

Faith and Voluntary Service

(Text of the 2008 Annual Desmond Tutu Peace Lecture delivered on Wednesday, 5 November 2008, by Swami Saradananda at Temple David. The event was hosted by the World Conference on Religion for Peace.)

I am deeply grateful to the office bearers of the World Conference on Religion for Peace for the honour they have bestowed upon me by inviting me to deliver the 2008 Desmond Tutu Peace Lecture. The President, Ms Paddy Meskin, and the Programme Co-ordinator, Ms Sydoon Sayed, have inspired us for decades. I have been the happy recipient of their kindness and wisdom. The enthusiasm in which they have been promoting interfaith understanding and the values of altruism have won our profound admiration. If I were to express my appreciation to the WCRP (South African Chapter) for the work they have done it would take me a considerable amount of time. May I just say, from the bottom of my heart, that your endeavours especially during our political transition in 1994, are efforts that have not gone unnoticed. WCRP is a nation-building organisation.

Over the years I had the privilege of attending six of the Desmond Tutu Peace Lectures. Each Lecture imparted to us insights and solutions to contemporary socio-political and economic problems. Every Lecture had a good measure of faith-based solutions to the challenges that confront us. The erudition and concern for humankind expressed by previous Lectures underpins the very purpose of instituting these Lectures, viz., to broadcast positive ideas and values that would contribute to human upliftment. That this Lecture is named after Desmond Tutu is significant in more ways than one. Desmond Tutu was a colossus among religious leaders. He was a civilizing force in a transforming South Africa. Without his moral authority and legendary courage several sinister forces would have overwhelmed us in our quest for freedom and justice. His many-sided contribution to peace, especially in the TRC, is etched in letters of gold in our contemporary history.

The subject of this Lecture is "*Faith and Voluntary Service*". This theme is vast and it bristles with all kinds of challenges and subtleties. The President, Ms Paddy Meskin, specifically asked me to incorporate the philosophy and experience intrinsic to the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa into this Lecture. It is with some trepidation that I accepted this challenge as I would have to, perhaps even inadvertently, recall some of our successes. I thought that our work which is meant to be unostentatious is incompatible with praise-singing. But sharing information of this nature is a virtue and perhaps obligatory on our part.

The Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa was started in 1942. Over the last sixty-six years it has been serving the South African public in areas spanning spiritual services, moral development, educational work, medical services, agricultural projects, etc. The Centre, which is a Hindu organisation, is part of the global Ramakrishna Mission with its Headquarters in Kolkata, India. The parent body, that is, the Ramakrishna Mission was started in the 19th century and is based upon the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna (1836 - 1886) and his chief disciple Swami Vivekananda (1863 - 1902). Both these spiritual masters appeared at a time when their country was politically subjugated and widespread poverty and ignorance stalked the land. They were sensitive souls and could not bear human misery. In an unprecedented manner and in the shortest possible time they were able to plumb

the depths of over 5000 years of Hindu spiritual experience and with dexterous ingenuity they extrapolated a harvest of ideas and values that would have immediate relevance to the modern Hindu, and for that matter all humanity. Both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were the spiritual inspiration behind towering figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru - a fact publically acknowledged by Gandhi.

How did Ramakrishna and Vivekananda inspire a worldwide voluntary service mission? Even after a century and a half of its founding, the Mission continues to flourish and provide services to millions of disadvantage people. Its work has been generally acknowledged both locally and internationally. Voluntary social service, in general terms, is work done by man in the service of society. In the earlier parts of our history there was no concept of social work as we understand it today. Sir P.S. Sivaswami Iyer in his scholarly work, "*Evolution of Hindu Moral Ideals*" tells us that, "*The idea of social service as is now understood is a feature of modern times. As observed by Dean Inge with reference to early Christianity, there were no 'causes' in antiquity*". History is undoubtedly replete with human suffering. But kings and beneficent rulers often ran welfare-states in which royal endeavours mitigated some human suffering. There was no need for large social service enterprises. The Encyclopaedia Britannica says:

"The term social service is a comparatively new one in Great Britain. If it has been used previous to the twentieth century, it would have meant philanthropy and charity in the ordinary sense."

History is never static. The Industrial Revolution, colonisation, population movement, natural and man-made disasters and the present globalisation process conspired individually or collectively to create human misery that needed solutions that went beyond normal conventions. Philanthropy and charity had to grow in their scope, infact became institutionalised. Ruling sovereigns, political parties, religious movements and social organisation had to become relevant to prevailing conditions or face obsolescence. As a result of this phenomenon each group developed its own ideology, resources, infrastructure and work ethic to mitigate human misery. Some groups espoused selfish motives and used devious methods albeit cloaked in the veneer of good work. Other groups scrupulously avoided corruption. Purity of purpose and selflessness were the hallmarks of their work. Religious organisations that institutionalised voluntary services had various motives. Those that took to such services with vested interests and selfish motives brought a bad name to religion. The secular school of thought, some socialists and Left Wing elements argued, that such selfish religious practices imposes shackles on the human mind, it deadens sensibility and asks us to surrender our integrity blindly to vested authorities. Such selfish practitioners of religion, it has been pointed out, have departed from the original purity of their founders, lost their dynamic vigour and degenerated into arrogant sects. Spiritual inspiration is buried under irrational dogmas and wayward behaviour.

On the other hand some religious organisations separated remunerated social service from voluntary social service and made great strides in maintaining their

integrity and work excellence. It is to these organisations, worldwide, that we look up to for inspiration.

The present world conditions indicate that there is an urgent need for more voluntary services. International Agencies, Governments and local municipalities cannot cope with the rapid rate of socio-economic and political upheavals. It is now an accomplished fact that NGO, Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and other voluntary agencies play a leading role to alleviate misery and avert impending catastrophes. Our essential humanity need not be influenced by law. Swami Vivekananda, in reply to a correspondent of the *Sunday Times* of London in 1896 said:

"The basis of all systems, social or political, rests upon the goodness of men. No nation is great or good because Parliament enacts this or that, but because its men are great or good. ... One must admit that law, government, politics are phases not final in any way. There is a goal beyond them where no law is needed."

Altruistic souls and sensitive people will always respond to the challenges of suffering. But what motivates and sustains a Faith Based Organisation to undertake work of charity and philanthropy? Religion is often perceived as a matter of faith. God, sacred space, worship and other components of religion hinge on faith. But can charity and philanthropic services hinge on faith? I will attempt to answer this question in the light of the Ramakrishna model which is infact a Hindu theological approach. It is one of the successful models of Faith Based Organisations doing voluntary work. Furthermore, I want to discuss just two or three relevant points that have sustained this model for over 150 years.

The eminent psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo states in his book "*Psychology and Life*" that, "Motivation is a general term for the process of initiating, directing and sustaining physical or psychological activities. It includes mechanisms involved in preference, vigour of response and persistence of an organised pattern of action towards relevant goals." To contextualise this quotation we may say that there must be something to motivate one to start, organise, sustain and further voluntary work without it having an adverse effect on the practitioner or the society he or she serves. Such voluntary work must bring human fulfilment, infact empowerment and enlightenment.

Service, in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings is born of spiritual experience. He was a career mystic and like the great mystics of Judaism, Christianity, Sufism, etc., he spent his days in spiritual rapture and in imparting spiritual wisdom to all who came to him. Infact his life mirrored the spiritual aspirations and realisations of millions of Hindus from the earliest antiquity till his passing away in 1886. His French biographer, the Nobel Prize-man Romain Rolland, described him as "*the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people.*"

One day in 1884 Sri Ramakrishna was explaining the three cardinal principles of popular Vaishnavism (a sect of Hinduism), viz., delight in uttering the name of God, kindness to living beings and service to devotees. After the discussion he fell into a profound silence and then into deep meditation. Sometime later, having regained consciousness of the external world, he remarked, "**Kindness to living beings! Fool! Who art thou, an insignificant creature, to show kindness to them? No, not kindness, but service to them, looking upon them as God Himself!**" Among those present in the room was Swami Vivekananda. After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna it was he who gave fuller articulation to his Master's teachings both within the Indian context and in the Western world as well.

Sri Ramakrishna obviously experienced the one God present in all objects, animate and inanimate. He experienced God present in all beings. The universe is interconnected. Nobody is an island. At the heart of man, at the very core of his being, was hidden the divine spark. Man is essentially divine. Ignorance of his spiritual nature causes him suffering. This was the fundamental theological position that prompted their actions for voluntary service. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda pointed out that to show compassion to suffering humanity by ascending an arrogant pedestal and doling out resources and services to the poor is not in consonance with the spirit of religious life. Rather, it is harmful. Service to man is worship of God. In a spirit of humility one should serve God in all beings. He distinguished between an arrogant kindness, compromised compassion and genuine voluntary service. It was Vivekananda who institutionalised this ideal of service. He pointed out that God would accept such services only if it is done with humility and reverence, without any taint of selfish desire for name, fame, etc. When voluntary service is purged of its impurities, selfish desires, arrogance, boastfulness and the egoistic notion that, "I am doing everything", it then evolves into a spiritual discipline and like other spiritual paths, viz., that of devotion, contemplation etc., it is capable of leading one to God-realisation. Introducing the phrase "daridradevo bhava" (a concept used extensively by Mahatma Gandhi) he meant that we should serve the poor as God, for, God was hidden within them. Vivekananda did not thereby deify hunger or thirst or indirectly want the perpetuation of poverty. Instead of only offering ritual worship or chanting hymns in praise of God, worship should also encompass selfless service to the poor. Vivekananda declared, "**I do not believe in a religion or God which cannot wipe away the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphans mouth.**" Millions of people, including India's freedom fighters were inspired by this ideal. It became the spiritual basis that inspired Mahatma Gandhi's concept of selfless voluntary service. Thousands of other Faith Based Organisations now use this ideal as the spiritual basis of their work. Since 1942 the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa has been using this model to serve the people of our country. Our devotees accepted this service as a spiritual discipline. They embraced the motto, "**Service to man is worship of God.**" Over these sixty-six years we have completed over ninety educational projects - the building of offices, classrooms, laboratories, libraries, water storage facilities, fencing etc. in the rural schools of KwaZulu-Natal. Everywhere we made friends with the local authorities and people. Since we had no selfish motive, political agenda or prosilatization activities the people accepted us without suspicion. When the facilities were completed we handed them over to the respective authorities without interference.

Today the Ramakrishna Clinic of South Africa, with over 80 specialist doctors and

with other medical and para-medical staff, services seven State Hospitals in our province. Annually, thousands of patients receive specialist services from our doctors in the fields of general surgery, endoscopic procedures, cataract and hip-replacement surgery, general medicine and laboratory services. Our veterinary doctors have worked in a number of informal settlements. Thousands of animals have been treated for various ailments. Architects, engineers, advocates and attorneys, chartered accountants and common labourers from our congregation have been inspired by this model of service and spiritual discipline. Nobody is remunerated for their work. Everywhere we are given the opportunity to practice humility, love, understanding and above all selflessness. This service has brought us great joy and fulfilment. At times our builders worked with our African brethren of the Independent African Churches, often our doctors work side by side with Catholic nuns. We have always worked with all races and people of all faiths. This is a spiritual discipline that is helping us purify our hearts and expand our consciousness. Not that we do not have our mistakes and limitations. Mistakes are inevitable in all voluntary work. We cannot grow without mistakes but we are also motivated to overcome them.

I must touch on just two of the many elements that sustain our voluntary work. Often we hear volunteers and social workers complain of frustration or psychological 'burn-out'. This is because the sustaining factor is feeble or non-existent. In our system all our volunteers are devotees. Everyone is encouraged and provided with opportunities for morning and evening silence, prayer and meditation. There are regular spiritual retreats where devotees can tap their spiritual resources and be renewed and refreshed in the Spirit. Silence, prayer and meditation balance our hectic work. This is an age old Hindu view. The Bhagavad Gita advises us to practice this stillness and tranquillity not only at the time of meditation but also in the midst of work. Infact Emerson admired this ideal and penned a brief commentary on this message from the Bhagavad Gita:
It is easy to be yourself when you are alone
It is easy to get mixed in the crowd when you
are in the crowd.
He is a heroic man who being in the midst
of the crowd can keep his head in solitude.

Work is enriched by a spiritual basis. Hectic voluntary work without spiritual roots can make life meaningless.

The second point of motivation and sustainability is that all voluntary workers require role-models. Here I must draw the distinction between a role-model and a celebrity. A celebrity may be popular and often involved in altruistic work. But all celebrities are not role-models. However we may perceive human frailties, if a celebrity's private life is corrupt, vulgar and selfish, then that is no role-model. Volunteers are inspired by honesty and hard work, especially from their seniors. Psychologists have long since recognised the need for role-models and voluntary service would be poorer without them. The absence of role-models deprives us of tangible human assets that provide motivation and set standards for work culture. The eminent psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote in a journal article entitled, "*Personality Problems and Personality Growth*":

"Every age but ours had had its model, its ideal: the saint, the hero, the knight, the mystic, the gentleman - all these have been given up by our culture. About all we have left is the well-adjusted man without problems, a very pale and doubtful substitute."

On a personal note, I have often observed with amazement the work done by the older monks of our Order. When I met some of them their hands were venerated with the glow of service. For fifty or sixty years they served patients with dedication. Their hands brought healing and administered innumerable types of medication. Some of our monks who were specialist physicians or surgeons served patients in our hospitals and at the lunch break they went into the street to beg their food for they wanted to preserve their vow of voluntary poverty. Others dressed the most infectious wounds for sixty years of their life. When I entered their treatment-room I felt a tranquillity that one finds in a place of worship. Their faces radiated a serenity that one rarely finds in the world. They were our living role-models. But life has also taught me that role-models may be found among the common workers. We conducted several agricultural projects in rural KwaZulu-Natal. When our projects were completed and we were about to depart how often have I seen the humble traditional Zulu woman offer us their last bunch of bananas or their last pumpkin as a token of appreciation. It was difficult for us to explain to them that we were not accepting gifts. They are the unsung role-models from whom we have learnt self-sacrifice. We discover much inspiration at grassroots level.

Today the role and scope of voluntary work cannot be underestimated. To transform criminals, dry the tears of the afflicted and oppressed, comfort the disadvantaged, quench hatreds, sweeten harshness, safeguard the bud of purity in childhood and youth and encourage all humankind to feel the attraction of goodness - this is the work of Faith Based Organisations. Religion in its broadest sense can effect this inner transformation and growth in us. Faith Based Organisations have a greater role to play. Firm in their ideals and untrammelled by impediments they should now move the frontiers of voluntary service to more glorious horizons.

I conclude with three quotations from Archbishop Desmond Tutu which I think is the gist of what I have been saying:

Do your little bit of good where you are; its those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.

My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.

And in many ways, each one of us, of course, is expected to be an icon, an image of that which is invisible, an image of God.