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**Workshop “Spiritualities and identities in the dialogue of civilizations”
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Thank you all very much. It is an honor but quite a burden at the same time to speak after Swamiji who so much echoes what is in all of our hearts. Funny enough as he was speaking I was thinking that ironically I too was born in a very deeply orthodox Brahmin family, a Tamilian Brahmin family, though my parents were quite liberal the rest of my family was extremely orthodox. And my own journey, unfortunately, I did not turn towards inner spirituality but rather I ran away from it. And most of my active practicing life was actually spent being, like most of the activists here, a secular rejecting religion for all of the reasons; but we'll come back to that later. It is just a little point.

Much of my work especially over the last 10 years has been looking at issues of peace and justice, partly because I am fascinated by the whole question of conflict but the fact that we look at conflict without talking about the profound injustice which is within conflict. Just within the last year I was at this time in Porto Alegre and between Porto Alegre and Mumbai. I have been in some places which have known deep conflict. I was in India which I feel is entering into very deep conflict which if not controlled now could become something similar to 1947. I was in Sri Lanka, torn apart by religious conflict, and unfortunately by intra-religious conflict. I spent much time in Afghanistan where everyone practically is Moslem except for 5 % and yet it is ethnic conflict between different ethnic and tribal groups though they were all Moslem. I was in Guatemala where people are primarily all Christians though there is the rise in fundamental Christianity but the conflict is about inequality between groups. And political ideology. And lastly, in December, I was in Uganda where I was teaching on peace and justice to professors who came from Sudan, religious conflict and injustice, social conflict; from Rwanda, ethnic conflict; Burundi, ethnic conflict; Democratic Republic of Congo, economic conflict.

Since the 1990s with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of so many conflicts, many, many theories became very popular. And most of these theories looked as we do at the conflicts I just named and they said of course these are all ethnic conflicts, these are all religious conflicts. These are all conflicts about identity. And those were the theories that became most popular. Now with what we have seen since 9.11, since the 11th of September, the whole theory that an American professor called Samuel Huntington had of a clash of civilisations has again become very popular and was beginning to see the whole world as divided among fundamentalisms, Christian fundamentalism on the one hand and Muslim fundamentalism on the other. This simplification of what the cause of conflict is has become very popular.

When I look at all these theories, I think, one: could any civilization, could any culture, could any religion that merits the name actually clash with any other? Is it possible to call them civilizations if they in any way encourage a clash with any other? And I ask, what is really behind these pop theories of conflict? What I find is that justice or rather injustice as the Swami was just saying is one profound factor which tends to be overlooked. We like to look at the popular part of injustice, we like to look at war crimes, rapes of women, all of these consequences of conflict. But we hate to look at what lies behind them, the causes of conflict which lie in profound social, political, cultural injustices within societies. We hate to look at the symptoms, the little flare-ups, here and there of violence, of deep grievance, which if we

address them could prevent a burst of conflict. What we have seen in India since 1947, what we saw in Bombay in the early 1990s were symptoms and we looked only at the consequences and not the underlying causes where these symptoms came from.

And one thing I also want to underline is, we love to see the other theory which is very popular and which has become much more popular after the war on terrorism, that it's poverty and illiteracy which cause conflict. And now it doesn't just cause conflict within countries, which was terrible but they were far away; you know Rwanda... horrible... 1 million people dead, but they were far away. We can just chuck some money towards them. And now they cause terrorism. And this too, I say let us look into every single country where there has been conflict and war and it is not poverty and illiteracy, it is inequality between groups which causes conflict. When any particular group, whether a social group, an economic grouping, a cultural grouping, feels that their difference from others cannot be justified in any way, their exclusion cannot be justified, that creates a factor. And what I also stress is much more often we have conflicts caused by the elites who try to resist any change to the status quo which privileges them, which gives them a comfortable life than by the poor or the down-trodden who seek to change by violent means that system imposed by the elite. And we tend always to overlook that and see the poor or the illiterate as the cause of conflict.

If we are willing for example in India to tolerate what in effect amounts to apartheid, which is mandated we believe by our religion or our culture, we do not know which way it could lead. So what is it then? There is a factor of social injustice, but social injustice by itself would never cause conflict. You might have unrest, you might have criminality but you would not have a conflict itself. The key factor in every conflict is when you have these social factors of injustice and at the same time you have certain individuals who see this as an opportunity to manipulate feelings of grievance, feelings of exclusion and marginalization for their personal benefit. What then do they do, what is the mechanism they use? They use two very simple mechanisms: fear and greed. They appeal to the greed of those saying, "you could benefit from these", "you could sell more arms, you could loot more houses, if you engage in war or conflict, as what we saw happening in Gujarat. And the second thing is appealing to fear: if you do not fight for your rights as this group which is oppressed or do not fight to maintain the status quo of your privileges you will become like those Blacks, if you are a South African White, you will become like those illiterate Muslims, if you are now a rich, educated Hindu. These fears are manufactured so you use the two mechanisms of fear and greed and that is how war is fomented. If we did not have injustices, if we address those symptoms and those causes well in time we would not create a situation where these grievances would be manipulated. But if we did not have those manipulators who see their individual games and manipulating such a situation, we would not have this mixture that leads to conflict.

Let me return now to where I was in December last year, in Uganda, talking about how do we deal with peace and justice in a context of conflict and injustice in all of these countries in Africa. And over and over again one concept kept coming back to us over and over again. It started about with a South African talking about this concept which Desmond Tutu talked about a great deal in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is called ubuntu. And quite simply ubuntu means common humanity, shared humanity. I exist because you exist. Without you I fail to exist. And what we realized in the course of that workshop is this was not just a South African concept, it was a profoundly African concept which existed in every single African country, culture, tribe, from the very south to the very north, up to Sudan. And each person, each of these university professors, came up with the concept within their culture which underlined common humanity, oneness, our basic unity. And what we were reflecting

upon is how that oneness which existed within Africa was repeatedly invaded by the outside world through slavery, through colonization, and then through the disasters after colonization of corrupt post-independent states, but also, people reflected on their inner divisions which were destroyed within Africa over the years. And the next reflection we had was that this was not just an African phenomenon. When I look at every single spirituality, culture, religion in the world, when I look at the teachings of every single prophet, son of God, great leader, Sufi, Hindu, whatever, their message was only one and it was a message of ubuntu, whichever language, whichever script, whichever voice they used to articulate it, it was the message that we are one. It was both a mystical as well as a grounded experiential feeling that we all share a common humanity.

I don't need to repeat the fact which Swami Agnivesh has said so beautifully but unfortunately even though within every part of the globe every human being and the great prophets experience a sense of oneness, it was translated to ordinary human beings with all of our dualities, and the institutions of religion simply translated this message of oneness in a deeply divided way. So whereas what every prophet, what every leader was trying to express was our need to capture throughout our lives and act upon that sense of our common shared humanity, our oneness. Tragically, ironically, paradoxically, every religion did exactly the opposite. You are the chosen ones. You are superior, etc. And that is the tragedy that we continue to have. And unfortunately what our society, our economy, our politics did was reinforce this duality, this divisiveness. Again by using the very two factors that I talked about as the causes of war, greed and fear. And these two factors rely on a simple mechanism which every human being has, the ego. And whereas every spirituality talks about, whether it's Jesus Christ talking about humility or whether it's Hinduism and Buddhism talking about the dissolving of the ego, all of our systems, religious, economic and political are based, and have always been based on systems of feeding the ego through fear and greed. Is this inevitable? I do believe unfortunately that conflict, violence, whether it's of the Rwanda kind, the Gujarat kind, are simply the violence today of neo-liberalism will be with us as long as we allow each of us our egos to be fed, as long as we listen to the message of fear and greed, as long as we are susceptible to it. But it is not inevitable. I do believe that each one of us, by simply being open, by listening to what our own inner message tells us, can we find that sense of shared humanity and act upon it. I could not dare to repeat what Swamiji has very beautifully summed up but we can indeed resist these appeals to our ego, resist the appeals all the subtle appeals to our greed and our fear. Let me end as we are running short of time. I will simply quote very often I take the Sufi poet Hafiz with me wherever I go and very often I simply have to open a page, anything I read is appropriate: but today I think it is appropriate for me to read this particular one which is at the heart of what we are talking about.

I have learned so much from God that I can no longer call myself a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Jew. The truth has shed so much of itself with me that I can no longer call myself a man, a woman, an angel, or even pure soul. Love has befriended Hafiz so completely, it has turned to ash and freed me of every concept and image my mind has ever known. Thank you very much.