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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SENIOR MINISTER
(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE) AT THE FIRST ASIA-PACIFIC
HINDU CONFERENCE AT THE PAN PACIFIC HOTEL
ON FRIDAY, 1 APRIL 1988 AT 6.00 PM

HINDUISM IN CHANGING SOCIETIES

One of the disturbing features of the contemporary world is the reappearance, after many decades, of racial and religious wars some of which have assumed genocidal proportions. Racial and religious slaughters are not new to human history but until recently these have been localised, sporadic and brief confrontations. The damage such bloody encounters inflicted were never greater than what could be achieved with primitive swords, spears and bows and arrows.

But today's genocidal wars differ from those of the past in that they are being waged not only on a global scale but also with sophisticated modern weapons that can inflict far more damage in one day than earlier wars could over many weeks -- more so if one day some zealot decides to use the atom bomb for the greater glory of his god.

This is the depressing theme I intend to focus attention on tonight, because most of us tend to minimise today's proliferation of racial and religious wars as passing aberrations; as exceptions to the general rule of growing racial and religious harmony throughout the world. Those of us who have so far been spared the horrors of racial and religious conflict have chosen ostrich fashion to find comfort in the thought: "It cannot happen here."

My principal concern tonight is with the proliferation of religious rather than racial wars though very often religious wars tend to be racial conflicts as well.

How serious is the problem of religious wars, whether domestic or international? Why after so many decades of relative peaceful religious co-existence should Holy Wars have proliferated and continue to proliferate in so many countries the past 20 years or so, entailing considerable loss of lives and property? Why should religion which had been an instrument for spreading human brotherhood and peace have become the means for launching murderous wars and hate?

What has happened to religion? Why has it been perverted for ends which are clearly at odds with the true spirit of religion? Clearly, it is not religion which is evil. The truth is that men of ill-will are misusing religion for ends that have nothing to do with the high purposes of religion.

Recently, I was with the Prime Minister in India and I came across this report in the "Times of India", March 17. I would like to quote a few extracts from it because they gave a clue to why Holy Wars are erupting world-wide.

The report read as follows: "Speakers at a seminar in New Delhi voiced concern over the fanning of the religious sentiments of people by political parties for electoral gains and called for the mobilisation of public opinion to separate politics from religion...Political parties were resorting to religion as a short cut to power, Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad, Congress General Secretary said while presiding over a seminar on 'Religion vs Politics'. The seminar was organised by the All-India Small and Medium Newspapers Federation."

The unholy mix of religion and politics is a source of concern not only in newly independent and developing Third World nations but also in highly-advanced secular Western countries. Here is a quotation from the London Times of July 1987. The article was entitled "Church-Thatcher War" and said among other things: "the first two Thatcher governments witnessed an unprecedented period of tension between church and state ... What offended the government was the way the church, appointing itself as the conscience of the nation, saw fit to adopt a particular underlying political and economic theory, seen by Conservatives as left of centre ... It was an ideological conflict ... (The Church) is fundamentally opposed to capitalist individualism not because it does not work but because of the system of values it represents."

This political conflict between church and state in Britain has continued to gather momentum. Last month the Straits Times carried a report on the Church-State Confrontation: "Home Secretary Douglas Hurd has warned the clergy about meddling in the world of politics." He complained about the failure of the Church to address itself to its proper function -- to influence people to hold fast to high moral conduct.

On the same day, the Minister for Agriculture, Mr John Gummer also accused the Church for failing to give a moral lead. He said that Britain belonged to what he called the "condom culture" where in the eyes of the Church "it was less sinful for a man to sleep with his neighbour than with his neighbour's wife." He told the leaders of the Church that "bishops should instead of entering the political arena be fighting the battle to preserve and strengthen Christian values. Instead, said Mr Gummer "they were intent of appeasing current intellectual opinion."

In Latin America, churchmen have become guerillas to advance not the cause of god but political and economic revolutions.

Even in the United States church and state are being mixed and mingled in ways which may well portend the dilution of secular politics with the hashish of low grade theocracy. A religious aurora appears to have emanated from the White House in recent years. God certainly has made his presence felt in the on-going campaign for the US presidency. There is a history to this. The election of President Kennedy was seen as a major breakthrough for Catholicism in a hitherto Protestant-dominated White House. Presidents Nixon, Carter and Reagan have, when in office, hinted that their politics was in tune with that of the Creator.

Today, two reverends -- Democrat Jesse Jackson, a black leader and Republican Pat Robertson, a multi-millionaire TV evangelist are running as god's candidates for the presidency. The Rev. Pat Robertson is explicit about his connection with the Creator. He told his listeners that when some 18 months ago a hurricane was miraculously diverted from the path of his Virginia Reach headquarters, it was a clear command from the Creator that he should run for the White House.

The Pope himself has been sufficiently disturbed by the tendency of his priests and bishops to recklessly wander into the minefields of politics to remind his flock of Christ's injunction some 2000 years ago to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

We know from history that a combination of religion and politics especially in multi-religious societies makes for a lethal mixture. Ours is not the only period in human

history where politics has been harnessed into the service of religion to serve non-spiritual ends. Such mixture has in every instance brought untold suffering and tragedy to believers and heretics alike.

I would equate religion or what I prefer to call religiosity, with the civilizing process -- awareness of beauty, harmony, sense of the future, difference between good and evil and a craving to understand the meaning of all things.

Religiosity is more than belief in god or teachings of Confucius is religiosity without god. with Buddhism and with many sophisticated branches Hinduism. More recently eminent Christian theologians elaborated theologies without god as traditionally conceived. Religion basically has to do with the perfection of man as an individual whatever his religion, or politics. The province of religion is morality, virtue and eternity.

Without religion man could not have made the great leap forward into civilisation and achieved mastery over the natural world. All the arts were inspired by religion -- the pyramids, temples, churches, mosques -- all foundations for the architectural achievements of today. Music, myth, legends, epic poems, sculpture, painting, dance, costumes, ideas about good and evil, the meaning of birth and death -- and much more have their sources in religion.

This is the civilising aspect of religion. But mix it with politics and it becomes something deadly, destructive and savage. Holy wars are brutal things -- the deformed offspring of illicit relations between religion and politics. The Mogul conquests; the Holy Wars of the Saracens and of the Crusaders; the Inquisition and persecutions, the burnings and the endemic Christian wars of Europe

over many centuries were all in fact cover not to advance the purposes of god but to further the political ambitions and material interests of priests, Imams, Popes, Arch-bishops, kings and emperors. And Holy Wars by their very nature, because of the powerful emotions involved, have been more virulent and uncompromising than secular wars. Fighting for land or loot ends the moment the coveted land or loot has been seized. But wars to further eternal and absolute divine truths or to avenge some imagined insult to one's chosen god or to obliterate false gods end only when total victory has been achieved by contending zealots.

The point I want to stress tonight is that we should not delude ourselves into believing that religious wars are things of the past; that at worst the religious conflicts of today are momentary relapses which will end as unexpectedly as they started. Many of us believe that in the modern world, thanks to universal or near universal literacy, the all-embracing influence of mass media and travel, religious tolerance is a firmly established condition of life and therefore: "It cannot happen here." Ours, so we tell ourselves, is an enlightened age; that we have grown out of the dreadful habit of killing fellowmen just to convince them that ours is the true and only god and that the possession of the authentic Holy Book is God's licence to exterminate heathens, pagans, infidels, kaffirs, heretics and similar vermin.

Are we right in believing that the age of Holy Wars is over; that they cannot happen in our country because we undeniably exude an air of unassailable tolerance today?

Let me recollect something from the recent past. When I was Foreign Minister I had occasion to visit Lebanon a few times some 20 years or so ago. It was one of the most delightful, prosperous, peaceful and gayest countries in the Middle East. The place undeniably exuded racial and religious tolerance especially between the Moslem majority

7

and the minority Christians. There were no more relaxed, sophisticated and cosmopolitan Arabs than the Lebanese. Every Lebanese leader I met was absolutely convinced 20 years ago that the racial and religious violence that plagued neighbouring countries "could not happen here" -- and I was then inclined to believe them.

Yet today Lebanese Christians and Moslems are locked in an orgy of endless killing and destruction. It is a land without joy or hope. What could not have happened has inexplicably happened.

Lebanon is not the only victim of religious intolerance. Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland for instance trade killings in a kind of perpetual motion of futility. The list of Holy Wars is growing and there are many more countries with potentials for Holy Wars.

A few decades ago a Holy War between Moslems and Moslems was unthinkable in the Middle East yet the war between Iran and Iraq and which has now reached genocidal proportions, is such a war. Religious militancy among followers of the same religion -- Islam -- has now reached a stage where Mecca itself has been made a battle ground for Holy Wars. Mecca is a place where the shedding of blood, even among enemies is considered an abomination. Yet last year Moslem Sunnis and Moslem Shi'ites who have always performed their religious rites side by side for centuries clashed and many pilgrims died.

In India to endemic riots between Hindus and Moslems there has now been added a savage Holy War between Hindus and Sikhs. Again the unthinkable has happened.

It is significant to note that two of India's most prominent leaders -- Mahatma Gandhi and Indra Gandhi -- were assassinated not by Moslems but by non-Moslems. This is a measure of the irrationality and unpredictability of Holy Wars.

Forty years ago a conflict between Singhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus who have lived peacefully together for centuries would have been unthinkable. In fact, Sri Lanka was for long held up as a model of peaceful co-existence between different races and religions.

Yet again the unthinkable has happened. We are today witnessing both a Holy War and a race war. There is no end in sight to a war that grows increasing savage as monks and zealots openly give vent to their lust for blood. The irrationality of religious passions was demonstrated in Sri Lanka when the Prime Minister Bandaranaike, who was the first Sri Lankan politician to unwisely use Buddhism as a political weapon, was himself eventually assassinated, not by a Hindu, but by an enraged Buddhist monk.

There is a Holy War going on in the Philippines between Christians and Moslems. There are potentialities for Holy Wars nearer home. Indonesian and Malaysian leaders have already drawn attention to the stoking of religious emotions and intolerance by extremists in their countries. Only last month Thai leaders warned against the dangers of Buddhist-Moslem conflicts within their country.

The unthinkable is also becoming a reality in the Communist countries of Eastern Europe and Communist China. The Communists had for long nursed the illusion that Marxism and Maoism had finally eradicated traditional religion. But what is happening now in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Tibet is a reminder that unless we take care to prevent the misuse of religion and uphold religious tolerance, Holy Wars can unexpectedly erupt.

I have focussed attention on the darker side of religion principally to dispel complacency that Holy Wars cannot happen here. The outbreak of so many Holy Wars the past twenty years or so underlines the urgency of distinguishing between the proper and improper use of religion.

As I pointed out earlier, religion properly used can be a creative and civilising force and in a world that has now shrunk to the dimensions of a village, religion, despite its inevitable diversity, can unify mankind -- instead of creating frontiers of murderous hate between men and men.

What is misuse of religion? Religion becomes evil when it is wedded to politics. All the Holy Wars of the past and of the present are the inevitable consequence of this illicit liaison between religion and politics. Throughout history such sordid co-habitations have invariably corrupted and made vicious both politics and religion. Every Holy War raging today is the consequence of priests aspiring to be Caesars or Caesars claiming to be emissaries of a true god.

The only way out of Holy Wars is to strictly leave politics to politicians and religion to theologians. Each may not make a good job of their respective callings but the damage they would do would be far less than when both callings are combined in one person.

The priest deals with absolutes and perfections. He deals with sin and virtue; with prayer and with a good life in this world in preparation for the next.

But he is a dangerous political guide. A cursory reading of all scriptures should immediately confirm their total disinterest in and even suspicion of politics as something tainted. The scriptures offer no guide on how to organise modern governments and societies; how to go about economic development; how to grapple with poverty; create jobs; tackle inflation and stagflation and other equally mundane problems this side of heaven -- or hell.

Priests turned politicians generally breed religious intolerance since they must believe that theirs is the only true religion and god and its competitors are blasphemous heretics to be exterminated like vermin.

A priest-politician does not subscribe to the ideal that all men are brothers.

Only believers are brothers.

The essential precondition for the ending of Holy Wars, apart from segregating religion from politics, is the acceptance of the fact of religious diversity and the consequent acceptance of religious tolerance. Hence the unrelenting ferocity of Holy Wars. In fact, there is no one true god. There are as many true gods as there are religions -- as far as the world is concerned.

Some Moslem theologians understand this. They claim that god has 3000 names. A thousand of these, they say, are known only to angels and a thousand more have been revealed to the prophets. Another 300 each are inscribed in the Jewish Torah and in the Psalms of David. Another 300 in the New Testament.

The Koran contains another 99 names, thus making a total of 2999 names.

But the one remaining name god has deliberately and wisely withheld from man and this, the theologians say, is the greatest name of all.

This is one of the most eloquent pleas that I know for religious toleration.

I like to think that "Toleration" is the 3000th name.

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