Interreligious Harmony and Social Engagement

Fazrin Huda[*] Mahmuda Islam[**]

Abstract: This paper intends to analyze various aspects and purposes of interreligious dialogue. It focuses on the concept of harmony in various religions and faiths. This paper shows how this harmony can work as a weapon in conflict resolution. This article also emphasizes the social engagement by different classes of people and recommends how various social activities can contribute in promoting religious harmony through interreligious dialogue for the establishment of sustainable peace and harmony.

Introduction

According to G. Wattas Cunningham- "Mankind is incurably religious. Whenever on the face of the earth man is found and at whatever level of civilization he may happen to be, he commonly has his religious beliefs and practices."[1] Every religion of the world advocates peace, harmony and unity. But it is very unfortunate that today our world is pervaded with conflicts, hatred, enmity, hypocrisy, jealousy, selfishness, mistrust etc. Almost everywhere the situation is getting worse due to constant war and aggression. It should be noted here that people around the world are facing these problems not with different faiths and religions; in fact they are dealing the problems with the followers of these religions. So the followers of different faiths and religions should develop a constructive and good understanding among themselves. Because in this situation if we fail to understand different religions in their proper perspectives, it is quite impossible to dream of a placid society free from all kinds of disorder and chaos. This unity and understanding can be possible through an effective interreligious dialogue which in turn will promote religious harmony. It is not the armament, not the war rather it is the feasible interfaith dialogue which can eradicate all kinds of vice existing in this universe. Today it is commonly possessed that interreligious dialogue is auspicious and indispensable and should ameliorated as much as possible.[2]

Research Methodology

The article has been prepared with the assistance of secondary data including various books, research articles, and journals. This paper also focuses various speeches and lectures given by various scholars and religious personages. The objectives of the article are as follows-

[*]   Professor, Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

[**] MPhil Researcher, Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

To acquire a clear concept of interreligious dialogue and its purposes.

To find out the link between interreligious dialogue and harmony.

To explore how various social activities can promote religious harmony through interreligious dialogue.

About Interreligious Dialogue

Christmas Humphreys writes in one of his books, "…perhaps very rightly, that no one religion can be properly understood without studying all or at least two. A comparative approach enables us to understand a religion better by singling out those common essential principles which seem to underlie all religions despite important differences amongst in respect of terminology, viewpoints and motivation."[3] And this kind of understanding through comparative approach can be possible through an effective interfaith dialogue.

Every dialogue follows a bipolar process. This process goes through a give and take policy. By this process one party learns something to the other and this does not mean getting biased to another religion and converted to it.[4] Interreligious dialogue is not merely a series of discussions, it is the entire way of thinking, seeing, feeling and reflecting on the religious traditions and perspectives of the partners concerned.[5] Interreligious dialogue is a discussion between the people of different faiths and religions on specific issues with a view to establishing peace and harmony.[6] It should be mentioned at the beginning that the aim of the dialogue is not to establish one universal religion excluding other faiths and religions and the possibility of a dialogue assumes the existence of many religions and yet at the same time it apprehends that as the core truth of all religions is the same, there is a common platform which religion can assemble.[7] Thus interreligious dialogue develops toleration towards other faiths and religions and creates harmony among all the followers of them. As PritibhushanChatterji remarks- "Thus a dialogue is expected to remove fanaticism and intolerance and at the same time it will start a free flow of communication among religions."[8]

Purpose of Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue possesses a great purpose in this world which is torn by deadly conflicts. Interfaith dialogue always advocates toleration, peace and harmony. It never denigrates any religion being biased to a specific religion. It always tries to make people understand that despite several differences the core points of all religions are the same. Ninian Smart emphasizes on the purpose of Interreligious dialogue. His remarks- "The purpose of the dialogue which follows is not to settle abstruse philosophical questions about Prime Movers and Necessary Beings. It is rather to show the kinds of considerations- the reasons which are relevant in religious discussions. It is to show how the great religions can differ and agree upon principles."[9]

Interreligious dialogue works for peace building and conflict resolution among the followers of different faiths and religions. We are facing deadly conflicts, wars, armaments in every single day. And yes it is interreligious dialogue which can save the world from all these vices and can help in disappearing fanaticism. This type of dialogue is so much significant that it has the power to strengthen inter-personal

communication among the followers. Raimundo Panikara, who is considered as the 'apostle of interreligious dialogue' also, emphasizes on the purpose of interreligious dialogue and he rightly remarks: "The aim of interreligious dialogue understands. It is not to win over the other or to come to a total agreement or a universal religion. The ideal is communication in order to bridge the gulfs of mutual ignorance and misunderstanding between the different cultures of the world, letting them speak out of their own insights in their own languages."[10]

If a person knows the religious teachings, concept and values of other religions, there will grow respect and high regard towards other religions and cultures of the world inside him. He will always advocate peace and harmony not conflict. As Pritibhushan Chatterji says- "... It is necessary that the followers should make an active effort to understand one another. For this they should initiate some kind of dialogue. The purpose of the dialogue is not to settle differences by Philosophical arguments, nor to find out the common factors by some kind of intellectual abstraction- the purpose is to agree to see and understand the differences and yet to grant the differences are not great enough as to blur the common points."[11]

So the main purpose of a dialogue is to establish harmony among religions. It will help to remove the bad habit of unnecessary attacking and degarding other faiths and religions which is a common characteristic persists in many people and it will make people understand the truth lying in several religions.[12] Concept of Unity in Several Religions and Faiths

We all believe that –"Religions for Peace". Every single religion of this world is a good patronizer of peace and harmony. So why are we dealing with violence which are being occurred in the name of religion? A group of people are making terror in the name of religion to achieve their political goals, to meet their hidden diplomatic issues and to establish their own ideology and faith in the society. So it is necessary to know the concept of religious harmony and unity in several religions and faiths which will make interreligious dialogue successful. As Swami Nikhilananda says- "Different religions can learn from one another. Thus Hinduism can teach the art of meditation, Christianity social service, Buddhism inner peace through desirelessness, Judaism justice and righteousness and Islam equality and brotherhood."[13] The concept of unity and harmony in various religions and faiths are as follows:

Hinduism

The true concept of unity and harmony is found in a speech of Swami Vivekananda at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago where he said- "If any one hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, 'Brother yours is an impossible hope'? God forbid… Do I wish that the Christian would become a Hindu or Buddhist to become a Christian? But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth."[14]

Islam

Islam is such a religion which always advocates harmony, unity and brotherhood. It never supports any action which is being caused by force and violence. In his last

sermon, Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) said: "So beware, do not stray from the path pf righteousness after I am gone. All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has a superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black or nor a black has any superiority over a white except by piety (taqwa) and good action."[15]

Christianity

Christianity gives utmost importance on interreligious dialogue. As Archbishop Angelo Fernandes said- "To engage in dialogue is to be part of God's continuing work among us and our fellow human beings in all places and in all ages. As Christ continues to forgive and reconcile us to the Father and to one another we enter into fellowship with peoples of other faiths, so that they too can share in God's gracious gift of a truly human community."[16]

Buddhism

If one comes to know the concept and fundamental ideals of Buddhism, he will find that Buddhism always advocates peace and non-violence.As Professor Niru Kumar Chakma puts it- "In its fundamental principles and ideas Buddhism not only approximates to advanced scientific thought and thus satisfies the queries of a scientific mind, but also is a best suited to the practical wants of present day and most helpful in reducing tension and conflict that threaten world peace."[17]

Sikhism

Sikhism emphasizes mostly on interfaith dialogue and gives topmost priority on interreligious harmony. As Guru Nanak said- "Religion consistent not in mere words. He who looked on all men as equal is religious Religion consistent not in wandering to tombs or places of cremation or sitting in attitudes of contemplation. Religion consistent not in wandering in foreign countries or in bathing at places of pilgrimages. Abide pure amidst the impurities of the world. Thus shall thou find the way of Religion."[18]

Jainism

It is Jainism which left no stone unturned to deter violence from all possible sources. Among all other sources, attachment and intention are considered as the main sources of violence in Jainism. [19] Attachment and intention helps to raise violence. Thus Jainism always advocates non-violence, peace and harmony.

Taoism

Taoism always patronizes non-violence and harmony. As David S. Noss and John B. Noss rightly said- "The Tao is emphatically a way of harmony, integration and cooperation. Its natural tendency is toward peace, prosperity and health."[20]

Zoroastrianism

The key theme of Zoroastrianism is ethical purity and dedication. The elementary ethical attributes that men are to engrain are good thought, good word and good deed.[21]

Confucianism

The core teachings of Confucianism are Humanism. According to Confucius, the common good was to be secured by the attainment of five cardinal virtues: "jen (the root), yi or righteousness by justice (the trunk), li, or the religious and moral ways of acting (the branches), chih (zhi), or wisdom (the flower), and hisn (xin), or faithfulness (the fruit).[22] Confucious always emphasized on filial piety (inherent love and loyalty to the family). The importance of filial piety can be found in the following message- "By the principle of filial piety the whole world can be made happy and all calamities and dangers can be averted." [23]

Judaism

The appeal of Judaism is based on strong ethical traits of righteousness and justice. As the Torah insists- "Justice, Justice shall you pursue." "Appoint judges and officials for your tribes….and they shall govern people with due justice. You shall not judge unfairly."[24]

Caodaism

The Caodaists outlook towards love, unity, peace and religious harmony is reflected in the following message- "I would like you to be united forever. The new doctrine that I teach aims at bringing you to one community of interest and living. Be united forever by my will and propagate the peace and mutual love to the whole world." [25]

From the above discussion it can be said that all the religions and faiths of this world patronize love, unity, harmony and humanity. And all these ethical approaches will make interreligious dialogue successful in every possible ways. As PritibhushanChatterji remarks- "We conclude then that religions can meet, and this meeting can possible through a friendly dialogue." [26]

Social Engagement

A society can be changed in two ways [27]

> by force
> by non-violence

It seems a social change through force may come so quickly but it will be temporary and in fact no real peace and harmony will be established. If we apply non-violence to change a society it may work slowly but we will be able to see the inner peace and harmony within the society which will be permanent and in returnsit will give birth a favourable society to live in. According to Pritibhushan Chatterji, "The followers of a religion may take up two extreme attitudes towards other religions:

> an attitude of hostility
> an attitude of co-operation and understanding." [28]

The people who possess the former attitude always underestimate other religions and faiths. They don't have such intention to co-operate with other religions and faiths. The people of the latter outlook possess an open mind towards other religions and faiths. They are so curious to know other religions and very respectful towards them. They are ready to share their own religious beliefs and offer others to share their

beliefs also. This is all about mutual understanding; this is all about co-operation which in fact leads to the path of interreligious harmony and social engagement. It is notable to mention here that this interreligious dialogue can contribute a lot to promote social justice and change. This interreligious dialogue will involve social workers in individuals or groups who will work for politics, racism, religion and culture which are the core points of social conflicts. The power of interreligious dialogue can be expressed in following words-

 "Interreligious dialogue as a bridging mechanism through which social workers in clinical, other direct practice, organizer, activist and other roles across micro-macro practice spectrum can engage with people in conflict to advance advocacy, justice and social change." [29]

Interreligious dialogue holds such capability which can connect social activities from all possible ways. These social activities with the association of interreligious dialogue will give birth social peace and harmony which is intensely expected by every society. As Professor Niru Kumar Chakma rightly puts it- "A dialogue may be a precondition of removing bigotry, fanaticism and intolerance. Thereby, a free flow of communication among the peoples belonging to different religions may be expected that will further strengthen the fabric of social bond. In fact, through dialogue, tolerance and mutual acceptance are equally given importance so that cross-cultural understanding can be promoted." [30]

Recommendations

A teacher is a person who can influence a student the most. So teaching is the best medium to plant the seeds of religious harmony in the minds of the students. The concept of interreligious dialogue through religious education in governmental and non-governmental schools must be taught within a government approved framework at least. The syllabuses for religious studies or ethics, or the content of 'religious education' should be determined by both government and religious institution." [31] To ensure religious harmony the authority should insert the concept of interreligious dialogue in the contents or in the syllabuses of educational institution.

Culture is a changing force of a society and human beings are mostly influenced by culture. We should enrich our literature, our poetry, our songs, our dramas, our films by talking about interreligious dialogue which can bring about a revolutionary change in society.

Human beings are biased with religion by nature. People try to abide by the speeches given by any priest, monk, imam, clergyman and such religious personalities of several religions. But it is really very unfortunate that sometimes it is seen religions are being misinterpreted by them. So to remove such false views the authority should take proper initiatives so that the religious personages can join interreligious dialogue in order to spreading the actual message of religious harmony.

Print and media can play a significant role in social changing. We are getting updated in every single day through these sources. So it is print and media which can spread religious harmony by making people understand about the importance of interreligious dialogue through television, radio, newspapers, articles, journals etc. It

should be noted here that print and media should not be fanatic or biased towards any specific religion.

The most essential part to promote interreligious dialogue is the engagement of the youth. Yes, it is the young generation who can contribute the most to make interreligious harmony successful in society. In this context community based program or work would be most effective. The youngsters can involve themselves in voluntary works. They can bring about processions, raise social awareness through campaigns, and organize public speaking sessions and cultural programs regarding religious harmony.

So it can be said that if every classes of people come forward and work for interreligious dialogue, sustainable peace and harmony will be established in every corner of the world.

Conclusion

The great Bengali scholar, spiritual leader and philosopher Dr. Mahanambrata Brahmachari said- "There is hardly any difference to be found between a good Christian, a good Muslim, a good Hindu, a good Buddhist and a good Jew. The reason is that what constitutes and greatness of human being is one and identical all over the work."[32]

The aim of every religion is to ensure social harmony. Interreligious dialogue is such a platform which opens the doors for opportunity to spread religious harmony in an organized way. Interreligious dialogue can contribute to the eradication of misunderstanding and false views. Because through the discussions of fair-minded experts from different religions and faiths will surely help to remove misinterpretation of religions and establish common ethical teachings for social harmony. So it is the responsibility of the political, religious, governmental and non-governmental leaders and mostly the young generation to engage them to work for religious harmony through interreligious dialogues for sustainable peace in society.

Notes & References

1   G. Wattas Cunnigham, *Problems of Philosophy: An Introduction,* London, Henry Holt and Company, 1924, p. 399.

2   Amarjit Singh Sethi and Reinhard Pummer (edt.),*Comparative Religion*, New Delhi, Vikash Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1979, P. 6.

3   Christmas Humpreys, *Studies in a Middle Way*, London, Curzon Press, 1984, p. 15.

4   Pritibhushan Chatterji, *Studies in Comparative Religion,* Calcutta, Das Gupta and Co. Private Ltd., 1971, pp. 422-423.

5   K.N. Islam, 'Interreligious Dialogue: Some Rules and Assumptions'*, Dialogue & Alliance,* Vol. 25, No. 2, 2011, p. 3.

6   Professor Dr. Niru Kumar Chakma and Dr. A. K. M. Salahuddin (edt..), *Interreligious Dialogue: Chance for Peace,* Dhaka, Goethe-Institute, 2004, p. 66.

7   Pritibhushan Chatterji, *Op. Cit.,* p. 421.

8   *Ibid.,* p. 424.

9   Ninian Smart, *World Religions: A Dialogue*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 1.

10   Raimundo Panikara, *The Interreligious Dialogue*, New York, Paulist press, 1978, p. 115.

11   Pritibhushan Chatterji, *Op. Cit.,* p. 422.

12   *Ibid.,* p.424.

13   *Proceedings of the Parliament of Religions* (held in Cacutta 1963-64), p.403.

14   *The Complete Work of Swami Vivekananda,* Vol. 1, Mayavati Memorial Edition, AdvaitaAshrama, Calcutta, Twenty-second Impression, 1994, p. 10.

15   Al-Bukhari: 1623, 1626, 6361

16   Archbishop Angelo Fernandes, *"Dialogue in the Context of Asian Realities",* Vol. 4, VIDYAMOTI, October 1991, p. 547.

17   Professor Dr. Niru Kumar Chakma, *Op. Cit.,* pp.53-54.

18   Amarjit Singh Sethi, *Op. Cit*., pp. 2-3.

19   N.K. Singhi, *Ideal, Ideology and Practice: Studies in Jainism*, Jaipur, Printwell Publishers, 1987, p. 214.

20   David S. Noss and John B. Noss, *Man's Religions*, New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984, p. 237.

21   Kedar Nath Tiwari, *Comparative Religion,* Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass, 1983, p. 93.

22   David S. Noss, *Op. Cit*., p. 271.

23   G. Buhler (translated), *Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 25, The Laws of Manu,* Oxford, Claredon Press, 1886, pp. 484, 496-498.

24   Deuteronomy: 16, 18-21, 9.

25   Nguyen Long Thanh, *The Path of Cao Dai Discipline,* Ho Chi Minh City, Phuong Dong Publishing House, 1970, p. 95.

26   Pritibhushan Chatterji, *Op. Cit*., p. 428.

27   Professor Dr. Niru Kumar Chakma, *Op. Cit*., p. 59.

28   Pritibhushan Chatterji, *Op. Cit.,* p. 426.

29   Adrienne Dessel Mary, E. Rogge and Sarah B. Garlington, 'Using Intergroup Dialogue to Promote Social Justice and Change', *Social Work,* Volume 51, No. 4, October 2006, p.303.

30   Professor Dr. Niru Kumar Chakma, *Op. Cit*., p. 17.

31   Witold Tulasiewicz and Cho-Yee To (edt.), *World Religions and Educational Practice*, London, Cassell, 1993, p. 21.

32   Quoted from the lecture, *International Fellowship Assembly*, London 1935.