

**2008 Annual Symposium Theme:
"International Protection of Religious Freedom: National Implementation"**

**RELIGION IS UNITY IN DIVERSITY
LET US ALL MAINTAIN EACH OTHER'S NATIONAL INTEGRITY**

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor to present this address brought to you from the new federal democratic republic of Nepal.

New Nepal's present status:

With the success of the People's Movement 2006, led by the Nepali Congress president Girija Prasad Koirala, the then Prime Minister and the subsequent signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord, the elections permitted the people to exercise their right to choose their own government by selecting their representatives. This government is responsible of ensuring justice and well-being for the people of Nepal. This is why the government that has been elected has to be committed to the respect of human rights for all people, and not just for those of their votes, but for the voters who have voted for all who believe in different religions and its aesthetic values.

Three-decade long Panchayat (party less) System of Government ended after the 1990 People's Movement. A multi-party system was established and the path for democratic system started. For almost 18 years, there has been various political unrests cropping up and today an effort is being made to lay down a strong foundation for a true democratic system of government. During this time people had to face more than a decade long armed conflict in which thousands of Nepali citizens lost their lives. The nation has now gone ahead with the Historic Comprehensive Peace Accord that has taken place, the interim constitution, the interim government has been established, the Constituent Assembly elections has been concluded on 10 April and a coalition interim government is to be held in forming a new Nepal.

Fundamental human rights in context to religion in Nepal

We all have to respect everybody else's fundamental rights, which is the responsibility that belongs to all and to be adhered by all. If we want to construct a democratic society in Nepal, we have to defend our rights, but also, and just as important, we have to respect the rights of those around us, our neighbors and the countries throughout the world. When human rights for all persons are respected and fundamental freedoms guaranteed, we will all have achieved a democratic society.

During this transitional situation, citizens were aware of many aspects of being able to participate in a free and fair election and disseminate proper information with each other without being bias to any political parties. This election has provided a space for all who have been elected to write the constitution of Nepal that will tell the future government on how to govern and set them guidelines and basic principles in doing the jobs properly. The present transitional situation also is an opportunity for all to be "re-educated" in a

healthy atmosphere and take this moment to think positively for the future of Nepal rather than go on a backlash.

Cultural policy deals with custom and tradition, belief, religion, language, identity, popular history, crafts, as well as all the art forms and, in general is the sum of the results of human endeavor. Communities were denied resources and facilities to develop their own cultural expressions, unless they coincided with the aims of the politicians and political parties. The absence of an effective educational system, high rates of illiteracy and extreme poverty has compounded the cultural deprivation of the majority. In Nepal, religion plays a vital role and lack of education has derailed the minds of thinking about religious matters in a twisted turn.

In Nepal, religion is not just a set of beliefs and supplementary rituals handed down from generation to generation; rather it is a complex intermingling of traditions, festivals, faiths and doctrines that have permeated every strata of the Nepali society in such a way as to become the very heartbeat of the nation. Mythology is strongly believed in the country due to each other's religious beliefs. This has strongly created a bond of mutual harmony. However, politics has infiltrated the minds of many in causing an imbalance in the thinking of religion, not for a good cause, but for disharmony in many parts of the world too. This should be taken into consideration so that it will not create chaotic situation.

However, religion is an intricate and beautiful embroidery formed by the interweaving of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and other beliefs present in Nepal. Religious tolerance and harmony such as is found in Nepal, is perhaps a unique example to the world. The secular state has provided the official recognition of all religions practiced in Nepal by declaring their major festival and New Year as national holidays too. Citizens should get involved and learn about why people get involved in effecting change in their communities. They should be more active in their community and get their voice heard about religious and political matters, but never use it as a political weapon. Brainstorming a list of various problems in their community (school or larger community) that they care about shall provide the benefit to all in terms of greater harmony.

National unity for religious harmony

National unity is based on the principles of reconciliation, inclusion, sincerity, honesty, respect for each other as individuals, respect for the rich indigenous and other cultural traditions domiciled in Nepal, and respect for our national assets and institutions including spirituality, human values, aspirations for economic and social justice, and basic constitutional principles.

National unity requires both dialogue and actions to increase understanding among the peoples of Nepal and dialogue and actions to address basic problems that underlie disunity. National unity also requires the highest standards of leadership and good governance. This can also be done by providing a safe, inclusive forum for dialogue to address issues of caste, ethnic discrimination and religious beliefs.

Priority must be given to those people and communities who were previously denied access to resources available in order to help them develop spiritually. National unity and sovereignty are the basics in exercising the rights of the people of an independent country and Nepal is one of them. There have been attempts to deprive the people of their sovereignty through various conspiracies in the past, but the people's awareness and determination foiled all of them. We, citizens of Nepal from different religious groups but expressing ourselves as individuals, must make commitment to promote national unity by providing equal guarantee to practice each other's religion in harmony, which Nepal has been maintaining.

Civic education and religious harmony

A good discipline in life ultimately makes a good human being. In Nepal's context, after a decade long armed conflict and the People's Movement in April 2006 the 1990 constitution was annulled and the interim constitution was promulgated on 15 January 2007. The nation is guided by the interim constitution and the interim parliament as well as the interim government. Nepal will be in a state of transition unless and until the constituent assembly forms a new constitution.

The purpose of civic education especially during this transitional situation is to encourage citizens to participate fully in the political life of a community and country committed to the fundamental values and principles of democracy, including the right to adopt the religion of its own choice. These skills may include advocacy, organizing, and lobbying for public policy.

Important achievement made in the country today and the changed political context that has taken place is of utmost importance to be known and understood by all the citizens. We should move ahead by informing the citizens about these important political activities, historical achievement and its points of importance through civic education programs.

Right to Religion and Religions in Nepal (RRRN) intact with harmony

Nepal was declared a secular state on May 18, 2006 when it had been a Hindu kingdom since its existence. The announcement has provided all citizens, regardless of religion, to have equal rights in practicing one's religion and/or beliefs. The reconvened parliament also issued a proclamation ending the monarchy and declaring Nepal a democratic secular state. Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala at that time said the move would protect the rights of the nation's minority religious groups.

The announcement also followed a large number of pro-democracy demonstrations. It was welcomed by members of non-Hindu religious minorities like Buddhists, Moslems and Christians who have also been practicing for generations in Nepal. The Confederation of Indigenous and Ethnic Groups of Nepal (CIEGN) have also said that

with this declaration, the nation has moved towards ensuring social justice and harmony for which in a democratic society minorities cannot be marginalized.

In addition to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Tantrism, a very small minority of Nepali people adheres to Islam and Christianity. Moslems and Christians believe and practice in much the same way as their counterparts in the western and other countries, where it has been recognized in Nepal with due respect.

Clause 23 of the interim constitution in its Right to Religion now reads as follows:

Every person shall have the right to profess, practice and preserve his or her own religion as handed down to him or her from ancient times paying due regard to social and cultural traditions. Provided that, no person shall be entitled to convert another and no person shall act or behave in a manner, which may infringe upon the religion of others. Every religious denomination shall have the right to maintain its independent existence, and for this purpose to manage and protect its religious places and religious trusts, in accordance with law.

Many thought that if a person was not a Hindu then he/she was a misfit in the society and not a Nepali citizen, for which it was totally misunderstood. Again, this needs to be explained to those only once there is proper education provided. However, one has to understand that religious minorities were not disadvantaged or discriminated against in any way, but it seems likely that they were constantly told that Nepal was a 'Hindu' state, and then they would be getting the message that as non-Hindu they were second-class citizens in some respect. This is where misinterpretation has to be clearly interpreted and explained well.

Spiritualism in Nepal intermingles with all religions practiced

Nepali religious customs and practices do show an evidence of Nepali spiritual richness. Hinduism is the primary religion in Nepal, practiced by overwhelmingly 90% of Nepali people. Nevertheless, space has been equally provided to others who practice different religions too. The country has such an overwhelmingly Hindu population and do provide the openness and prominence of religious practices maintained by other prominent religions practiced by Buddhists, Moslems and Christians. Despite extreme poverty and substandard living conditions, these people are spiritually rich beyond measure. Almost one festival each day celebrated by one religion or the other has been evidence of the Nepali people leading fulfilling lives, despite being poor by international standards. In Nepal, religion is a part of everyday life for the people and exists harmoniously.

Ma ko hoon (who am I?) is the basis of initiation toward spiritualism. When we admit the existence of a soul, independent of the body, we enter into the world of spiritualism. We find all religions believing and upholding a god or gods. In that content, all religions are spiritual. However, spiritualism needs not be religious. Spiritualism can be adopted and practiced without subscribing to any religion. Every religion has a set of prescriptions and

faiths. They appear so different in their appearance and rituals. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable commonality in all of them. They invariably subscribe to divine power, a supreme power and a spiritual power, for which Nepal has the will power to sustain all of these.

The value of peace need not be overemphasized in all respects. A society without peace is unlivable. Many welcomed Nepal to the family of secular states which shall guarantee equality to the religious minorities in Nepal, particularly Moslems and Christians in order to protect their identity and dignity and promote their full participation in the political, economic and social life of the country. Roman Catholics throughout Nepal offered prayers of thanksgiving at weekend masses, and Buddhists, Christians, Moslems and tribal groups welcomed the country's new secular status. It will ensure justice among the different religions, their religious beliefs that the cultural and linguistic minorities in the country and abroad have faced.

Girija Prasad Koirala, my father fought for full democracy and brought the People's Movement and formed a secular nation. The 240-year-old Shah regime ended which also ended Nepal from being the Hindu Kingdom. This has made Nepal a secular state and the freedom of religion to be practiced by all in a peaceful and graceful manner. We have temples, churches, mosques, Buddha vihars and other places of worship believed by various other religious groups and believers in harmony. All sorts of religious beliefs will have equal place in the constitution that is being prepared for a new Nepal. Religion is a state of art, culture and the status of all human beings of a nation, nationalities that all belong to earth, which we know is the world made up of in all seven continents of the world. Nepal would welcome people to provide support in reaching them in forming a religious harmony. We believe in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief ("1981 declaration") which reads:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

Thank you all.