The new millennium is about to dawn and it would be interesting to see how religion faces new challenges of the coming century. The World Conference for Religion and Peace (WCRP), an international organisation based in New York organised a four day international conference in Amman, Jordan from 25-29 November 1999 to define the role of religion in promoting peace in the world in the twenty first Century. Some fifteen religions from 100 countries were represented in this exercise. Top religious leaders and heads of religious communities participated in the discussion. What was most interesting was that the Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders from the conflict torn Bosnia and Kosova were also present and they talked to each other face to face and vowed to promote peace in the region.

Raisul Ulama Mustafa Cervic, the chief Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina made some interesting remarks. He pointed out that it is too dangerous to leave politics to politicians alone and similarly too hazardous to leave theology to theologians alone. It is, needless to say, professional politicians and theologians who are at the root of the problem. It is very true that politics or theology should not be left to professionals. People themselves have every right to be involved both in politics as well as in theology. It cannot be done over their heads. When left to only the professionals they ignore interests of the people and promote their own interests.

Another important question to be answered—is religion alone responsible for the conflict in the world? Conflict in many parts of the world like Bosnia or

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Kosova appears to be due to religion? Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan maintained that it is not religion but politics that is guilty. Hassan Talal said that “we believe in positive engagement as partners in a world which is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent, and where borders are becoming less meaningful, or even disintegrating.” He also maintained that “We are moving towards a ‘single world’ with a single agenda. But we want all people and all cultures to contribute to the formulation of this agenda, so that it will reflect our mutual interests and concerns.” He also made a significant remark that “For a ‘single world’ with a single agenda formulated according to the value system of one culture – to the exclusion of others – will be a world in which injustice and marginalisation will inevitably lead to conflict and, further, to war. However, a ‘a single world’ built upon ten thousand cultures, a world in which commonalities are the foundation and particularities are the cornerstones, will be characterised by co-operation. This is the only basis for common living and a joint effort necessary for the construction of a brighter future in which all individuals and all communities have the means to achieve their potential.”

There is much truth in what Hassan bin Talal observed. The problem is precisely what he pointed out. The west has its own agenda and wants to impose it on the unwilling peoples of Asia and Africa. All those who participated in the conference felt that mutual respect for each others’ religious traditions and cultures is very necessary for peace. It is when the west determines the agenda for the whole world that Osama bin Laden are born who, in order to fight western hegemony, promote religious hatred and extremism. The likes of Osama use religious vocabulary that is as dangerous as armament. In a lighter vein Mustafa Cervic of Bosnia suggested that there should be disarmament of extremist vocabulary like ‘holy war’ and holy peace should take its place.

Rabbi David Rosen from Israel was of the opinion that though it is important that one should love ones’ neighbour but then this principle can be applied by someone negatively and say if my neighbour hates me I will also hate him. This will again promote conflict and bloodshed. So he felt it is essential to emphasise that regardless of how the other behaves and regardless of the pain of your own experience, one must not lose sight of the fact that every human being, regardless of race, colour, creed or sex, is of inestimable transcendent Divine value. Accordingly, we must behave with respect for each person’s life and dignity regardless of whether or not they behave correctly and regardless of one’s own bitter experiences. But this is too moralistic to work successfully in the world of ordinary mortals. One wishes all human beings were like the ones Rabbi David Rosen suggests. The Rabbi also said “The challenge of common living is precisely the ability to overcome our own sense of pain and alienation so that we may see the other as a child of God.” He was right in pointing out that “an overwhelming number of the members of our religious communities are trapped in their own very real historic and even contemporary sense of
victimhood. This is true in Northern Ireland, in the former Yugoslavia, in Sri Lanka, in the Middle East and throughout the world where territorial conflicts exist involving human identities, inextricably bound up with religious cultural factors. In all such contexts and beyond them, the various protagonists feel that they have been someone’s victims and they are not genuinely accepted and respected by the other.”

This is, needless to say, heart of the matter. Unless we accept the other with all sense of his/her dignity there cannot be peace. Mutual acceptability and respect for others dignity is what is lacking and we often end up blaming the religion. Religion and religious values can only be a guide for us. What is important to bring revolution within us and develop a culture of respecting the other and accepting him/her as he/she is. It is sense of our superiority over the other that brings us in head on conflict with him. We think that the other threatens our existence, our domination and hence we seek to maintain our domination through assertion of our superiority which is often imaginary. It results in rejection of the other and hence conflicts.

Arch Bishop of Canterbury Carey posed a question, like Prince Hassan bin Talal, do religions cause conflict? But he also posed the question—can religion resolve conflict? While the answer for the former is in negative, the one for the later can be positive if religion is not made an instrument of promoting selfish interests. Though to promote selfish interests is quite contrary to the very spirit of religion this is what is sought to be done by human beings championing their own vested interests. Similarly, the Grand Mufti of al-Azhar Sheikh Tantawi profusely quoted from the Qur’an and the Prophet’s traditions to show that Islam means peace and there is no place for belligerence of any kind.

What role religion can play in the coming century? Will religion be sidelined in view of the breath taking technological progress or will it be a valuable resource for peace in the coming years or a source of conflict? These are the questions which have to be grappled with and one has to find answers to them. Religion is not a source of conflict but it can be a valuable resource for peace. Religious identities clash as these identities signify much more than mere religious beliefs. A religious identity signifies, besides religious beliefs, cultural and territorial hegemony, a conflict with the other who competes for these cultural and territorial spaces. Also, religious identities are, more often than not, the signifiers of specificities that are sought to be contested by other cultural identities. The battles for political or cultural supremacy are fought through assertion of religious identities. This possibility has tremendously increased in view of globalisation. Globalisation seeks to steamroll all other cultures and impose western secular and consumerist values over the people of Asia and Africa who not only are rich in their own traditional cultures but also are having a feeling of deprivation vis-à-vis the developed western world which has pushed them to the margin of existence.
It is this marginalised sense of existence and acute sense of exploitation that fuels violent conflicts in the region. Unless this imbalance is corrected there cannot be hope of meaningful coexistence. One also has to bear in mind that today’s world is basically pluralist in character. Rapid means of transportation cause mass migration both within and outside the country. Large number of people is migrating to other (western) countries for better prospects. The migrants either compete with the local people for jobs or become a source of cheap labour causing deep resentment among the natives. These battles are often fought under the garb of religious or cultural identities. Thus globalisation on one hand, and, mass migration on the other, is fuelling religious and cultural conflicts both in Asian and African countries as well as in western countries.

In coming days when we enter the 21st century this process will be intensified causing more religio-cultural conflicts. More the conflict, greater is the need for coexistence. However, coexistence will be difficult if there is no sincere attempt to build a just society. It is in this respect that religion can become an important resource for justice and peace. If religious values, rather than religious rituals, are asserted, there will be greater possibility of building a just and peaceful society. It must be noted that the core values of all religions are complimentary rather than contradictory. If Hinduism and Jainism stress non-violence, Buddhism stresses compassion. If Christianity stresses love, Islam stresses justice and equality. These core values can become an important resource for a more meaningful and peaceful society.

But besides this, there will be more important challenges facing the religion in coming days. These challenges are already surfacing. One of the greatest challenges is that of gender justice. There is not a single gender just society today, neither in the ‘advanced’ western society nor in traditional Asian and African societies. Unfortunately the World Conference for Religion and Peace (WCRP) also did not address this question adequately. Though some people did refer to it was only in passing. The women in this conference did not even have important role to play. The question of gender justice will be most fundamental question in coming century and without addressing this question it will not be possible to build a just society, much less a peaceful one. Gender in justice is quite rampant in all the countries of the world, particularly the developing countries of Asia and Africa. In many societies the problem is very acute. There is what is known as ‘honour killings’. Those women who marry against the will of the parents or even develop some kind of relationship with men of their choice are killed in the name of honour of the family. This is quite rampant in tribal areas of Pakistan. Only recently when a married woman from North West Frontier Area of Pakistan wanted divorce from her husband it was thought to be against the honour of the family and was shot dead at the instance of her own parents in the office of her lawyer. The parents were in this case highly educated and well off. This is called ‘honour killing’ and the culprits escape clutches of law.
It is legally condoned in many Muslim countries like Egypt and even in a liberal country like Jordan. When a bill was brought in the Jordanian Parliament to amend the criminal procedure code 360 to punish the guilty of ‘honour killing’ as ordinary culprits, the conservatives opposed it saying it will increase the cases of illegitimate sex and corruption of morals and threaten the very basis of family life. The amendment of course could not be passed. The conservatives carried the day. In Sindh, Pakistan, the feudal lords have devised ingenious way to save their land being divided through inheritance of their daughters. They marry off their daughters to Holy Qur’an and thus deprive them of their legitimate right to marry a man. The woman has to lead a life of virginity and ‘piety’. She cannot even protest, let alone break the shackles of her ‘marriage’ with the Holy Book.

Such killings and such marriages have, of course, no justification in the Islamic law and is yet widely practised in several Islamic countries. And even when these practices are totally contrary to Islamic teachings the Ulama either keep silent or lend their support to them in the name of ‘purity of morals’ and sanctity of family life. Now with greater democratisation of societies and greater awareness of women of their fundamental rights such antediluvian practices are causing grave social tensions and great injustice to women. The theologians and Islamic jurists have to meet this challenge and banish such grossly unjust practices. No religion, much less Islam, comes in the way of gender justice. It is only customs and traditions of patriarchal society, which have accorded the status of sanctity to these practices. In view of increased awareness of rights among women these practices cannot and should not be perpetuated. But our traditional societies are still not prepared to abolish them. And yet we are boasting of preparing ourselves to face the new century or new millennium.

In India too if a woman marries with a man of inferior caste – she is often beheaded in villages in front of all. At times even boy is also executed for daring to marry the woman of higher caste. Also, in certain parts of India there is the custom of child marriage. Infants still in the lap of their mother are married off. In these cases also it is woman who suffers more in her adulthood as man is free to marry a woman of his choice, if he does not like the one whom he married in his infancy. A woman cannot. Of course such marriages are not sanctioned by the scriptures but are part of social baggage. Also, there is more horrifying tradition of sati (burning the wife on the funeral pyre of her husband). Though not widely prevalent, still one comes across instances of sati here and there. But what is more painful is its celebration by men and women and even constructing a temple on the site to worship the sati. Then there are more widespread instances of bride burning for the sake of dowry. These are of course legally punishable but yet glorified by the society or condoned by it. It is a great challenge before the religious people. They must see that these
practices are abandoned being basically against the spirit of religion. No religion, much less, Hinduism, would permit taking human life. Religious people, being compassionate, should not withstand taking of human life. If they want religion to survive with dignity in the next millennium they should bring about psychological as well as spiritual revolution and restore the right to women to live with full dignity and honour. Compassion for life and full honour and dignity for all human beings including women is the part of basic religious attitude. One must enter new century with this religious attitude.

Yet another challenge before the religious people is that of spoiling of environment. Industries and motor vehicles have made our environment unfit for healthy life. It is greed of the few rich who pollute so that they can live in luxury and consume beyond all limits. It is the rich countries who are consuming beyond all limits. In fact their greed knows no limit. But also the rich in developing countries imitate the ways of their counterparts in the west. It is having adverse effect especially on the poor. Many schemes of industrialisation or of big dams bring immense misery to the people living in that area. The forests are also indiscriminately destroyed by launching such schemes. Religious people would not approve of such destruction of nature and resultant problems. The environmental destruction is one of the gravest challenges before humanity today and religious people cannot escape their responsibility in this regard. Universe is the creation of God and God’s creation must be respected as well as loved. In fact, as pointed out above, it is over consumption of the rich, which is responsible for the grave danger to our environment. However, all religions in the world stress austere living and avoid overindulgence. It is this fundament of religion that must be propagated by truly religious people. Again, over consumption, apart from polluting the environment, deprives the poor of their right to livelihood. And every religion sensitises its followers to the needs of the weaker sections of society.

Thus religious people in the world should come together to protect the environment on one hand, and to empower the weaker sections of society, on the other. While there is so much production and much more potential for more, the poor continue to suffer. Science and technology has great potential to solve the problems of poverty and hunger but the vested interests come in its way. The World Trade Organization (WTO) regime is also essentially against the poor of the world and it is precisely for this reason that trade unions and other NGOs are demonstrating against the WTO meeting in Seattle in USA. The people of religion, whatever religion they belong to, should throw their weight behind those fighting against the WTO and similar other regimes. But it is unfortunate that the religious heads either consider it beyond the scope of religion or keep silent in order to serve the needs of the powerful vested interests rather than those of the poor. The religious establishments should disassociate themselves from these interests. Either they can serve these interests
or the interests of religion. The poor are becoming more and more aware of their rights and would question the religious authority if they ignore their interests. In the coming millennium the poor are likely to increasingly question the religious authorities on their attitude about the interests of the poor.

There is another most important question – the question of faith and reason which has to be tackled to the satisfaction of the people in the new millennium. The medieval age was the age of faith and nineteen and twentieth centuries, the centuries of reason. However, our experience in twentieth century, particularly towards the end shows that reason alone cannot meet the challenges of human existence. Human existence is full of complex challenges and these challenges cannot be met with the help of reason alone. Reason, it must be noted, is a tool, not the goal. Goal is meaningful human existence in this world. Faith is equally necessary to achieve this goal. Neglecting faith resulted in more complex problems. We witnessed religious extremism throughout the world. The revivalist and fundamentalist movements surfaced posing great challenge. These movements became violent, as they could not persuade those at the helm of affairs to listen to their point of view. This violence, it is important to note, is the violence of frustration. And violence in the age of technology can be much more devastating than one can imagine.

Faith, in human existence, plays very important role. Without faith in values, or for many in higher reality or God, life would be devoid of meaning. Life without faith would be mere hedonism for some and mere animal existence for many. But faith alone cannot, like reason, enable human beings to live purposeful life. Blind faith can not only be exploitative but also superstitious. Faith to many is mere solace and comfort of mind. An inquirer’s mind, on the other hand, is restless and devoid of comfort which a believer experiences. Nietzsche, in a letter to his sister in 1865 wrote, “...if you wish to strive for peace of soul and pleasure, then believe; but if you wish to be a devotee of truth, then inquire.” However, Nietzsche made this observation in nineteenth century which was essentially a century of reason and revolt against blind faith. But by the end of twentieth century we can say that neither superstitious faith nor instrumental reason can serve our purpose. It is creative synthesis of faith in values and reason as an enlightening tool of inquiry that is needed for purposeful human existence.

Thus religion has to enter the twenty first century with a new agenda: a creative blend of comforting faith in values and an inquiring reason to construct a meaningful and humane society. A truly religious person should not escape from the responsibility of inquiry after truth. While faith determines the purpose and meaning of life, reason unfolds the hidden mysteries of universe. Also, new technological breakthroughs have raised new ethical questions which people of faith have to tackle. Be it cloning or be it unraveling the genetic code, new ethical problems are arising and in coming years many more will arise.
The people of faith will have to meet them in the light of their values and with an open and liberal mind, a mind that accepts truth, not mere dogmas, a mind that is dynamic, not static, a mind that is rooted in faith, not in past traditions. People of faith should have mind free of traditional encumbrances, a mind that is fearless and free. With such mind the people of faith should enter the twenty-first century.