

Inter-religious dialogue and human rights in resolving religious born conflicts

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Abstract

The world has witnessed innumerable incidents of violence that are born of religious intolerance in the human history since time immemorial. On the intellectual plain, no religion can pride itself on having fully revealed the mystery of reality; and on the existential plain, man suffers more and more the attraction as well as repulsion of other religions. Such facts give rise to the insufficiency of religions in their claim of being the supreme religion to be true for all, everywhere, and all the time and hence to be followed by all in the planet earth. Thus any absolutist claim made by fragile and contingent human beings on behalf of any religion is bound to fail and thus create religious based conflict among the diverse religious groups. So to end any conflict born out of mutual religious exclusivism, various ways must be sorted out. In this paper, inter-religious dialogue and human rights that promote religious freedom are selected as the main topics for discussion that can contribute towards resolving the religious born conflicts. Thus the aim of this paper is mainly to look into what extent Inter-religious dialogue and human rights can fruitfully work to diminish religious born conflicts in our societies of diverse religions. To substantiate the paper and to realize its ultimate goal, informations have been gathered from the secondary data.

Keywords: religion, religious violence, fundamentalism, conflict, inter-religious dialogue, tolerance, human rights

Introduction

It is an undeniable existential phenomenon on the face of the earth today that human beings most often engage themselves in hatred, bloodshed, discriminations etc. in the claim of religious superiority. Various conflicts in human society have their roots in religion whether it is between different religious groups or among the individuals of the same religion. Often world has to witness wars due to religious fundamentalism in which innocent and helpless people are the worst sufferers in the absence of any defense mechanism except the voice of Human Rights organization. There can be many strategic ways to curtail any form of violence arising due to religion such as dialogue among different religions and adherence to United Nations Declarations on Human Rights. By means of dialogue one can gain knowledge about the religion of others which can result converting intolerance into tolerance and help diminish of violence substantially. The very process of dialogue can also lead to the understanding of intrinsic natural right of each human person, preservation of which is vehemently endorsed by United Nations Organizations. United Nations Declarations on Human Rights condemn any form of violence that dehumanizes an individual human being. This paper highlights violence arising based on religious fundamentalism which is followed by the explanations of the roles of inter-religious dialogue and human rights in confronting against any form of violence in order to foster peace in human society.

Conflicts Born of Religion

In today's increasingly polarized world, religion has been represented by some as a primary cause of social division, conflict and war, whilst others have argued that this is a distortion of the true significance of religion, which when properly followed promotes peace, harmony, goodwill and social cohesion. It is undeniable that religion has elements that promote goodness in human life, but living aside the

essentially good teachings of religions we can account for the harmful effects of radical religious fundamentalism. Hatred towards faithful in other religions apart from one's own originates because of too much emphasis on one's own religion and maintaining closed mindset so as not to listen to other religions. Thus, various clashes among the individuals of diverse religions emerge due to religious fundamentalism and taking aggressive steps towards people of religions other than one's own. Humans of different generations have witnessed violence in the name of religion which have been recorded in the human history. Due to violence incited by religions many in the world have lost their life, sacrificed their dear ones while majority have spent their life in the absence of peace. There are wars in the world that are fought in the name of religion to establish one's own religion as the supreme religion holding only unquestionable absolute truth for the people of all time and all places on earth. Examples of such wars in our time can be the recent wars in many Middle East and European countries, including in some Asian countries. Various examples of religious violence can be cited that are extremely heart rending if we consider them from humanistic approach.

Even within the same religion there is violence that has been reported in human history of different times. Such as the reform movement that was initiated by Martin Luther which gave rise to Lutheran Church in the history of the Church. The first large-scale violence was engendered by the more radical of Luther's followers, who wished to extend wholesale reform of the Church to a similar wholesale reform of society in general. This was a step that the princes supporting Luther was not willing to countenance. The German Peasants' War of 1524/1525 was a popular revolt inspired by the teachings of the radical reformers. It consisted of a series of economic as well as religious revolts by peasants, townfolk and nobles. The conflict took place mostly in southern, western and

central areas of modern Germany but also affected areas in neighboring modern Switzerland and Austria. At its height, in the spring and summer of 1525, it involved an estimated 300,000 peasant insurgents. Contemporary estimates put the dead at 100,000. It was Europe's largest and most widespread popular uprising before the 1789 French Revolution (European Wars of Religion, 2017).

The world is also constantly witnessing wars in the name of religion among the two sectarian groups within Islam religion namely, Shia and Sunni. An ancient religious divide is helping to fuel a resurgence of conflicts in the Middle East and Muslim countries. Struggles between Sunni and Shia forces have fed a Syrian civil war that threatens to transform the map of the Middle East, spurred violence that is fracturing Iraq, and widened fissures in a number of tense Gulf countries. Growing sectarian clashes have also sparked a revival of transnational jihadi networks that poses a threat beyond the region (The Sunni-Shia Divide, 2017) [23].

Religion based violence is also seen in Indian sub-continent which is a secular and democratic state. On the evening of 28 February, 2002, Gandhinagar, the capital of Gujarat was the scene of Hindu-Muslim riot. Ahmedabad and Godhra saw the most serious clashes with 350 and 100 victims respectively in early March, according to official figures. After two cities came Mehsana (50 dead) and Sabarkantha (40 dead) (Jafrelot, 2007) [15]. More than the official figures there is the possibility that some went unaccounted. Another violence that shocked India was the violence in Orissa between Hindus and Christians. Violence first broke out on December 24, 2007 during an altercation between Hindus and Christians over Christmas celebrations in Orissa's Kandhamal district. A group of Christians then attacked the vehicle of a local leader of a right-wing Hindu organization. In retaliation, Hindu mobs burned down at least 19 churches, and attacked church officials. Christians then began to attack Hindu properties. A number of villagers had fled their homes to escape the violence. The state government failed to act quickly, leaving vulnerable groups at risk, which enabled the violence to escalate over the last four days. The exact death toll in these clashes is still unknown, though the media had reported the deaths of at least eight people (India: Stop Hindu-Christian Violence in Orissa, 2017) [13]. Likewise, many other incidents of violence based on religion are still prevalent on Indian soil which still make many people feel insecure even in their own country. To come out of such violence based on religious intolerance there can be many ways and among them inter-religious dialogue and human rights can contribute a lot towards building of mutual trust and understanding among the people of different religions which will reduce conflicts in human society.

Pre-Requisites for Inter-Religious Dialogue

It should be noted that there are certain indispensable pre-requisites for inter-religious dialogue. The fulfillment of those pre-requisites are of utmost importance in order to make the inter-religious dialogue a successful one. Among the various pre-requisite conditions, the most important ones can be presented as follows. First, a deep human honesty in searching for the truth wherever it can be found. Second, great intellectual openness in this search, without conscious preconceptions or willingly entertained prejudices (Panikkar, 1977) [18]. One needs a deep commitment and desire to

understand another tradition which means being open to a new experience of truth since one cannot really understand the views of another if one does not share them. This also requires trusting the other. Without some kind of trust in the other and some form of optimism in the human spirit (or in God, Being, Truth, Non-being, Transcendence or Life itself), the other must forever remain the unknown stranger. Panikkar says, "Dialogue seeks truth by trusting the other, just as dialectics pursues truth by trusting the order of things, the value of reason and weighty arguments. Dialectics is the optimism of reason; dialogue is the optimism of the heart. Dialectics believes that it can approach truth by relying on the objective consistency of ideas. Dialogue believes that it can advance along the way to truth by relying on the subjective consistency of the dialogical partners" (Panikkar R. 1979) [19]. And finally a profound loyalty towards one's own religious tradition (Panikkar R. 1977) [18] is an unavoidable pre-requisite for inter-religious dialogue. This is why the starting point for dialogue is the intra-personal dialogue by which one consciously and critically appropriates one's own tradition. Without this deep understanding of and commitment to one's own tradition, there are simply no grounds for the dialogue to proceed. It is only through the actual praxis of dialogue among specific traditions that similarities and differences can be explored at the deepest level and thereby we can get rid of conflicts arising from the differences in religion.

There are also some other guidelines for interreligious dialogue which can be briefly mentioned as follows:

1. Participants in interreligious dialogue cannot use the encounter as opportunities to defend their own traditions.
2. Neither is interreligious dialogue a means to defend religion in general.
3. There is a risk of conversion. Participants may find themselves transformed by the interfaith encounter.
4. Dialogue participants must reveal the beliefs that they hold closest and that define their religious tradition.
5. Interreligious dialogue is not a philosophical, theological or intellectual exercise. It is an expression of the participants' lived faith lives. Therefore, interfaith encounters form communities of awareness (Fulst, 2017) [10].

Inter-Religious Dialogue

Different religions have come out of different traditions and against different backgrounds. Therefore, differences are bound to be present in them. But because religion as a whole arises in human consciousness due to certain common problems that human beings have to face in the world and because people of different traditions share certain common feelings, ideas and sentiments, therefore, there are bound to be certain similarities too amongst different religions (Tiwari, 1983) [24]. It is also an observable fact that a religion as a complex of patterned responses to the core-concerns does not thrive completely in isolation. New contingencies emerge even in the most stable tribal community (Barnhart, 1977) [3]. The very facts of differences and similarities among different religions and religions not thriving in isolation call for the inter-religious dialogue in order to facilitate mutual understandings and peaceful co-existence among the people of different religious faith.

Inter-religious dialogue describes exchanges among religious practitioners and communities on matters of doctrine and issues of mutual concern in culture and politics. People explore the engagement of the world's religious traditions

around theological questions and in their efforts to collaborate on questions of peace, human rights, and economic and social development (Interreligious Dialogue, 2017).

Principles and behavior that involve taking advantage of other persons, or recklessness of the welfare of others are immoral (Dunlap, 1946) ^[8]. Therefore, the other also must be treated with respect as one deserves being a human no matter to which religion does one is affiliated. Inter-religious dialogue begins with the assumption that the other is also an original source of human understanding and that, at some level, persons who enter the dialogue have a capacity to communicate their unique experiences and understandings to each other. According to S. Radhakrishnan, human beings are fundamentally the same and hold the same deep values. The differences among them which are, no doubt, related to external, temporary and social conditions and are alterable with them (Banerjee, 1982) ^[2]. Inter-religious dialogue can only proceed on the basis of a certain trust in the "other qua other"--and even a kind of "cosmic confidence" in the unfolding of reality itself. But it should not, indeed cannot--assume a single vantage point or higher view outside the traditions themselves. The ground for understanding needs to be created in the space between the traditions through the praxis of dialogue.

The encounter of traditions through multi-faith dialogue is crucial in the new situation of radical pluralism that confronts our world since no single religion, culture or tradition holds a universal solution for either our theoretical or practical human problems. All the religions have something or the other to give to us as we need to solve our diverse problems and we are bound to get our search for the absolute at least to some extent almost in all the great religions. The witness of all true religion is that there is no reality which more directly confronts us than the reality of God (Baillie, 1938) ^[1]. Thus, we can get some comforts in all kinds of religion even if not fulfilling our entire expectation.

Radical pluralism is appealing in the manner it develops a critical stance towards all imperialistic and monistic modes of thinking and acting. No more will one religion, culture or tradition impose itself on peoples of diverse if less powerful traditions. It is the undeniable fact that a new holistic experience of reality is emerging in which every religion can play its part in the unfolding of a new revelation where all will live in harmony and peace. This does not require the abandonment of faith, since faith is what humanity holds in common. Indeed, faith provides the basis upon which inter-religious dialogue among the various traditions can aid the purification of beliefs. In fact, it is religion itself or, properly speaking, the religious dimension of the human person that holds the key to our anthropological unity.

The inter-religious dialogue focuses on the mutual testimonies of those involved in the dialogue keeping in mind that what the other bears is not a critique of my ideas but witness to his own experience, which then enters our dialogue, flows with it and awaits a new fecundation. These notions of testimony and witness highlight the fact that dialogue is primarily the meeting of persons; the aim is convergence of hearts, not just coalescence of minds. Consequently, it is the experience of religious dialogue itself which is all important. In the encounter, each participant attempts to think in and with the symbols of both traditions so that there is a symbolic transformation of experiences. In inter-religious dialogue

individuals of different groups of religion are encouraged to deeply engage into the other's tradition and then return to their own. In so doing, they mutually integrate their testimonies within a larger horizon. Not only does each begin to understand the other according to the other's self-understanding, but there is growth and dynamism in the manner that each tradition understands itself. Inter-religious dialogue challenges once and for all the notion that religions are closed and unchanging systems.

Justin Martyr, one of the early Christian apologists, claimed that whatsoever things have been rightly uttered in all places are the property of Christians. The Lambeth conference of 1907 says, "The truth of the fullness of Christ must guide our attitude towards other religions" (Tambyah, 1983) ^[22]. Because every religion contains truth that is very much in conformity with Christianity. Inter-religious dialogue assumes then that one should not neglect the truths of the other religions instead each one must try to understand them in reference with their own religious truth.

Thus, it is the observable fact that each religion represents the whole for that particular group and in a certain way it is the religion of the other group only in a different topological form. Although admitting that such a view may sound "too optimistic," it provides insight into the basis upon which homologous correlations can be made. Although religions and cultures are profoundly unique, they may represent transformations of a more primordial experience that make each tradition a dimension of the other. If this is the case, then inter-religious dialogue may not only uncover hidden meanings within another religious system; it also discovers hidden or repressed meanings within one's own. The idea of similarities among certain religious elements not only recognizes points of encounter; it equally suggests a process of mutual fecundation.

At this point it needs to be reiterated that the discovery of functional similarities between religions can only arise from the praxis of inter-religious dialogue. Such praxis does not claim universal objectivity, but neither is it to be dismissed as expression of subjective bias. With regard to the former, it should now be clear that no culture, tradition, ideology or religion can today speak for the whole of humankind. With regard to the latter, it should also be evident that there is no human truth that is divorced from the person or community that holds it. God is forever expressing himself and God is forever expressing truth (Goldsmith, 1973) ^[12] in all the cultures, traditions, ideologies or religion.

From the above it follows that reality is ultimately harmonious. It is neither a monolithic unity nor sheer diversity and multiplicity. Reality is also radically relational and interdependent so that every reality is constitutively connected to all other realities. There is organic unity and dynamic process where every part of the whole participates in the whole. This corresponds to the ancient notion that every reality is a microcosm of the macro-universe. Reality is symbolic, both pointing to and participating in something beyond itself. We do not have a God separate from the world, a world that is purely material, nor humans that are reducible to their own thought-processes or cultural expressions. While it is important to be tolerant among the individuals of diverse religious groups it is also important to recognize the symbolic difference between God and the world, between one religion and another, Akbar the great, the one who propagated

religious dialogue with the leaders of different religions, held that God is one (Jones, 1974). The inter-religious dialogue is important because it emphasizes the communicative possibilities of symbols.

Human Rights as Opposed to Religious Violence

The very fact of undermining the freedom of individual human person from religious stance dehumanizes the subdued individuals and as a consequence the instigated religious based conflict bursts forth while it is opportune for the oppressed to rise against the oppressors. Thus violation of human rights on the ground of religion should be stopped if at all peace is to be maintained among the people of diverse religions. The 36th session of the United Nations General Assembly on 25th November, 1981 has adopted the following resolutions (presented in four articles) that speak about religious freedom.

Article 1

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. This article very specifically works against the religious intolerance that we frequently experience in various parts of the world due to strict adherence to and extreme exaltation of own religion. One concrete example can be drawn from the religious violence that broke out in the Indian state of Orissa in the first decade of the 21st century in which thousands of people from both Christians and Hindus were subjected to multiple forms of suffering. The Human Rights Watch condemned the mob violence and urged both Hindu and Christian leaders to work toward peaceful reconciliation. Human Rights Watch also called on the Indian government to meet its constitutional and international obligations to ensure that all people may equally enjoy the right to freely profess, practice, propagate and adopt a religion. In particular, Indian officials should take steps to prevent further violence and end impunity for campaigns of violence and prosecute those responsible for the attacks (India: Stop Hindu-Christian Violence in Orissa, 2017) [13]. While people of a particular religious group force individuals to convert to their religion without the consent of individual victim or subject to brutality to give up existing religious faith, it amounts to the violation of this article. No one shall be subject to coercion which impair his freedom to have a religion or belief of his choice (United Nation's Declarations on Religious Tolerance, 2017) [25].

Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others (Subramania, 1984) [20].

Article 2

No one shall be subject to discrimination by any state, institution, group of persons, or person on grounds of religion or other beliefs (United Nation's Declarations on Religious Tolerance, 2017) [25]. The world has witnessed at various incidents of religious conflicts where state shows lackadaisical attitude towards the persecuted people in order to gain favor of the majority as it benefits their hidden political motif. This is

especially true of terrorism, which sees violence committed against unarmed noncombatants in order to inspire fear and achieve some political goal. Just to cite an example mention can be made of Indian rulings on religion. India's constitution provides for religious freedom, but the country does not always practice it. Overall, the Pew study criticizes India for having "high" levels of government restrictions on religion, defined as interference in religion practice or proselytizing, hostility to minority religions and inaction on complaints of discrimination. (Bhattacharya, 2017) [5]. The dignity of human beings is a basic value that every state should try to protect, regardless of consideration of nationality, race, color, gender, etc. (Cassese, 2005) [7].

For the purposes of the present declaration, the expression "intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief" means any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on religion or belief and having as its purpose or as its effect nullification or impairment of the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis.

Article 3

Discrimination between human beings on grounds of religion or belief constitutes an affront to human dignity and a disavowal of the principles of the charter of the United Nations, and shall be condemned as a violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and enunciated in detail in the International Covenants on Human Rights, and as an obstacle to friendly and peaceful relations between nations (United Nation's Declarations on Religious Tolerance, 2017) [25]. Hence no one should be discriminated based on religion nor even be subjected to any kind of ill-treatment that makes one dehumanized. In 1975 the United Nations General Assembly, by consensus, adopted a Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from being subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The prohibited conduct is condemned as a denial of the purposes of the Charter of the United Nations and as a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Brownlie, 1983) [6]. Article 55 of Chapter IX entitled international economic and social co-operation of the united nations states that universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion must be maintained (Bennet, 1977) [4].

Article 4

Surveillance and suppression of information and free speech are rampant in many countries (Vago, 1981). All states shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise, and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, economic, political, social, and cultural life (United Nation's Declarations on Religious Tolerance, 2017) [25]. The atrocities on Christian minorities in Syria by majority group of Sunni sect of Islam religion is diametrically opposed to United nations declarations on Religious Tolerance. Hundreds of thousands of Christians have been displaced by fighting or left the country. Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III Laham said that more than 1,000 Christians had been killed,

entire villages cleared, and dozens of churches and Christian centers damaged or destroyed (Syria's Beleaguered Christians, 2017). As far as the human right is concerned, the Syrian government must take effective measures to stop such kind of religious violence.

All states shall make all efforts to enact or rescind legislation where necessary to prohibit any such discrimination, and to take all appropriate measures to combat intolerance on the grounds of religion or other beliefs in this matter (United Nation's Declarations on Religious Tolerance, 2017) ^[25]. All must recognize that each human being regardless of any religious affiliation has the rights that are intrinsically bound in human nature in order to make that person recognized as human in human society. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) speaks similarly of 'natural, inalienable rights' and state that 'Men are born... free and equal in right' (Ott, 1987) ^[17]. So, no one should be subjected to any inhuman treatment. Vivekananda said, "the greatest error is to call a man a weak and miserable sinner (Goel, 1996) ^[11].

Conclusion

As has been discussed above it is clear that both inter-religious dialogue and human rights can help us to foster peace in the world by diminishing religious born conflicts. There are religious diversities and we need to maintain diversities and this very fact demands a peaceful co-existence in the atmosphere of which all can survive and prevail without being detrimental to others. Since peace is the goal of interreligious dialogue, the process must be peaceful. It is important to realize that peace is not easily achieved and maintained within a short period of time. A tireless and continued effort among the individuals of different religious groups must be maintained. Peace does not occur in a day and there are obstacles in achieving it as there are people with different convictions and backgrounds but it must be attained because it is the only space where the human spirit may soar. While trying to achieve peace by eradicating religious violence one must learn to treat each human person equally with due dignity. It is based on such a conception that United Nations Declarations on Religious Tolerance exhorts every individual human being to treat with each other with respect where each one can exercise freedom of religion without fear from within and without. If each individual in the world practices inter-religious dialogue with true spirit of mutual respect and if each one adheres to the principles of United Nations Declarations on Religious Tolerance, then the religious born conflicts will substantially diminish and thereby peace will prevail in the world today.

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