

Book Review

Fanaticism, by Prabhakar Bhattacharyya, Kolkata: Samik Prakashan, 37 A, College Row, 2004, pp. 12 + 28=40.

Dr. Prabhakar Bhattacharyya's short but purposeful book is the earnest expression of his sincere commitment to peace and harmony in the society. He candidly handles the menace of fanaticism, which causes untold suffering and incessant hatred. His work is pregnant with educative information to deal with fanaticism.

The author's carefully analyzes the meaning of the word 'fanaticism' and vivid clarification that fanaticism is a mental tendency and it can be controlled and carved but cannot be suppressed is a valuable guideline to tackle the issue. Another handy lesson that expose the groundless actions of a fanatic is that she/he loses his/her individuality and identifies with a mob and its actions. Fanatics are bereft of the power of judgment, they work against integrity of character, they are not open to the feeling of others, and civilized life and fanaticism can never go hand in hand, somberly communicate that fanaticism is undesirable.

His call for people of convictional commitment to counter fanaticism and the view that only time will prove whether one is committed is encouraging and comforting to the relentless efforts of many.

The author takes cue from Swami Vivekananda and warns the possible dangers of emotional religiosity, populist religious leaders, mixing political motives with religious symbolism, professors of religion who do not have deep convictions about establishing truth, peace, etc; hypocrisy of preachers, priests and fundamentalists. His assumption that these can arouse fanatical feelings and there is close connection between religion and fanaticism are extremely relevant to the Indian context.

The declaration that lack of spiritual outlook of the reformers renders their ends self-defeating teaches that what is required is not fanaticism but genuine spiritual foundation for all our undertakings. All the religiously based organizations or movements need to learn an often-ignored but serious lesson that caring only for one section or community of the people leads to communalism or fanaticism. Educational institutions should be careful about the content of the knowledge imported is another necessary suggestion for countries where academic resources are utilized to introduce communalized education, and consequently to nurture fanaticism.

The author's suggestion from the work of Pro R.M. Hare that in the name of intuition, the educators of moral science should not have shortsightedness and his call for critical thinking, places him as an earnest educationalist. The author's admiration for the liberals is glowing from the observations that contrary to the liberals the fanatics avoid critical thought; they are

in search of some absolute ideal, and their avoidance of the interest of others causes suffering to the society and create clash and violence. His openness is further beaming in the view that not content of a principle but the attitude one has towards it that breeds fanaticism. His appreciation for the liberals is further substantiated in the view that the principle of tolerance is the ideal of liberals and they are more human. His credit to the liberal viewpoints warrants recognition because the perpetrators of fanaticism consider them as uncommitted.

The author's concern that the influential section of the society should not be misled by fanaticism is an apt lesson to our context where people do not have the basic necessities of life but religious sentiments are misused to achieve political interests. His proposals for curbing fanaticism are: removing confusion in thought, developing critical thought, right for correct information, moving from micro to macro spirituality and insistence on inner personal development.

Although realizing the necessity of inter-religious dialogue, the author condemns dialogues that have hidden agenda. His submission that injustice and intolerance cannot create a world of solidarity and peace depicts the corrupt and wicked behaviors of the so-called custodians of religion and religious institutions. His prescriptions of certain qualities for young participants of dialogue and his bemoaning that religious leaders with such qualities are rare painfully indicate the predicament of present day religious affairs.

Yet, without diminishing his interest for dialogue he insists the need for it at grass-roots level for it can nullify superstition, which paves way for fanaticism. The same spirit continues when he says that the truth claims will never be settled but we need to have attitudinal change towards other religions, and restrain from using derogative names for friends belonging to other religious traditions. His insistence for discussion on mass conversion and relation between state and religion are timely to investigate the demeaning character of certain religions and the misuse of religion for political gains.

The author's critical insight is manifest in his plea that there is need to fix universally accepted common goal and codes of conduct for peace activists otherwise fanatics will decide what is peace and the opposite.

His appeal for attitudinal change through education and awareness programmes, plea to spread we-feeling throughout human society, quest for creative individuals with respect for human dignity, and his mention, at the end, of UN Convention on Genocide indicates the author's acceptance of plural society.

The author's constructive explication of the meaning of the word fanaticism, the assertion that fanatics are unsubstantiated, his appeal for people of convictional commitment, his unveiling of the connection between fanaticism and religion, insistence for genuine spirituality, admonition to avoid misappropriation of education, demand for vigilant use of moral education, industrious comparison between liberals and fanatics, urge to develop critical thought, counsel to move from micro to macro spirituality, persistence for correct information, realization of the benefits of dialogue, disgraceful state of religious leaders, plea for attitudinal change towards others, optimistic expectation for creative individuals and suggestion to create we-feeling are praise worthy. And they suggest that fanaticism is a grave issue to deal with.

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