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Fostering Peace Amidst Multi-Religious Communities: Reflections on inter-religious dialogue

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Abstract. -- Cultural prejudices and religious biases have often come in the way of sustainable peace among Nations and communities. In the current milieu, the geopolitics that we witness often result in ethnic and National conflicts on the basis of religious identities. One of the most significant ways to address these conflicts to ensure peace in an ethical partnership is to foster a culture of dialogue amongst religions. In order to further the cause of interreligious dialogue, we may well look into possible metaphysical/theological commonalities across religions for a start by way of comparative theology. Nonetheless, Inter-religious dialogue needs to be taken to the socio-cultural dimensions of everyday life from the hallowed portals of theology or metaphysics in order to facilitate peace. Thus, a dialogue in terms of mutual appreciation of quotidian practices is very much desirable for bringing religious harmony and thereby sustainable peace.

Keywords: Inter-religious dialogue, peace, comparative theology, ecumenism, religious conflict

Introduction

Cultural prejudices and religious biases have often come in the way of sustainable peace among Nations and communities. According to Scott Appleby, it is the same “religious dynamics” that prompts some believers to engage in violence while encourages others to seek justice by adopting nonviolent means and striving towards reconciliation.¹ Years ago, Swami Vivekananda pointed out that, on the one hand, religion has shown us the most sublime virtues and the intensest love towards humanity and, on the other, has subjected humans to the most diabolic hatred.² In the current milieu, the geopolitics that we witness often result in ethnic and National conflicts on the basis of religious

identities.³ One of the most significant ways to address these conflicts to ensure peace in an ethical partnership is to foster a culture of dialogue amongst religions.

In order to further the cause of interreligious dialogue, we may well look into possible metaphysical/theological commonalities across religions for a start. Though not virtually absent, the metaphysical or theological exchange has not been much between Indic and Semitic religions. One of the reasons could be that the Semitic religions are 'monotheistic' and Hinduism is 'polytheistic' while Buddhism in some sense is 'atheistic'. Thus, it is often claimed that comparison and contrast of religions may be made only about the socio-cultural realms and not in the theological or metaphysical domain. However, there are quite significant works along these lines giving us a rich repository of 'Comparative theology'. One only needs to look into the works of Indian Christian religious thinkers to appreciate the 'dialogue of theological exchange'. Such attempts enrich 'comparative theology', contributing towards inter-religious dialogue. Nonetheless, Inter-religious dialogue needs to be taken to the socio-cultural dimensions of everyday life from the hallowed portals of theology or metaphysics in order to facilitate peace. Thus, a dialogue in terms of mutual appreciation of daily practices is very much desirable for bringing religious harmony and thereby sustainable peace.

The dialogical rootedness of everyday life, in fact, is in accordance with the phenomenological traditions of philosophising. Thus, Aihikhai points out that our everyday life is dialogical as we are thrown into a world of relationality as suggested by the philosophies of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Thus, the impetus for dialogue originates from our relationality rather than our own self-reflections. As stressed by Levinas, the space of relationality would often subject to vulnerability. This vulnerability prompts us to let go of our biases and embrace openness to the other reciprocally, thereby facilitating dialogue.⁴

World-religions and the call for dialogue

In the latter half of the 20th Century, Inter-religious dialogue has been regarded as an essential and integral part of human society in the globalised world. This has led to the various interfaith commissions, international meetings, academic deliberations, humanitarian interventions and spiritual movements to create greater understanding and co-operation between people of different faiths. In the present decades, dialogues between Jews and Muslims, Christians and Muslims, Jews and Christians, Muslims and Hindus as well as Hindus and Christians are urgently needed to counter the tension and misunderstanding which has been created by the manifestation of various socio-political events that had brought religious conflicts to the centre jeopardising peace and sustainability. Pope Francis reminds us all of the significance of interreligious dialogue for peace in the following words:

Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, so it is a duty for Christians and other religious communities. This dialogue is, in the first place, a conversation about human existence or simply, as the bishops of India have put it, a matter of “being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows”. In this way, we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking and speaking. We can then join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace, which should become a fundamental principle of all our exchanges. A dialogue that seeks social peace and justice is in itself, beyond all merely practical considerations, an ethical commitment that brings about a new social situation.⁵

As seen from the above remarks of Pope Francis, dialogue is an ‘ethical commitment’ that seeks partnership with our fellow beings to build a society steeped in the pursuit of peace. Dialogue is living our faith in the presence of other faiths by reaching out to them in a spirit of tolerance and openness. Dialogues on different religions’ theological or metaphysical content would go a long way in bringing religious harmony and peace. As noted by Catherine Cornille,

Dialogue is here thus understood as comparative theology in the broad sense of the term, as a constructive engagement between religious texts, teachings, and practices oriented toward the possibility of change and growth. To be sure, far from every dialogue between religions will actually yield religious fruit. However, it is the very possibility that one may learn from the other, which moves religious traditions from self-sufficiency to openness to the other.⁶

It was in acknowledgement of the above need to be open to other traditions that the first Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work was held in Stockholm on 19 August 1925. However, it was almost forty years later that Pope St John XXIII called all the Cardinals of the world to Rome and announced “. . . [T]hat he was calling a new Ecumenical Council (Vatican Second) to follow the signs of the time as he put it, to bring the Catholic Church up to date (aggiornamento) so it could engage in dialogue with the world”.⁷ Thus Vatican Council II came with a powerful proclamation on the relation of the Church to other faiths, with different documents for Ecumenism and inter-religious/interfaith dialogues. *Nostra Aetate*, on 28 October 1965 promulgated during the final session of the council was meant not only for the Catholic and Jewish community but was also about the relation between Catholics and the followers of other faiths. This declaration has proved a milestone in inter-religious dialogue. *Lumen Gentium* had given new ground in the history of the ecumenical councils of Catholic Christianity by its positive remarks about Judaism and Islam. *Nostra Aetate* further reflected on other religions, particularly Eastern Religions, by considering the riddles of the human condition to which different religions provide an answer. For the first time in

the history of the Roman Catholic Church, an Ecumenical Council honoured the truth and holiness to be found in certain other religions, as the work of the living God. Archbishop Felix Machado sees the fruits of *Nostra Aetate* in the document *Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World* as a sign of maturity in receiving the teachings of the Second Vatican Council in highlighting the ecumenical relationships that are needed for any effective interreligious dialogue.⁸

The spirit of inter-religious dialogue is the belief that all human beings are the creation of God, and the Lord has fashioned each of the created beings with different talents and qualities. Thus all creation is precious to the Lord. The inter-religious encounter of 1893 at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago that was made memorable for India by the presence of Swami Vivekananda was one of the earliest instances of interreligious dialogue. On 13 October 2007, Islamic scholars and religious leaders from different parts of the world embraced the global inter-religious dialogue in a massive rally, with 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders around the world having been assembled. They invited Christian leaders and scholars to join with them in dialogue. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia met Pope Benedict XVI and launched a World conference and dialogue with all the religions of the world in Spain. He established the King Abdullah Centre for the study of Contemporary Islam and the dialogue of civilization within Imam University, Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia.⁹

The space for interreligious dialogical knowledge has increased in recent times. Interreligious experience that was once prevalent in the East is now part of the West too.¹⁰ In dialogue, one learns not by being passively open or receptive but by thinking and speaking. A partner in dialogue asks questions and stimulates the other partners to respond. In the process, one gives reality the specific categories and language in which to respond. The notion of rationality, which all expressions of reality are fundamentally related to, applies to the speakers and the listeners. It is while accepting this view of dialogical partnership that we move ahead in our ethical projects of promoting peace amidst various religious communities.¹¹ The significant meaning of dialogue is, “I can learn from you and others”. Dialogue opens our senses to tell us the ultimate implication of life and how to live at peace with other religions in our times. In the name of religion, conflicts and wars have taken place all over the Universe. As pointed out by Koslowski, “behind the ‘clash of civilization’, there stands the ‘clash of religions’”.¹² The world religions have now accepted the challenge, and it is the responsibility of all the religious leaders to promote dialogue among the followers and resolve the conflicts between them to usher in peace.

Inter-religious dialogue and comparative theology

There are sufficient reasons to keep comparative theology and inter-religious dialogue closely connected, yet they could be very distinguishable. Comparative theology

is a form of academic theological study and scholarly work, whereas inter-religious dialogue is generally conversational. Comparative theology is more than listening to others or attempting to justify their faith. They may study other traditions more seriously side by side with their own traditions, taking both the traditions to the heart and reintegrating the wisdom of the other into her/his own. This necessitates good scholarship of various religions and their metaphysical/theological perspectives. Thus the theologians have to understand and explain the beliefs of their traditions and ought to correct what they say about them. These all are studied in inter-religious dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue may take place as a skilled form of theological conversation on a much broader and less formal exchange; it is a general conversation, less intellectual. Not that inter-religious dialogue can be exchanged for comparative theology though the conversation is better than solitary study.

For the educated people, theological dialogue is not to change their traditions and beliefs. Instead, they continue to represent their traditions. Nevertheless, comparative theological and inter-religious dialogue does more than listen to the other. They correspond with the demands of sound scholarship. Thus it is incomplete unless the theologians hear the other person, understand how they represent the religious beliefs of their particular traditions. These theological studies reflect on the old ways of believing, and a new perspective may emerge in an inter-religious dialogue. According to John Sheveland, comparative theology compares with polyphonic music. There are two characteristics of polyphony: identification of difference and intelligibility. Like dialogue, comparative theology acknowledges differences yet looks at others with hospitality and integrity and thus is similar to polyphony music.¹³ Particularly in Asia, such comparative theology could stimulate the search for the common heritage of the community through dialogue. As Sheveland observes:

The dialogue with other religious persons and communities, against the backdrop of which the Christian community in Asia is but a small minority with historical and ancestral roots in the majority populations, is a necessary step for Asian Christians to understand themselves and their neighbours integrally. Dialogue with the many cultures of Asia is an appropriate form of Christian witness, self-appropriation, and construction of meaning in a church which is polycentric and multicultural.¹⁴

Comparative theology is perceived as a mode of academic theology and a scholarly work. In contrast, one can have an inter-religious dialogue through learning other traditions and questioning other religions seriously. It gives external expression on actual learning. Learning is not significant, but success depends on the conversation. There are differences in comparative theology and inter-religious dialogue, yet they are seriously learning from each other. This learning occurs either through speech-communication or sharing the notes of scholars; in this context, comparative theology and inter-religious

dialogue are not to be seen as alternatives to each other.¹⁵ As we have mentioned earlier, the need to harmonise religions at a metaphysical or theological plane may be fulfilled by indulging in comparative theology.

However, inter-religious dialogue and comparative theology are not mutually exclusive or neatly separable. The study of another religion involves encounters and questioning of each other. To question one's own prejudices against other traditions and bring religious harmony, comparative theology is eminently suitable as it opens the vistas to theological doctrines of other religions. In the 18th century, James Garden, a pioneer in the subject, brought out the book *Comparative Theology*, also titled as "the true and solid grounds of pure and peaceable Theology". In his theory, Garden explains two kinds of theologies: absolute and comparative. Absolute theology discusses the object of religious knowledge as revealed and instituted by God and has a basis in the Scripture. The second comparative theology is in terms of the significance and observance of a religious order, respect and relation of matters belonging to a religion, including rites. Garden's theological study identifies significant fundamental truths and values. Garden further tells us that the common truth and values could be shared with all human beings.¹⁶ At the time, there were different opinions among Christians and across wider religious boundaries, and theology was construed as a discipline to identify and promote common ground.

Comparative theology could be supported and nourished by inter-religious dialogue since comparative theology presents a genuine and satisfactory way to realise and acknowledge the otherness of the religious standing of one's own identity. Comparative theology creates a balance between openness and loyalties; it sees inter-religious encounters as an ongoing conversation that can make authentic dialogue. It is dialogical as it sets out to understand other religions by researching in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions. Thus, it opens the doors for questions and their meaning in the life of the believers.¹⁷ According to Stosch, the notion of 'truth' is an integral aspect of enquiry in comparative theology, unlike inter-religious dialogue.¹⁸ In other words, inter-religious dialogue abstains from discussing the truth claims of different religions. However, in the present era, the interplay of comparative theology and inter-religious dialogue is unavoidable, given the variety, dynamism, dispersion of knowledge and the frequent lack of responsibility to the self and the other.

Shared scriptural readings vibrate with comparative theology; here, the purpose is scriptural sharing and reading based on a theme. The traditions, culture and reasoning peculiar to each are shared. Comparative theology studies several texts of different religions at a time; it is an activity that could be reproduced and improved upon and tested with other texts because it is social in a limited sense that the expressions of different traditions may be heard together, where there is neither modification nor generalization based on the expectations of the other, no decided model in which its

meaning could be predicted. These same virtues of both scriptural reasoning and comparative theology often apply in inter-religious dialogue as well, where changeability and resistance to expressed decisions raise the wished substitutes.

Often, the question comes as to whether comparative theology can alter the mindset of inter-religious dialogue. In the dialogue, we benefit that participants will be generally informed about their own tradition and culture, not about the other traditions at the table. If comparative theology has been experienced by those engaged in dialogue, they will know about the other traditions and assimilate learning and bring into dialogue their own traditions. Comparative theology may strengthen the persons who participate in inter-religious dialogue so that it is no longer superficial since the participants are learned not only in their own traditions but also in others. The dialogues are immediate and concretely developed for success. Comparative theology may decrease the importance of inter-religious dialogue by suggesting that dialogue is not to be the principal source of selective information about the other traditions. However, developmental scope of human knowledge is always considered, and dialogue is a means of gaining it. After comparative theology, one must learn to pursue the dialogue. The significance of philosophical approach to religious beliefs in the context of inter-religious dialogue comes into play at this level.

Philosophy and the inter-religious dialogue

The mediation of philosophy in dialogue arises from the fact that though comparative theology is well prepared to address the issue of 'truth' and 'rationality' of religious beliefs it does not assume the role of a meta-level inquiry into religious convictions.¹⁹ Philosophical discussions should be seen as meta-level communication for the inter-religious dialogue. It should promote deactivating religious conflicts and favouring inter-religious dialogue. Philosophy stands amongst the different religions exceedingly in affects since philosophy contains religious doctrines and philosophical critique of religions. Unlike scientism, it refuses to view religion as superstition. Ancient philosophy asked early Christianity to verify their fundamental belief in relationship with Jesus Christ and the Church. The Church verified this to the relationship to individual and political liberty. Also, Christianity used philosophy for a more profound influence of communication of the faith and its defence against people of other religious beliefs. Philosophy encourages conversation of the universal religious beliefs for the discussion of its foundational structure and its application. However, the Western philosophy, one particular philosophical tradition that has been generated historically, should not be made the standard of non-Christian religion. In contrast, philosophy should be understood in the universal sense of rational communication, based on the highest discourses of inter-religious dialogue.²⁰

The knowledge and information one has of his or her own religion, and that of others is intellectually and philosophically insufficient; we need to attend to the teachings of other religions. As well-known, a language of 'contrast' often helps one to understand oneself better. Thus the most significant feature of dialogue is the eagerness to consider the incompleteness of one's own definition of truth and learn from the other. Dialogical intention can also be seen as a part of the paradigm shift that is taking place in our culture, as previous modes of knowing and communicating lack the requisite qualities or resources to respond to current realities. Many theoreticians have offered thoughtful guidelines for engaging with others in dialogue to recognise the inclination we all have toward a dogmatic understanding of our traditions.

According to Kant the critiquing of the reason is in a position to say precisely, as the self-critique, how far knowledge attempts the reality and how much reason can reason out the truth? When will it be true knowledge? The enlightenment's faith is in reason; here the reason is significant for reality as a whole. Kant in his work *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* interprets 'rational faith' as 'reasonableness of religion' and not as 'rational principles and concepts'. Thus, for Kant 'faith' and 'reason' are consistent with each other. In fact, Kant reminds us that it is our duty to find meaning in the Scriptures in accordance with the teachings of reason.²¹ However, reason is not the totality of reality as all reality is not rational. Thus, reason alone cannot decide the criteria of revelation.²² The great and the major religions of the world chiefly are not based on reason and experience alone but on the apocalypse or revelation. The history of many religions shows us that religious doctrines have been revealed to them, and certain core aspects of many religions cannot be known outside the ambit of divine revelation. Thus, the divine-revelation narratives of the religions cannot be ignored by philosophy as fabrications; they should be temporarily and conditionally accepted by philosophy as objects of research and must be taken as what they claim to be God Himself revealed in the world. The critique of religion could not challenge the reality of this because the approval of this event ultimately is a matter of religious faith. Also, the role of philosophy is central in addressing the questions like who is a legitimate partner in the dialogue and what the goal of dialogue is.²³ However, philosophy cannot impose to religions what they must believe and exclude as irrational from their doctrinal systems of dogmatic belief or what ought to be the goals of a religion. Science and philosophy cannot be thought of as the substitute and termination of religions.²⁴ Instead, philosophy must recognise religion as an autonomous domain of knowledge and experience.

Another point of contact between philosophy and interreligious dialogue stems from an exploration of the nature of the relation between the 'Self' and the 'Other' in a Levinasian sense or that between 'I and Thou', as Buber emphasises. Thus, philosophy would clarify the nature and quality of the space 'in-between' the dialogical partners.²⁵ Since religious beliefs and the culture in which they are embedded have inalienable

associations, a culture's expressions are shaped mainly by its religious beliefs. The pluralism of religious beliefs is related to pluralistic cultures. In other words, religious pluralism is a development of cultural pluralism.²⁶ Thus, the fact of the plurality of lived worlds and religions cannot be denied. Multiculturalism makes sense in many Nations as there are several different cultures peacefully co-existing rather than having one National culture. However, in and through recognising differences, one may simultaneously seek ways to reach an actual dialogue of religions. In this way, religious pluralism can be successful only if realised within the background of multiculturalism of religious beliefs, a crisscrossing of elements in religious beliefs a la Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances'. From a phenomenological perspective, it may be argued that each culture is always plural in its constitution. However, this plurality does not necessarily end up in unmitigated relativism; multiculturalism undercuts such radical relativism as there are over-arching elements in a multicultural society. However, one need to be cautious here as sometimes, the commonalities of elements are interpreted in terms of the dominant culture in a multicultural society; this possibility makes it imperative for everyone in a multicultural society to be in a continuous dialogue.²⁷ Nonetheless, the dialogue in religious beliefs must be an inter-religious dialogue and not just a multi-religious discussion.²⁸ There are different concepts of philosophy such as rationality, faith, justice, and truth that are useful for the discussion of religious beliefs in order to promote the dialogue and discussion of world religions through philosophy.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the outset, religion in our times has become a potential source of conflict and violence despite its promise of peace, harmony and salvation. This is mainly due to a failure on our part to properly understand the religious doctrines, texts and practices of one's own as well as that of the others. Sometimes, the provocation for violence is due to proselytization that originates from a lack of understanding of the other belief systems. Inter-religious dialogue provides a forum to prevent proselytising though it does not curb evangelism. Instead, it may be seen as an activity that complements evangelism. Inter-religious dialogue is related to evangelism in two ways: to understand the situation of non-believers and how the Scripture answers their needs and to respond to the questions raised by the people. This dimension of dialogue can be seen in The Holy Bible as one that involves them in a personal encounter with God. The Bible does not directly address inter-religious dialogue as it is understood and practised today. The Greek word *dialogomai* appears in Acts 17:17 and Jude 9 ask us to "discuss in argument or exhortation". Thus, the New Testament writers were using *dialogomai* to describe a period of questioning and seeking answers following the proclamation of the Gospel. The Bible gives several examples of affirmed religious conversations. For example, Child Jesus spent three days in the temple discussing with the teachers. "After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them

and asking them questions” (Luke 2: 46). Discussing religious issues with the religious leaders, all of them were amazed at his responses to their questions. Discussions with Jesus by the teachers could be considered as a model of inter-religious dialogue for the Church. An interrogative pedagogy was common among Jews and Greeks; the rabbinic method of teaching involved mutual questioning and discussion. Earlier, Socrates used the same method; today, it is called Socratic ‘dialogue’. This mutual discussion is the essence of inter-religious dialogue. It also fulfils the process of answering questions that involve others in a personal encounter with God.

St Paul’s discourse on Mars’ hill in Athens demonstrates an occasion of getting together in inter-religious dialogue. The dialogical skill exhibited by Paul in striking a reconciliatory tone in his speech addressed to the Athenians is hard to miss.²⁹ Paul observed very closely and the practices of Athenians as the beginning for presenting his beliefs. Paul debated with the devout Jews; he beheld the practices of the people outside his religious community and investigated the religions of Athenians to identify their spiritual state and present the new religion accessible to them. Paul used the knowledge that he obtained through direct interaction with the professionals of the Athenian philosophies and religions. He shows that Christians can acknowledge the truth in other religions without accepting the entirety of that religion as true; acknowledging the limited truth which the Athenians held does not mean denying the supremacy of God’s complete revelation in Christ. By clarifying other religions that result from inter-religious dialogue, evangelists can express their beliefs so that people of other religions and cultures will correctly understand them. Such an approach to one’s own religion in the context of a multi-religious culture that encourages inter-religious dialogue is the requirement of our times to seek sustainable peace and harmony among people and nations.

Overzealous dogmatic believers of any religion refuse to acknowledge the Scriptural legitimacy of other religions and thereby succumb to religious fundamentalism. Scripture also has intolerant stances! Fundamentalists use such texts for religious supremacy over other traditions. Inter-religious dialogue in terms of comparative theology, to a large extent, can check this constricting view on other religions. At the same time, we may have to move beyond theology at times to the terrain of philosophy to clarify the very meaning of what it is to be human and the notion of existence in general. Philosophy also helps us to unravel the various dimensions of notions like truth, rationality and belief. However, a genuine understanding of “dialogue” prompts us to embrace the spirit of inter-religious dialogue beyond the realm of theology or philosophy and to acknowledge the very dialogical nature of our being in the world. Such a broader and deeper understanding of inter-religious dialogue would enable the comity of Nations and religions to work towards sustainable peace and harmony in an ethical way.

End Notes:

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Repression and Resistance in Ngugiwa Thiong'o's *Wrestling with the Devil:* *A Prison Memoir*

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Abstract. -- Prisons are built with the aim of depriving the captives of liberties. Prison mechanism adopts many strategies to stigmatize the imprisoned through moralistic arraignments, accusations and indictment. Most prisoners in the third world countries are incarcerated not always because of their criminalities but because they have been accused of breaking the repressive rules exerted upon them by the arbitrary powers of the state who establish control over the subjects. The domination and criminalities of the sovereign power structures of the third world countries include genocide, torture and curtailment of freedom of speech, false imprisonment and execution. The penal system is controlled and monitored in these countries by the oppressive policies of state apparatus under the tyrannical rulers. This paper is an attempt to study Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wrestling with the Devil: A Prison Memoir*¹ which offers a deeper understanding of how African political prisoners' voice of dissent has been suppressed by the colonial power and how the political intellectuals alter the dark dungeons into spaces of resistance.

Keywords: political imprisonment, brutalities, oppressive regime, dissent, resistance

Introduction

Prison literature of Africa², closely allied to its political writings, informs the readers of the horrendous conditions prevailing in African prisons. Those who have contributed to this genre of writing, have been incarcerated for their strong political commitment and anti-establishment ideologies. The inhuman practices depicted in the prison writings-novels, plays, poetry and life writings of African writers of Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria throw light on the socio-cultural, political and economic developments in the continent and also the turbulent struggles for freedom, colonial aggression, decolonization