Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Dialogue

Manas Kumar Sahu

Humanities and Social Science Department Indian Institute of Technology Mumbai
Powai-400076, Mumbai, Maharastra
Corresponding Author: Manas Kumar Sahu

Abstract: Religious exclusivism is the biggest threat for multi-religious society at the same time, ambivalent thoughts among religion in religious pluralism due to religious diversity, often yields religious violence. In both of the extreme, (religious exclusivism and religious pluralism) there is the possibility of religious violence, i.e., religious riots, terrorism, mob lynching, and communalism. The objective of this paper is to discuss the significance of interreligious dialogue (IRD), its basic principle, how IRD will help us for addressing the problems of humanity (i.e., Religious diversity and contradictory thoughts in major religions, Religious Dogma, superstition, and terrorism). If there is any biggest challenge for religion in the 21st century, is this one that how religion can deal with these problems and became a good tool for establishing peace and prosperity in the region.

I.   INTRODUCTION

The word religion is derived from the Latin word "Religare," which means "bind together." It denotes harmony between different religions for a common goal. It also refers to peace and reconciliation of different thought, a cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions/humanistic beliefs at both individual and institutional level.

In the 21st century, there are lots of human-made problems prevailing in the society, The role of religion in the present-day society is increased; every religion has to play a vital role to restore peace and prosperity and fight against all kinds of evil or impurities from the society. Interreligious dialogue has become very much essential to serve these purposes and to protect the core values of humanity. IRD works for the objective of the exchange of ideas and mutual understanding among religions and their teachings or core values for facing the problems of humanity. The dialogue among religions is very much crucial for avoiding religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, which leads to the problem of communalism and other religious violence. It is very much essential to know each other's religious tradition and work together for dealing with the current problem of humanity. This objective can be attained through interfaith dialogue, which gives a platform for understanding each other's tradition and their core values to address the problem like terrorism, communalism, other religious violence, environmental and social issues

Basic Principles of Inter-Religious Dialogue

Certain basic principles must be followed for fulfilling the objective of interreligious dialogue. Generally, there are four basic principles for the fruitfulness of interreligious dialogue. These principles are named as 4 E's principle of inter-religious dialogue. These are

1) Eagerness/Enthusiasm: - interreligious dialogue cannot be possible without the subjects have the eagerness for understanding each other's traditions, customs, and values. It often happens that due to lack of enthusiasm, people failed to understand each other's religion completely and misinterpret others religion. In every religion, there is a common factor – to address the practical problems of humanity. The problem need not be equal; it may depend on their culture, belief, geographical diversity. The problem faced in Islamic country may not be found in the non-Islamic country. However, it cannot be denied that the nature of the problem may be equal despite facing a different problem. Therefore, every religion needs to learn from each other, how they are addressing the problems and being able to solve the problem, whether it is a medieval problem or practical problem of the 21st century.

2) Epoche: - It is very much essential for the religionists that their minds should be free from any biases about the other religious tradition, it is often found that people came up with some preconceived ideas about the

particular religious' tradition which later became a big hindrance for the productivity of IRD. It also restricts them to know the religious tradition completely. Therefore for the fulfillment of the objective of interreligious dialogue, 'Epoche' or bracketing is a crucial tool. By putting the preconceived notion about other religion within a bracket in the initial stage of the study of a particular religion, one can reveal some new fact about that religious tradition. Bracketing does not mean that the preconceived ideas which are gained by the study of the particular religious tradition are entirely redundant but for the particular time being that has to be bracketed. It is a significant tool to avoid religious biases and understand other religions completely.

3) Empathy: - Every religion has to be empathetic to other religion. Just acknowledging the weakness of a particular religion is not going to help for sustaining the common goals of religion. For attaining the common goal, every religion has to respect the cultural values of others and be empathetic to the underdeveloped idea of other religions. Be empathetic means not just acknowledging but taking the problem as if it is a problem of their religion, unlike sympathy, it upholds intense love and cares to other religion and actively seek a solution to the problem by recognizing the core teachings of that particular religion.

4) Enhancement: - The interreligious dialogue will be fruitful when the core teaching of a particular religion spreads among other religious tradition through communication. It is the duty of the religionists for bringing the issues to the broader community that what they learn from each other's religious tradition through inter-religious dialogue and how it can be helpful to restore the human values and enhancement of religious faith.

Major challenges for inter-religious dialogue

There are several challenges for IRD; need to address. I will be confined myself within some of the major problems like exclusivism or absolutism, religious diversity, and contradictory thought among religion. Religious dogma, superstition, and terrorism which has to be sorted out through IRD. Let us take them one by one.

i) Exclusivism[1]

In a multi-religious society, religious unity and integrity are always threatened by religious exclusivity. Religious exclusivism is a threat to the harmony of a multi-religious society. Exclusivism proclaimed that the ideology of one religion is superior to other religions, and the description of the reality of a particular religion is the only truth or closer to the truth than other religion. Every religious tradition has the conviction that their explanation of Reality is the best expiation.They uphold the view that my truth is the only truth and other religious tradition must follow it. All most all religious violence occurred due to exclusive tendencies of major religions. Exclusivism promotes religious expansionism.[2] Exclusivism in the strong sense does not allow to co-existence of other religions. A believer of Christianity may think "John 14:6 :(in the King James Version is translated as **:)** "Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (Fennell 2011: p-350) Personal salvation and haven are only possible for them those who believe that Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In Islam it is found that "Whosoever follows any other religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him, and in the hereafter, he will be among the losers" (3:85). (Eaton, 1985: p-36)[3] Exclusivism is a threat for multi-religious society because it has become a source of violence for humanity. Strong exclusivism neither allowed religious pluralism nor go for interreligious dialogue with other religions for dealing with both the ontological problem and current problem of humanity. Swami Vivekananda explains exclusivism with the help of the story of two different frogs. The frog which is living in the well always thinks that there is nothing outside of well. Like that, all the religions of the world think that their religion is better than other religions, so there is no need for any dialogue. As Vivekananda pointed out, "That has been the difficulty all the while. I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Muslim sits in his little well and thinks that it is the whole world." (Vivekananda 1892).

Weak Exclusivism allows other religions to coexist because of the acceptance of religious tolerance. Major religion has begun to adopt this idea, but the problem of religious exclusivity cannot be resolved through religious tolerance entirely.

Because though it somehow gives place for the coexistence of other religions, however, cannot accept the religious equality in the real sense and there is the possibility to treat other religions as an inferior religion[4]. A biased mind can't evaluate the religious doctrine/beliefs with impartiality. Hence it leads to the biased

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[1] Plantinga (2000), j. Gellman (2000), is the proponent of exclusivism.

[2]. If we look to the past, religion was used by the king to expand their empire. In the 21st century, religion is utilized as a political weapon for acquiring political power and has become a source of vote bank politics.

[3] Like Christianity and Islam, other religions are also more or less suffer from religious exclusivity.

[4] Plantinga (2000, p-402) accepts that the exclusivity can't be undermined because it comes inheritably form the parents "The religion one's parents raised one in will almost always be exclusivist. The home religion will teach that it is true and that other religions are false to the extent that the latter clash with the home religion."

judgment of other religions. It is very much essential to the practitioner of religion as well as religionists that they will investigate religious ideology unbiasedly, which is not possible in exclusivism.[5]

Vivekananda rightly pointed out that religion is about mutual acceptance but not tolerance. Religious tolerance implied that one religion is being superior to other religions and allowing other inferior religions to exist. The idea of the dominance of one religion over religions still exists though there is religious tolerance. In mutual acceptance of religions, there is no superiority and inferiority; some truth inherently exists in every religion. All religions are true or closer to the truth in some way. There should be universal love and compassion to each other's religious tradition.

ii) Religious diversity and contradictory thought

Religious diversity sometimes works as a threat to inter-religious dialogue. The people of different religious traditions have different religious belief and opinion. Every religionist should acknowledge the fact that there are certain beliefs exist in religion which are contradictory to each other (for example in Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism wine is forbidden in religious place but in Christianity wine is necessary for the church). Each religion has a different set of beliefs, different ritual, mythology, and philosophy. In Hindu religious tradition, Cow is worshiped as the sacred mother whereas, for other religious traditions (i.e., Islam and Christianity) Beef-eating is part of their religion. Human cannibalism of Christianity is a dogma for Hinduism, and phallic worship of Hinduism is horrible for Christianity. Major religions have not only differ in their culture, tradition but also have a contradictory ontological claim. The Bible says that human beings are the offshoot of sin (according to Adam and Eve story) on the other hand, Upanishad defines human beings as "Amritasya Putra"(holy child of God). For Buddhism, nothing is permanent in the earth; there is no soul, no god, whereas other religions have quite opposite world view. These are the beliefs not only different from each other but contradictory as well. Some of the ideas are due to dogma and some of them due to their different view of their ontology. All most all religions rely on one kind of source, namely testimony[6]of their religion (a major source of contradictory beliefs). If we look at the history of religions, then we can find that all the religious riots happened in the past because of the contradictory beliefs of different religions and the tendency to showing the superiority on others (exclusivity) or attempt for religious conversion. It is often found that they fight with each other for upholding their own beliefs and take the life of others without any hesitation (i.e., Religious riots, mob lynching, and terrorism).

As we have seen that there are inconclusive thoughts in religion, then the inevitable question may emerge that how inter-religious dialogue can be then possible at all? Which belief is true, and which one is false? Moreover, how can we decide that someone's religious convictions are based on a reasonable justification but not religious dogma? What is the reality behind these beliefs and how far these beliefs are justifiable? Another inevitable question may raise here that if there are religious diversity and indecisive ideology of different religion, then how interreligious dialogue can be possible? Two contradictory thought or ideology ('A' and '−A') will always oppose to each other, then how can it be possible that they will work together?

One can argue that all the religious dogma and superstition exist in the religion because of the failure of rationalization of religious faith. The religious practitioners were not applying their reason and cannot differentiate between Good faith and Bad faith. However, this approach might not help us to resolve all the problems, every religious faith (including bad faith or dogma) is supported by reason, and the practitioner gives justification for their belief. All of these problems are a by-product of religion, for dealing with the above problem, we need a different approach.

Belief, Faith, and Reason

If we look at the history of religion, then we can find that religionists preach a religious faith, latter the believer of that particular religion follow that religious ideology either blindly or applied the reason selectively or biasedly. People stock to their religious faith so badly that they cannot enforce their reason for distinguishing, which is against humanity. When a humanist oppose that religious faith, the practitioner takes it as an attack to their religion without questioning their religion, whether it goes against humanity or not. The Practitioner of religion believes first to a religious idea then apply their reason biasedly (belief guided reason) which leads to them into the position that they cannot differentiate that what they believe is whether grounded in dogma or superstition and start arguing in support of that particular faith/ideas. Sometimes it seems plausible to others due

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[5] It is often found in the multi-religious society that minority religions are marginalized by the majority of religion.

[6] Includes religious text, doctrine, written or unwritten claims, and religious preachers verbal testimony, Testimonial claims(there are exceptions) are not completely apt and reliable hence needs justification for their validity

to blind faith, and people believe it without analyzing its pros and cons. as a result, the religion became a victim of spreading religious communalism and mob lynching.

This approach is not going to help us to address the problem completely, because different people may have a different religious opinion and have justification for their belief. Indeed, it will help the people to think in divergent ways and come out from their dogmatic slumber, the question remains unanswered that how to deal with two contradictory religious ideas. What is the maxim for resolving the issue?

One possible response to the above questions maybe the idea of religious pluralism which holds the view that all religions are equally true. If religions are the way for knowing the truth, then all religions are equally closer to the truth. There is no superiority and inferiority among religion. All religions are equally important. (Chaturvedi 2016, hick 1989, 2003,) Every religion has the same destination though they adopt different paths. All the followers of the religion are co-passenger but not a competitor. "All Religions have partial truth, and there is no such religion which can claim for absolute truth."(Anonymous source) It holds the view that despite religious diversity, interreligious dialogue can be possible. Let us see how it can be possible with the help of an example. In a family, different members have a different belief, thought, opinion, but they all live together, acknowledge diversity by understanding each other. They are not allowing or tolerating each other instead; they accept each other with intense love like that all religion can exist within the society despite their religious differences.

Though Religious pluralism put enough effort to address the above problem, it becomes partially successful in giving a satisfactory account to these problems. Religious pluralism seems implausible to address the problem of diversity. Because it has failed to answer the question of how it can be possible that two contradictory theology or doctrine can be true at the same time. As we know that both A and −A cannot be true together, otherwise it will be a violation of the law of contradiction. The major contradictory claim of religion came from one source that is ontological problems of religion. Every religion has its own way of perception of reality. Therefore they opposed to each other. It seems there is no objective solution to this problem. Though there are various arguments proposed by religionists but none of them are quite convincing. (Vivekananda 1992, p-18, Radhakrishnan 1967, p-133, 1927, p-18)[7]. The religious doctrines are constructed in such a way that it will be challenging to have a collective agreement between major religions and give an objective solution to the problem of diversity.

iii) Religious Dogma, Superstition, and Terrorism

If someone looks critically towards religion, then one can easily find that the major religions of the world are still suffering in some religious dogma and superstition. There are certain religious diversities grounded on dogma and superstition itself. Every religion has to make perfect their religion as much as possible. Major religions might not agree that their religion is indulged in any religious dogma and superstition. However, the reality is that it is always there in every religion. Vivekananda always criticized the religious dogma and superstition, and that is reflected in his writings. I quote

"To believe blindly is to degenerate the human soul. Be an atheist if you want, but do not believe in anything unquestionable … stand up and reason out, having no blind faith, religion is the question of being and becoming…"(Vivekananda, p-216, 1882)

If we look at the history, then we can easily find that no religion is free-from violence activities (for example, riots, terrorism, and mass killing, so and so forth), these problems have been occurring due to religious dogma and superstition. Vivekananda was recognized that religion has both positive and negative outcome, as he pointed out in his ideal of a universal religion that "The intensest love that humanity has ever known has come from religion, and the most diabolical hatred that humanity has known has also come from religion. The noblest words of peace that the world has ever heard have come from men on the religious plane, and the bitterest denunciation that the world has ever known has been uttered by religious men. The higher the object of any religion and the finer its organization, the more remarkable are its activities…."(Vivekananda.p-1, 1907).

There are some lope holes in every religion, which has the inherent tendency to give rise to violence and religious absolutism.

There are two possible approaches for inter-religious dialogue to deal with the above problems. These are

a) The internal approach: - there is an inner truth in every religion-(spirituality). Many people may think differently, feel differently, seeking God differently, but there is one inner truth of every religion or one certainty for all that is spirituality. Therefore this aspect of religion may be helpful to unite other religion for dealing with the above problem. The internal approach argues that solving the ontological problem will help to address all other problems of humanity.

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[7] The arguments for pluralism and their failure is summarized by Vibha Chaturvedi (2016) in the article "philosophical implication of religious pluralism."

b) The External approach: - unlike the internal approach, focused on the pragmatic aspect of religion and looked for solving the external problem of the universe like social and environmental issues instead of the ontological question. This approach has a broader perspective because it includes all kinds of religion and non-religious organization (i.e., humanist, atheist, and agnostics) for a discussion on the current problem of the universe. It argues that there can be disagreement on the explanation of reality (i.e., god, soul and liberation) however, the current challenges for humanity in the world unite everyone to work because the problems have affected everyone irrespective of religious and non-religious people.

Peace, human dignity and social progress

Despite all kinds of diversity, there are some collective agreements of every religion. Every religion has some core teaching which would not contradict to each other and very much essential for humanity. The core teachings of religion are the building blocks of their religion on which their entire belief system is based, i.e., Compassion, unconditional love, peace are the core teachings of every religion (popularly called oneness of religion). Vivekananda called these core values are the inner truth of every religion. Despite different tradition, faith, and belief, every religion will agree on the core teachings of the religion. i.e., address the global problem like terrorism, Environmental issue, and social justice are the common goal of every religion which unites them to work together. All religions are the soldier of humanity and always try to remove all kind of evil from society. To establish global peace, respect for human dignity and protect the sanctity of religion is the aim of inter-religious-dialogue.

Major religionists argue that we have to consider the 1ˢᵗ condition only because there is a limitation in the 2ⁿᵈ condition that the dialogue is possible as long as the problems exist. So we have to give importance to the internal approach only and which will also address the external problem of the universe later. (Grunge, 2011).

However, there is a synthesis between the two approaches in Vivekananda philosophy. He advocated that religion must have inclusiveness in its nature rather than exclusivity because exclusivity always leads towards discrimination and disharmony, but inclusiveness always try to bind together and bring familiarity among all the religions. (Vivekananda 1992)

Inclusiveness of religion and integrity within diversity

Vivekananda believes that religious diversity can be helpful for humanity, though there are differences in religion that does not mean they are contradictory to each other, there is harmony within the diversity of all religion. As Vivekananda pointed out that the photograph of an object from the different side looks different, but it is the same object like that, different religions may have different faith but they are looking for the same reality from a different perspective. Vivekananda proposes the idea of a universal religion which believes that there is some-inter-connecting factor exist in every religion like peace, unconditional love and compassion.

Universal religion does not mean there will be one mythology, philosophy, rituals, but in fact, it is the beauty of a religion that the diversity of different religions can give food for different minds. The different mind has different religious conviction. Therefore, it is not possible for any religion to satisfy all at the same time ;(Vivekananda 1892) religious diversity is required for satisfying religious conviction. The motto of IRD should not be religious conversion. Vivekananda in his address at the final session of parliament of religion criticized the idea of religious conversion, as he rightly pointed out that "Do I wish that Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. DO I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? The Christian is not to become Hindu or a Buddhist, Buddhist, nor Hindu become a Christian. However, each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his law of growth". (Vivekananda, p-11 1989)Universal religion does not mean there will be one religion, but there is no problem to follow the core values, i.e. (compassion, justice, truthfulness, nonviolence so and so forth.) in their religions.

II. CONCLUSION

Everyone is independent to believe what they believe, but it is equally important to think that what is the justification behind their belief and what is the relevance for holding that belief? Religion is not a matter of mere belief, but it also provides justification, and one should be counter-intuitive before accepting any religious claim. The objective of every religion should be overcome the religious dogma and address the real issue of humanity instead of supporting a dogmatic belief through interpretation because of their religious prejudice conviction. The religionists must have concerned that the problems to which they are dealing with, is a real problem or a pseudo-problem and if it is a real problem then what its relevance is? Which one is the more worth asking, the medieval questions, or the current issue of humanity? I am optimistic that the contemporary problem can be sort-out through religion itself only. Because of the deviation from core values of religion, the above problem arises; therefore, every religion has the duty to protect their core teaching of religion and remove the obstacle through inter-religious-dialogue.

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