem to be matching them in more conservative dress. No longer is the mid-drift exposed under the sari. Women are more covered, but they have a greater presence in business and public life.

Worldwide, from the United States to the Philippines, fundamental religion and religious violence are on the rise and we have to question whether this is just a fad or the direction of the future? How have we strayed from the path of rational religion? Is the truth as simple as the disappointments of modern life? Since "the good life" has not trickled down, do some people gravitate to a world where they are appreciated? If you are nobody in this world, you can be somebody when an all-powerful god needs your affection and worship. As personal commitment religious devotion can be self-affirming, but when the commitment becomes group identity, you are ripe for manipulation into fanaticism.

India is at a crossroads. There is increased prosperity and energy. At least part of the country is moving ahead at a fast pace and yet the ancient, slow-moving culture remains. In the clash of past and future, of expectations and limited resources, tension rises and religion has become the focal point or scapegoat for that tension.