

The Pope and religious inclusiveness

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When Pope Francis undertook his journey to Cuba and USA last week, we all watched and listened – in amazement, disbelief, joy and pride. We all, irrespective of religion, felt pride; after all, we human beings can be all right, too. We had seen it coming and we knew this pope could show the best of humanity.

“Finally, it is happening”, said a British woman who has lived in Pakistan for more one and a half generation. I will call her Katherine in my article.

“People are tired of politics, cheating and dishonesty, people’s worship of money, our ‘dance around the golden calf’ in our time. Now, we go back to the basics, Christians, Muslims, and other men and women of faith, and those who cannot find faith in their hearts.”

“The Pope prayed for fellow human beings. As significant, he asked that the listeners pray for him, and if they couldn’t do that, he asked them just to wish him well”, said Katherine.

I have known Katherine for many years. She is a widow now, and is getting on in age, but is in good health and high spirit. She recovered from a surgery a few years ago thanks to good treatment and strong will; the latter women usually have more of than men.

Katherine is intelligent and well-informed. I never discussed religion with her, and I didn’t know that she indeed bows her head in prayer and reflection. I am sure she has her own understanding of the dogma, doctrine, theological interpretation, moral traditions, and more. For Katherine, and for me, faith is less public; it is just our own, individual relationship with God’ and faith is also how we live with fellow human beings.

The main message that the Pope gave us last week was simple: I am just God’s servant given the task of helping you on your road in this world, with secular and sacred matters, in sun and rain; I am not your judge or master; it is your relationship with God and fellow human beings that is important, and only you can make that right – with God’s help. This was in sum Pope Francis’ message.

In our time, especially in the West, organized religion is less popular than before. Well, people may be believers in their own way, but they may not attend church and other places of worship frequently. In Cuba, religion, mostly Catholic Christianity, has been discouraged since the communist revolution in 1959. Yet, most people are Christian and others are culturally Christian. There are few Muslims in Cuba and other countries in Central and South America.

USA is a secular country, and no particular religion or denomination within a religion is given priority. Yet, most people are believers, with the majority confessing to Christianity or being culturally Christian. People who fled religious persecution in Europe were among the first immigrants to America. The exact number of Muslims in USA is not known, but it could be up to ten million. Canada, too, is a secular country and multiculturalism is an adopted government policy. In Europe, Christianity is on decline, at least as regards actively practicing members of the Church. However, most people remain culturally Christian.

Migration to Europe has led to a marked increase in members of other religions, indeed Muslims, and in most countries a few percent, up to six-seven percent, are Muslims. It should be noted that the majority of immigrants, including refugees, are Christian. It should also be noted that many immigrants are more actively practicing believers than members of the old congregations they join. Often, the newcomers will help the old

congregations and that can lead to renewal of activities; sometimes, though, not all that is brought in is seen as positive, perhaps not modern enough.

I have given this brief overview of religion in the West as a background in order to explain the Pope's open-minded attitudes. He is less orthodox than most Christian leaders, indeed past popes, and leaders in other religions. The fact that he several times during his recent journey mentioned people who are not active believers, is a new approach. Sometimes, people believe most aspects of the Christian teachings (or Muslim teachings) but not all. The Pope seemed to be more open to those than what has been common in the past, yet, without changing the Catholic Church's doctrines. Being less rigid and more inclusive is in line with attitudes and thinking in our time. People want to think and reason for themselves in all spheres of life, including faith and religion.

The lessons we can draw from the Pope are that people are more religious than we may have thought. People are more open to listen to a spiritual leader who preaches and discusses issues as one of them. He is concerned about important issues in our time, such as climate change and environmental protection, as seen from secular and religious viewpoints. He is concerned about poverty and inequality. He is simply saying that we should care more for each other. And in all this, we should also be joyful and happy. That is to let God live in us.

Christians and Muslims constitute more than half of humanity. Should the Pope last week, during the time of Eid-ul-Azha, have spoken more about Islam? Yes, probably, but I am sure he will do that another time. Besides, there are many other religions, too, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and others, that we talk less about than Christianity and Islam. I believe that we should show equal respect and appreciation for all religions. Yet, we can only belong to one, but feel close to a few others, such as if we do who belong to the Abrahamic religions.

There seems to be an emerging religious revival and renewal in our time. There can be more exchange between religions, yet, change should happen within each religion, on each religion's terms and premises, the way people want it in their religion, group and denomination. True, we will debate and disagree; we will worry about new ideas going too far, and some will argue that change is too slow and piecemeal. Solutions can only be found by and for the believers in the lands and the world we live. But if we do nothing, if we just want to preserve and let things stay the way they are, we are evasive and avoid doing what we should – not only for ourselves, but also for the fellow human beings we travel with through the world in our time.

I and so many people were glad for Pope Francis' journey and sermons last week. Today, I have had the opportunity to say it, as so many others have already done. The Pope's message was universal. It is for all of us – Christian and Muslim, Jew and Greek, Hindu and Buddhist, rich and poor, man and woman – and then it is up to each of us in our religion and own faith to make it relevant and right. Let us pray for the Pope, as he prays for us, and let us pray and show empathy for each other – in the spirit of all religions.

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