

INTER-RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING FOR ADVANCEMENT OF **HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL**

Editor

M Afzal Wani



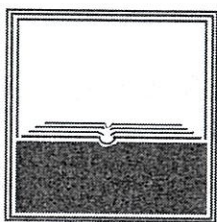
Institute of Objective Studies
New Delhi

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Editor
Prof. M. Afzal Wani



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Inter-Religious Understanding for Advancement of Human Rights (*For All*)

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Preface

Prologue

1. Islam
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7. Peace
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CONTENTS

Preface *i*

Prologue *iii*

1. Islam and Inter-Religious Understanding: It's Implications to Human Rights *1*

Dr. Mohd. Habib

2. Inter-Religious Understanding for the Promotion of Humanity: Dialogue as a way forward in Indian Context *11*

Ab. Majeed Ganaie

3. Dialogical Communication between the Religious Traditions of Asia and Africa *27*

Dr. Amita Valmiki

4. Inter-Religious Understanding and Dialogue for Promoting Humanity *39*

Bhupinder Singh 'Bashar'

5. Nature of the Shariah and its Objectives *45*

Dr. Nazir Ahmad Zargar

6. Revisiting Socio-Religious Harmony: A Study of Sufi-Sant Traditions of India *55*

Dr. Ashraf Amin

Ms. Ujala Amin

7. Peaceful Coexistence in Indian Subcontinent: Lessons from Medina Charter of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) *69*

Dr. Hassan Shareef

8. Religious Understanding: A Sikh Perspective *73*

Dr. Jaspreet Kaur Sandhu

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9. Islam in a Multi-Faith Society: Adherence with Rights and Respect

Dr. Javed Nadeem Nadvi

10. Fr. Thomas Michel's Approaches to Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Dr. Md. Abrarul Haque

11. Ethical Philosophy of Sufis: A Nourishment to the Communal Harmony in Kashmir

*Dr. Naseem Gul
Ms. Ujala Amin*

12. Dialogue to Enhance Humanity: The Vision of Pope Francis in Fratelli Tutti

Dr. Poulosiju K. F.

13. Social Justice in Islam: Key to Communal Harmony

Gulzar Ahmad Bhat

14. Inter-Religious Marriages and its Current Scenario

*Ira Leo
Rifat Khan*

15. Rights of Religious Minorities in India from a Constitutional Perspective

Iymen Nazir

16. Dara Shikoh and his Model of Inter-Religious Understanding: An Assessment

*Javad Ahmad Mir
Prof. G. N. Khaki*

17. Ghazali's View of Human Dignity

Nazir Ahmad Shaikh

18. Rights of Minorities and their Protection under Islamic State

Mohd. Osama

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20. Traces of

21. Religious I
Perspectiv

22. Religion ar
Schools in

13 List of Contrib

819.	Social Justice in Christian Perspective	219
	<i>J. Peter</i>	
20.	Traces of Tolerance in Persian Malfuz Literature	233
90	<i>Prof. Aleem Ashraf Khan</i>	
21.	Religious Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence: An Islamic Perspective	249
11	<i>Sajad Ahmad Kumar</i> <i>Dr. Rafique Anjum</i>	
22.	Religion and Social Justice: Role of Major Religious Schools in Fostering Social Justice in India	267
12	<i>Waheed Ahmad Ahanger</i> <i>Dr. Firdous Ahmad Sofal</i>	
13	List of Contributors	285

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DIALOGICAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF ASIA AND AFRICA

Dr. Amita Valmiki

In Africa there is a concept known as Ubuntu—the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others; that if we are to accomplish anything in this world it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievement of others.¹ “If I were asked to define the Hindu creed, I should simply say: Search after truth through non-violent means. A man may not believe in God and still calls himself a Hindu. Hinduism is a relentless quest for truth. Hinduism is the religion of truth. Truth is God. Denial of God we have known. Denial of truth we have not known”, says Gandhi.²

The word ‘religion’ raises the feelings of pleasure, bliss, harmony and virtues; but at the same time, it arouses the feelings of being dubious, obscurantism, violent debates and controversies. In the name of religion there have been riots, rampant brutality, rampage and cruelty! This is indeed extremely appalling. Why so? The word religion comes from ‘re’ and ‘ligare’; that is ‘binding together’, binding the Infinite (name It God) and finite (name it human being).

As such the word ‘dharma’ also raises the same feelings. The term *dharma* in Hinduism is defined as “the religious and moral laws governing individual conduct, and is one of the four ends of life. In addition to the *dharma* that applies to everyone (*sadharana dharma*)—consisting of truthfulness, non-injury, and generosity, among other virtues—there is also a specific *dharma* (*svadharma*) to be followed according to one’s class, status, and station in life. *Dharma* constitutes the subject matter of the *Dharma-sutras*, religious manuals that are the earliest source of Hindu law and in the course of

¹ Nelson Mandela. See Shinabarger, Jeff. *More or less: Choosing a Lifestyle of Excessive Generosity*. David C. Cook, USA, 2013. pp. 45.

² Gandhi, M. K. [Kumar, Raj (Ed.)] *Essays on Ancient India*. Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 2003. pp. 33.

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time has been extended into lengthy compilations of law, the *Dharma shastra*.³ Can this definition be valid in the contemporary times?

The word 'religion' or *dharma* needs to be revisited, and a new definition should be welcomed. Each era needs to interpret the term in its own context: and embrace the latent ethical aspect of each religion. This process demands patience, compliance, and co-operation with a positive dialogue that can lead to inter-faith dialogue and communal harmony. As His Holiness Dalai Lama said, "Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values."⁴ So one thing is pretty sure, with changing times, one needs to change but the paradigm of values should not shift.

Religion is so inherent in human beings that it seems like a basic necessity for them. In a way it has become part and parcel of our day-to-day lives. Today, those engaged in the study of religion and theology do not think of clarifying and justifying the characteristic features of 'the Divine' or 'the Absolute' or popularly known as 'God'; but the intriguing factor today is the concept of 'Religion'; and therefore, the word 'Religion' has almost completely replaced the word 'God' in scholarly discourses.

So, if any change has to be brought for the betterment of society then it should be through metamorphosis within religion(s) itself. If *dharma* as an ideal has to be put into practice in the global scenario, it would be only through religion. But the following question would be how and what of religion? And the answer to this is—it is the concept of "love" that is found in religion. As John Caputo says "..... Religion is for lovers, for men and women of passion, for real people with a passion for something, who hope like mad in something, who love something with a love that surpasses understanding. Faith, hope and love, and of these three the best is

³ Augustyn, Adam. *Dharma: Religious Concept*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019.

⁴ Hereford, Z. 18 *Excellent Rules of Living* by HH Dalai Lama. Essential Life Skills.net [https://www.essentiallifeskills.net/18-excellentrulesforliving.html]

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⁵ Caputo, John D
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love, according to a famous apostle (I Cor. 13:13)The opposite of a religious person is a loveless person.”⁵

So back to square, if one asks the question what is religion? Then it is not the question about religion itself, but it is the question about ‘who is giving this definition and where this person belongs to.’ This can be exemplified by saying that a philosopher would define religion in a different way than a sociologist or psychologist; whereas an African or an Asian would define religion as completely associated to their cultural identity. They all will be different from each other. Therefore, the paper will have a general comparative approach to religious traditions of African and Asian continents.

The paper is a humble attempt to understand diversity of religions of two continents—Asia and Africa; and one finds lots of vital ethical similarities between the religious traditions of these two continents.

Both the continents’ religious traditions are considered by scholars as ‘primal religions’. ‘Primal religions’ can be defined as something unique to a particular land. They came into existence without having any alien influence; they evolved in relative isolation from other cultures and traditions. This is the unique characteristic of religious traditions of both Asia and Africa. Primal religions and native ethnic religions of the same land are inter-dependent on one another. These faiths are completely animistic as their methods of worship and rituals encompass various forms of ‘nature’. Elements of nature like wind, fire and water are worshipped and considered as local deities. Zoomorphism, that is worship of animals or half animal and half human being, is one of the common characteristics of the religions of these two continents.

Also, religious traditions are highly ‘culture-specific’. Some of prominent examples are *Oshun* (river Goddess) of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, *Shango* (deified ancestors and a natural force) of the Edo

Caputo, John D., *On Religion: Thinking in Action*, Rutledge, New York, 2001. pp. 02.

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people of Nigeria, *Amadioha* (God of thunder and lightning of Igbo Christianity at tradition of Eastern Africa and in ancient Egypt *Ra* or *Horus* had the appropriate to imagery of radiating fire. The parallel can be drawn likewise in Asian countries as well. For instance, *Agni* and *Zhurong* (fire God) in The mystical s Hinduism and Chinese folk religion respectively, *Vayu* (ancient and African co Iranian wind God) is similar to *Vayu* in Hinduism, *Vayu* is also found endeavors, int in Zoroastrianism, *Suijin* (water God) in Shintoism of Japan, *Raijin* o continents are *Indra* (God of lightning, thunder and storm) in Japanese Shintoism diversity. This and Hinduism respectively. moral". This v Nelson Mande

These primal religions do not have a written documentation but 'tradition' of the flourished orally from generation to generation. Mostly these primal Africa have the religions do not have some specific authoritarian inventor and these continent therefore they flourished like other art forms that make use of Christianity and ornamental language using metaphors, signs and symbols. These have a popular artistries play a pivotal role in most of the religious traditions that are spirits, intricate found in Asia and Africa. Even though these primal religions do not Entity. compete with creedal religions in today's world, thanks to the But the question originality they tend to be unique in their own land. offer to the wo:

The minority religions of Africa comprise of the indigenous ethnic countries or reg religions that are external to Christianity and Islam; for example, the Congo, Tanzani Zulu, the Edo, the Akan, the Xhosa and many more. Since the Pakistan, Sri Lar diversity is vast, a single general term is used in this paper for ethnic on a few regio diverse African religions or mystical traditions as African religion mystical moveme They share similar values as put forward in Judaism, Christianity and are known for u Islam or those of Abrahamic religions. So, the ontology of existence traditions. of God is not in segregation with the 'community living' but integr African religions part of everyday life; that is not just theoretically spiritual but practical known phrase ap wise it is religio-spiritual. am because you are

So is the case with Asian religions. India (and Indian sub-continent though not absol has seen a blanket term 'Hinduism'; but within Hinduism is Art!" the Vedanti variegated sects. And Asian countries also have been the birth place is One; One is all! of great religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Daoism and If that is 'the known as Taoism, Shintoism, and Confucianism or under condition; and tha umbrella of powerful religions, adapted and absorbed, we convention.

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of Igbo Christianity and Islam with their various sects. Here it would be appropriate to mention the Sufi tradition.

n Asia
God) in The mystical socio-philosophical background of some of the Asian (ancient and African countries may comprise religious rituals, rites, spiritual endeavors, intuitive divine experience or 'the other'. Both the continents are full of ethnic, tribal and societal spiritual-religious diversity. This may happen to be morally neutral; "therefore being moral". This we can conspicuously see in the above quotation by Nelson Mandela. This is the consequence of 'humanity-based tradition' of these two continents. Both the continents of Asia and Africa have their own indigenous religions and practices. And both these continents also had been influenced by Semitic religions like Christianity and Islam. Statistical data show that these continents also have a popular belief in rebirth or reincarnation, the evil-eye or evil spirits, intricate rituals and sacrifices for higher spirit or the Supreme Entity.

to the
But the question is whether this is all that the two continents have to offer to the world. There are numerous indigenous religions in the countries or regions of Asia and Africa like Senegal, Rwanda, Mali, Congo, Tanzania, Cameroon; or Tibet (now China), Japan India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Iran Iraq and Bangladesh. The article will focus on a few regions/places of Africa and Asia where religions or mystical movements have gone beyond rituals, rites and sacrifices and are known for upholding values which are intrinsic to these cultural traditions.

out integ
but prai African religions like Asian traditions are quite pantheistic! The well-known phrase applies in both the continents' mystical movements, "I am because you are!" (Ubuntu philosophy); of which Asian version, though not absolutely same, would be "Tat Tvam Asi!" (That Thou Art!) the Vedantic injunction). Ultimate telos remains the same, "All is One; One is all!" The 'One' can be the self, soul, I or the Absolute. If that is 'the truth'; 'non-violence' becomes the pre-requisite condition; and that can have pragmatic value only if 'Love' becomes a convention.

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As mentioned by Gabriel E. Idany, "African traditional religions have the belief that good and bad spirits do exist and these spirits are who make communication with the Supreme Being possible. Above all, it holds a moral sense of justice and truth and the knowledge of the existence of good and evil. (Umoh 2005:68). African religious values seem to permeate every facet of life of the African and the African believe that anything can be imbued with spiritual significance."⁶ This is again so similar to indigenous religious tradition of India and Indian sub-continent.

Though evil is defined in a different sense as *avidya* (ignorance) (that is *Maya*, the illusion producing power, internal and external - Vedantic concept); while 'evil' has a separate, individual existence, rational deduction of most of the Semitic religions and even African indigenous religions. But the moral sense of justice and truth coincides with the concepts of *Rta* (the Vedic concept of Moral Order) and the Upanishadic concept of '*Tat Tvam Asi*' (That Thou Art) [as already mentioned earlier], where spirituality is imbued in everything. In fact, it means everything is spiritual in nature. As noted by Jayaram V. "Truth has a great significance in Hinduism, as an aspect of Brahman, a characteristic of existence, the support of creation, quality of gods, moral virtue, philosophical concept, spiritual practice, instruction, and the personification of *Dharma* (Law) and *Rta* (Order)."⁷

This seems a clear echo of indigenous African religions. The rituals, though considered important in Hinduism and African religions, but nowhere moral values are undermined. In fact, they play a pivotal role in their lives. As the Ubuntu is well known for its phrase, "I am because you are!", most of the ethnic mystical and spiritual practices of Africa and Asia touch upon every facet of human mundane life that one finds these rituals are integrated and reconciled in routine domestic chores. (No doubt, the sacrificial ritual also has its

⁶ Idany, Gabriel E. *African Culture and Values*, Phronimon Vol. 16(2), Pretoria, 2018.

⁷ V. Jayaram. Online Article: *Truth According to Hinduism*. Hinduwebsite.com, 2009.

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ligions have drawbacks as animal and even human sacrifices were also performed; its are where but by the influence of Semitic religions, and in Asia by influence of Above all, Buddhism and Jainism, to quite an extent, they were curbed.)

Both these continents—Africa and Asia, are known for autochthonous spiritual sects, meaning thereby, they are known for indigenous rather than originated or descended from colonists or migrants (as noted earlier). For example, China has her own indigenous religion known to be a-religious (or neutral) called “traditional Chinese folk religion”. Later, like in many countries of Africa and Asia, Chinese religion is also the amalgamation of many belief systems.

Therefore, if one takes Ubuntu, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Shinto or later Christianity, Islam or the Sufi movement—morality was never compromised; the place of truth and non-violence being integral part of these religions (though non-violence being defined subjectively). Hinduism strictly upholds values and ethics in social order. Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism run parallel to African religions, whether influenced by Christianity and Islam or not, values like truth, non-violence, compassion, love and empathy are intrinsic values explicitly seen in these religions. In fact, Christianity and Islam have now become intrinsic to African and Asian religious/mystical traditions, therefore it is an a priori truth that both these continents’ religious or mystical traditions are not just resorting to religious scriptures but overall reiterates relationship between the Supernatural and natural realms as well; that is to say the relationship between the transcendental and the mundane or empirical worlds.

Both the continents saw the rise of unique spiritual-religious traditions where religions or even mystical elements are emphasised more on praxis than on doctrine be it the realm of politics, economy or social norms. Law or culture and customs reflect religious codes and conduct. Both the traditions have emphasised thought and action, principles and practice, freedom and necessity, and spirit and nature. None of it is underestimated. Confucianism laid stress on both theory and practice. De facto, Confucius’ main paradigm was ‘organic holism’; that believed in cosmic interconnected approach to

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the environment. This environment is not limited to one surrounding but overall nature that is 'organic holism'. At the same time this approach is reflected in Samkhya philosophy that is upheld by the Bhagavad Gita where in the 2nd Chapter both the *Purusha* and the *Prakriti* (the Self and the Nature) are important in simultaneity.

Maulana Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, an Iranian Turkish mystic asks us to welcome whosoever the person is, in the journey in search of meaningful life. In Rumi's words—"Come, come whoever you are Wanderer, idolater, worshipper of fore, Come even though you have broken your vows a thousand times. Ours is not a caravan of despair."⁸

Like Asia, African religious tradition includes the great Sufi movement. The rise of Sufism is mooted in the concept of asceticism. Again, point to be noted is that that Islam does not propagate extreme form of asceticism. But Sufi movement, though completely rooted in the Holy Quran upholds asceticism. This form of asceticism is very similar to the Bhagavad Gita concept of *Nishkamakarma* (performing action in detached manner, without expecting fruits). It is not 'renunciation of action' but 'renunciation in action'.

The Sufi movement in both the continents have been absolute mystical and intuitive in nature where 'divine love plays a pivotal role.' So mainly the Sufis concentrated on the Quranic injunctions but led strictly ascetic form of life. Therefore, the history of Sufi movement is quite similar to the Bhakti movement (the path of devotion) that is popular in India and Indian sub-continent. Like the *bhakti margins* (the followers of the path of devotion), the Sufis derive their happiness in 'the truth of divine love' and knowledge through direct experience of God.

⁸ Ozdemir, Ibrahim. *Rumi and Confucius: Message for a New Century*. Tughra Books 2013. p. 11.

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⁹ Abdi, Rashi
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Two things are of great value for the Sufis (like the *bhakti* margins or the followers of the path of devotion) and that is 'Divine Love' and 'Wisdom'. This automatically leads to non-violence towards everything that surrounds them. In Africa and Asia, Sufism has helped in creating a unique Islamic culture. In East Africa, for example, Sufism has created a non-violent pathway to eradicate the violent religious extremism. It is noted by Rashid Abdi (former Project Director, *Horn of Africa*), "A new engagement emerged from meeting of Sufi clerics and activists from East and Central Africa who organised a three-day conference in Mackinnon-Nairobi Highway to discuss ways of countering violent extremism (known as CVE). Some 300 delegates representing Sufi orders (*tariqas*) from Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia and D. R. Congo attended the meeting billed as '*The International Sufi Conference for East Africa*'".⁹ In North Africa, the Sufi mystical orders (*tariqas*) or *Maghrib* (Muslim West) were established in early Middle Ages and then spread to West Africa, Europe, Asia and in modern times in the United States too. Later the movement became the integral part of Islamic culture in these continents. The Sufi traditions not only have their own distinct identity but also emphasise the philosophy of 'Transcendental Unity of Religions.' The whole tradition that spread in Africa and Asia completely relied on the principle of 'love' and 'non-violence', so that humanity is upheld and peace and harmony is restored.

Rumi boldly proclaimed, "Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it."¹⁰ Therefore the Sufi ideology emphasised the ultimate truth, ultimate wisdom to live in harmony with the Creator's creation and not to use one's freedom against the creative and magnificent flow of life and nature. And Rumi says further, "Through love all that is bitter will be sweet, through love all that is

⁹ Abdi, Rashid. *East Africa's Sufi Path to Countering Violent Extremism*. International Crisis Group, 2015.

¹⁰ Sene, Sidate Demba. *A Muslim Journey to the Simple Truth*. Balboa Press, Bloomington, IN; 2012. p. 87.

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copper will be gold, through love all dregs will become wine, through love all pain will turn to medicine. ... love is the Master."¹¹

So also, the Sufi philosophy spread in China and India (and India Sub-continent) and disseminated the message of love and harmony. Linxia, north-western province of Gansu, China was the main centre. In India, especially in Kashmir (the place is considered as "Sufi Paradise"¹²), Sufism spread in the 16th and 18th centuries. According to Braj B. Kachru, for many centuries the Muslims and Hindus lived together with complete cordial relationship, where Muslims have Pandit and Bhat as their surnames. [These surnames are quite emblematic of Hindu family names.]¹³ And Sufi-Saints in Kashmir are often called as '*Muslim Rishis*'; meaning thereby Muslim Sages (*Rishi*, a common term used for sage in Hinduism). Some lines from one of the poems by Sufi Shaikh Nooruddin Noorani, also called Nun Rishi are as follows:

*"Should you not shun inner anger, How can you, your external wrath?
Unless you cleanse your inner mind, You'll lead an ostriched life!"*¹⁴

A drastic paradigm shift came in India with introduction of Sufism in synthesis with Indian mystical religious movements which tried to uphold the values of love, compassion, harmony and humanity. According to Bahuguna, "Modern historical writings on the religious history of medieval India are mostly the histories of either Sufism or bhakti devotionalism. These two histories—one based on Persian sources and the other on regional literary sources have, however, followed their own independent trajectories and progressed largely in isolation from each other. Research on medieval Indian Sufi orders is usually viewed as an integral part of the larger project of constructing the history of Islam in India. Similarly, most of the scholarship on the

¹¹ Rad, Roya R. *Rumi and Self Psychology (Psychology of Tranquility)*. 3rd Edition. Trafford Publishing, USA, 2010. p. 21.

¹² Qadri, Shafi Ahmad. *Kashmiri Sufism*. Gulshan Publishers, 2002. p. 137.

¹³ Kachru, Braj B. Article: *An Introduction to Spoken Kashmiri*. University of Illinois, 1973.

¹⁴ Razdan, P. N. *Gems of Kashmiri Literature and Kashmiriyat (The Trio of Saint Poets)*. Samkaleen Prakshan, New Delhi, 1999. p. 46.

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medieval bhakti study of 'Me to some of the incorporate the devotionalism

Indian Muslim countries like Turkey and Amir Khusro Indian renaissance bhakti movement Muslim Khwaja preached complete philosophy of Sunni Islam.

Both in Asia and religious spirit the coloniser's culture that a political and religions of (from the "secular Christian ethical remarkable. A century, the dramatic small minority traditional African combined material to historical e

¹⁵ Bahuguna R. I *Perspectives from*
¹⁶ Lugo, Luis *Christianity in S*
April 15, 2010.

medieval bhakti 'movement' perceives itself as being engaged in the study of 'Medieval Hinduism' or 'Bhakti Hinduism'... In all fairness to some of the practitioners of these largely insular histories, they do incorporate the theme of the interaction between Sufism and bhakti devotionalism in their studies."¹⁵

Indian Muslims have drawn their Islamic Sufi tradition from countries like Abyssinia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and Arab countries. The stalwart in the tradition in India is Amir Khusro who initiated a new Indo-Islamic culture, a pioneer of Indian renaissance. The Sufi movement led to the growth of the bhakti movement with a completely different dimension. A Persian Muslim Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, who settled in India and preached asceticism, was a religious scholar and a mystic with a complete philosophical bent of mind. He initiated Chishti order of Sunni Islam. He is considered as a unique figure in Islamic mysticism.

Both in Asian and African continents, there is a parallel in matter of religious spiritualism. Christianity came to Asia and Africa through the colonisers. The Christian faith is inseparably related to Christian culture that comprises prayer, worship, theology, social, economic, political and spirituality. This was in coalescence to indigenous religions of Africa and Asia; and also, the oppressed communities (from the "so-called upper class or caste or communities.") And the Christian ethics that displayed through missionary work was remarkable. According to Lugo and Cooperman, "In little more than a century, the religious landscape of sub-Saharan Africa has changed dramatically. As of ..., both Muslims and Christians were relatively small minorities in the region. The vast majority of people practiced traditional African religions, while adherents of Christianity and Islam combined made up less than a quarter of the population, according to historical estimates from the World Religion Database."¹⁶

¹⁵ Bahuguna R. P., Dutta, Ranjeeta and Nasreen, Farhat. [Eds.]. *Negotiating Religion—Perspectives from Indian History*. Manohar, 2011. p. 211.

¹⁶ Lugo, Luis and Cooperman, Alan. Article: *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Pew Research Centre, Religion and Public Life, April 15, 2010.

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These religions helped to eradicate poverty and contributed positively to social, economic and political reforms. But nothing comes free. Though the UN emphatically states freedom of religion, the fanatics be in the garb of ethnic, tribal, scriptural, conventional indigenous—couldn't admit reforms. This has further led to a contaminated form of religious traditions and eroded the basic humanity. This form of mind-set can give a basic setback to ethics that is inevitably associated with religion. The fanatics in both the continents—Asia and Africa—have prevented people from assimilation, synthesis, reconciliation and inclusiveness.

Therefore, salute to all the reformers belonging to various religions and religious sects as these mystics, saints, religious reformers have not bothered to care for their own lives but caring for others' lives. Nelson Mandela says, "In a world driven by violence and strife, Gandhi's message of peace and non-violence holds the key to human survival in the 21st Century."¹⁷ M. K. Gandhi says, "My religion is based on truth and non-violence. Truth is my God. Non-violence is the means of realising Him."¹⁸

One can say, there are many religions, but 'Religion' is one. And Prof. Wadia notes, "They (religions) have brought us to the height from which we can truthfully say: he who finds truth only in his own religion and has no eye for truth in any other religion is still groping in the dark; he alone has found truth of God who has learned to appreciate the efforts of all religions in getting at God."¹⁹ And I think, the purpose of this seminar is to maintain this moral stance, to see 'unity in diversity' and 'communal harmony'; above all celebrating the diversity found amongst religions of the world.

¹⁷ Bhalla, Nita. Article: *Mandela Calls for Gandhi's Non-violence Approach*. Thomson Reuters Trust principles, Jan. 29, 2007.

¹⁸ Sen, N. B. *Wit and Wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi*. New Book Society of India, 1964. P. 194.

¹⁹ Wadia, A. R. *Religion as Quest for Values*. University of Calcutta, 1950, p. 28.

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Culture in Globalizing China (Hong Kong University Press 2021). His other works can be found in journals *Asian Studies Review*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Convergence*, *Television and New Media*, and *Continuum*, and edited books *Contesting Chineseness* (Springer 2021), *Queering Paradigms VII* (Peter Lang 2018), and *The Cosmopolitan Dream* (Hong Kong University Press 2018).

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