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MY AUSTRIA VISIT AND PROJECT OF HOPE

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(Secular Perspective December 1-15, 2011)

I was invited to visit Austria from 16-20th November 2011 to deliver a few lectures to schools students and citizens, activists and politicians as Right Livelihood Awardee which is also known as Alternate Nobel by sponsors of an interesting project called “**Projects of Hope**” along with two other awardees Mr. Alyn Ware an anti-nuclear activist and member of New Zealand Parliament and Tony Clarke from Ottawa, Canada who received his Right Livelihood award for his work for environment. I had received this award for my work for inter-religious peace and communal harmony and also my contribution for human rights along with Swami Agnivesh. This programme was held in Bregenz, a beautiful city in the valley and surrounded by Alps Mountains.

The main organizers of this programme are Marrielle Manhal, Christian Hore and Sanjya, all three deeply committed to social causes and they have started this project which is very interesting. They invite every year three Laureates (Right Livelihood Recipients) to narrate their life story – what motivated them to work for the cause and what odds they faced and how they overcame these odds and sustained their work.

The main idea is to give hope to young students and motivate them to work for a better, cleaner and peaceful society along with social activists, citizens and politicians. It will be interesting to say a few words for Right Livelihood Award for those who do not know about it. Unfortunately in English speaking world only Nobel Prize is rated very high and even Magsaysay award is more known than Right Livelihood award.

Actually Nobel Prize is given either to pro-establishment activists (even Obama got this award for his empty rhetoric and for not being able to stop Iraq or Afghanistan war and rushing to intervene in Libya like Bush would have done. But Alternate Nobel is given in Swedish Parliament for those activists who are pronouncedly anti-establishment and for challenging powerful people.

When I went to Sweden to receive this award a member of Socialist Party who taught political science in the Stockholm University invited me for tea and congratulated me for receiving this award saying this award is a ‘good kick on the back of Nobel Prize’. Also, Nobel Prize is financed by the profit earned Mr. Alfred Nobel by selling arms and that is why Mr. Jean Paul Sartre the famous French writer refused to accept it saying it is money earned by selling of arms whereas as Right Livelihood is financed by money Mr. Jakob Von Uexkull received by auctioning his old stamp collection. It was a huge money which Mr. Uexkull donated for giving this award to genuine activists.

Now coming back to the Projects of Hope and its activities. This is extremely interesting project being run by deeply committed people who want a healthy society which makes it possible to spiritual and right kind of livelihood and not corrupt and materialist one. The over consuming, globalized and capitalist society has distorted all the values and over-armed certain countries and over consumption has not only polluted our environment but also is fast exhausting our limited resources.

I told the audience in this regards that how Gandhiji viewed this situation. Gandhiji used to say that there is enough on this earth for the need of entire humanity but there is not enough for greed of one person. The modern technology has increased our consumption no end and our greed has made us blind to all healthy values. Gandhiji's saying was greatly appreciated by my audience.

Mr. Tony Clarke, the environmentalist activist from Canada narrated a story which demonstrates how blind modern advanced countries have become for satisfying their greed. Canada has lot of oil deposits but these deposits Canadian Government that these sedimented rocks can be blasted easily using nuclear weapons. Such proposal would send shock down the spines of Canada. How harmful is nuclear radiation, even a school student knows. Yet, US Government made such suggestion blinded by their greed for over-consumption.

What was most interesting for me was our lectures before young students of high school level. It is much easier, as all of us know, to influence the young students. Their education system, we came to know through discussions, is mainly, like India, career oriented and have nothing to draw inspiration from. I was extremely happy with our presentation before these young students.

In fact they are our hope and this project hope is mainly targeted at them. The students heard us with rapt attention and raised many questions during discussion. It showed their curiosity to know more. Austria is also diverse society though its diversity is rather limited compared to India. In Bregenze there are about 10 per cent Muslims who are more unemployed and less educated.

I was told by Marrialle that there is lot of tension between Muslims and Christians AS Turks are treated as aliens, of different race and violent being Muslims. Like any other country Muslims are considered as violent and jihad is the main problem. These students also raised the question on Jihad. As far as I could make out from his question, there was perhaps only one Turkish student out of around 60-70 who were taking part in the discussion.

I told them that in Qur'an and in Arabic language jihad does not mean war. The word jihad and its derivatives occur 41 times in Qur'an but not even once for war. For war Qur'an uses the word *qital* and clearly says that fight only those in the way of Allah who *fight against you* and do not commit excesses as Allah does not love those who are aggressors.(italics supplied). This clearly shows that Qur'an only permits war of defence, not war of aggression

Thus in western countries too education system has become a powerful tool to spread misinformation and prejudices. Thus I indeed admire these ladies Marrialle, Sonja and Mr. Christine Hore who have taken such good initiative to inspire the young generation and give them hope. The name of the project "Projects of Hope itself is very important. I addressed students and teachers in two schools – one public school and one privately run Catholic School. Austria is mainly Catholic with 90% Catholics but only 11% are believers and remaining indifferent to religion. Thus the school is run by Catholic Church but all students are not necessarily believers.

Someone asked me, when I was emphasizing truth as a value and what is difference between fact and value. It was very good question and many eye brows were raised. I said fact is mere conformity with empirical reality and that is what science deals with. Science deals with empirical reality whereas truth is more than empirical reality. It is facts plus values and truth

is much more than mere empirical reality though it cannot contradict reality Thus truth is as much spiritual as material.

What religions emphasize is truth which includes values while being in conformity with empirical reality. Thus there cannot be any confrontation between science and religion. While both can be of immense use for humanity both can be massively misused by vested interests as instruments. A teacher of philosophy liked my definition very much and said I was often confused when students asked me the difference. Thanks Dr .Engineer for removing this confusion.

I also told students and teachers today we have problems with religion as our priesthood equates religion only with some routine rituals and totally sidelines values. Thus religion becomes meaningless for today's educated people as they do not find any meaning in these rituals. All religions emphasize certain values which we never practice. There are seven values which are common more or less to all religions i.e. truth, equality, compassion, non-violence, love, human dignity and freedom.

Truth is emphasized by all religions so much so that in most of the religious traditions God's name is truth and Gandhiji gave so much importance to truth that he said 'truth is God. How can there be God where there is no truth. Today we are so absorbed in materialism and consumerism that we have forgotten these values and we no longer respect God's creation i.e. our universe. We are recklessly violating God's creation to fulfill our greed for consumerism.

There would have been no problem with earth's environment if we can contain our greed. It is real jihad for all of us. We can do this jihad together – Hindus, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Zoroastrians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains and there will be marvelous peace on earth. Kingdom of God or paradise will be here on earth here and now. But we have made our earth a virtual hell by our greed. It is America's greed which has inflicted violence on so many countries killing millions of people. Greed is more dangerous than terrorism which can be contained but not greed. I finished by reciting chapter 104 which so vividly describes this situation.

Tony Clarke and Alyn Ware, the two other awardees also spoke excellently well and drew great applause from the audience on environmental and nuclear threat. Both of them were great human beings. For lack of space I can summarize their speeches. Hope to do so in another article.

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