

# CHRISTIAN FAITH IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY



Too often India is in the news for all the wrong reasons. The world has witnessed with horror outbreaks of violence between members of different religious communities in places like Gujarat, the same state from which the apostle of nonviolence, Mahatma Gandhi, came.

Neighbours have turned into fanatics; the home has turned from a place of refuge to a killing field; carefully fostered relationships and shared joys have evaporated into a frenzy of hatred. Pent-up hatred has burst from behind the facade of civility, revealing the frightening face behind the mask.

What sears the imagination are the pictures of burnt-out shops and homes, bodies lying twisted, hands reaching out for help and the shallow proclamations of those in power, cynically playing with human lives, indifferent to the human cost.

This is all the more troubling because for more than three thousand years India has been a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious land. Of course there have been clashes through the ages. The partitioning of the country over fifty years ago led to a great human tragedy. But India has been described as a “laboratory of dialogue”, where people belonging to different religious persuasions and faiths have for generations lived and worked side by side.

Christians are a minority in India. The churches in India – Orthodox and Catholic churches as well as various Protestant churches and a wide range of Pentecostal churches – are left bewildered and forlorn, wondering how best to carry out their calling to be active and committed peacemakers in the context of interreligious violence.

What does proclaiming the gospel of peace and reconciliation mean in such a context? How can Christians work with others to build a society in which people of different faiths live together in peace? How can the churches demonstrate their love while speaking the truth to power?

## CAUGHT UP IN THE CROWD (MARK II.1-11 AND 15.6-15)

During the last week of his earthly life, Jesus faced large crowds in the city of Jerusalem. On the first occasion, when he entered the city on the back of a donkey, a large group of people welcomed him with palms and shouting. There was a sense of excitement, exhilaration and exuberance in this crowd.

It is easy to be carried away when you are part of a crowd. You do not have to make your own decisions – they are almost made for you. You do not have to think, but simply follow the crowd. There is a sense of being part of something greater than yourself.

It can also be frightening when you are part of a crowd. In a crowd it is hard to make yourself heard. Even if you do not like what is going on, there is little that you can do. A crowd develops its own momentum. If the crowd is involved in activities that foster peace and reconciliation, it is a wondrous force. However, if the crowd is involved in destruction and violence, matters go terribly wrong.

On the day of his crucifixion, Jesus faced a hostile crowd. There is something frightening about the cruel determination of this second crowd. It did not fear the consequences of its actions. No appeal to reason nor for reconsideration could sway it. It was determined to taste the blood of an innocent man.

When the crowds dispersed, there were only a few people left to pick up the pieces (Mk 15.42-16.2).

Jesus’ disciples were not too sure where all these events would lead. Except for a handful of faithful women, they preferred to melt away into the anonymity of their previous lives. It was the power of the resurrection that forced them to come out



into the open and boldly to proclaim the gospel of hope in the midst of hopelessness, peace in the midst of violence, meaning in the midst of alienation, value in the midst of frustration, and love in the midst of hatred.

### QUESTIONS

1. DO YOU LIVE IN A MULTIRELIGIOUS SOCIETY? WHAT ARE THE FAITHS OF YOUR NEIGHBOURS?
2. DO THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN YOUR SOCIETY LIVE TOGETHER IN PEACE? WHAT TENSIONS EXIST?
3. IN INDIA AND OTHER PLACES, INTERRELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IS ON THE RISE. TO WHAT EXTENT ARE CHRISTIANS IN YOUR SOCIETY CAUGHT UP IN PERPETUATING SUCH VIOLENCE? HOW CAN WE HELP TO END THESE CYCLES OF VIOLENCE?
4. HOW CAN CHRISTIANS WORK WITH OTHERS TO BUILD A SOCIETY IN WHICH PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT FAITHS LIVE TOGETHER IN PEACE?
5. HOW DO WE GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF THE HOPE THAT IS WITHIN US IN WAYS THAT BRING HEALING AND RECONCILIATION?

### PRAYER

*God of mercy and of grace,  
you constantly startle and surprise us;  
you shake us out of casual complacency;  
you reveal your presence to us  
in unexpected places  
at unexpected times  
through unexpected people  
and in unexpected forms.*

*As we reflect on the reality of violence in our societies,  
as we ponder the violence experienced by your Son,  
enable us to be receptive and responsive,  
awake and alert to the demands of the gospel,  
rededicating ourselves to live out our faith in action*

*working towards the restoration of wholeness  
and the possibility of healing.*

*This we pray in and through the present and coming  
one, Jesus,  
whose death resulted in breaking down the dividing  
walls of hostility. Amen.*

### AUTHOR

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The majority of Reformed Christians in the world live and worship as religious minorities.

There are over one billion people living in India. Approximately thirty million Christians represent only 2.34% of the population.

