

Some Thoughts on Interfaith Dialogue

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Interreligious Dialogue; photo, Cetrta Kenney

Interfaith dialogue is becoming commonplace these days and many organizations are pursuing it in view of interreligious tensions in many countries of the world. Post 9/11, when Islam came under attack and tensions between Christians and Muslims increased, many organizations embraced a dialogue mentality.

In India too the decade of the 1980s saw the eruption of communal violence and several major riots took place from Moradabad in beginning of the decade to Bhagalpur and to Mumbai until the beginning of the nineties. Thus Indians also realized the importance of interfaith dialogue and many such meetings took place. I must admit that Indians did not have this tradition and it was Christians who took the main initiative and invited Muslims and Hindus to talk to each other.

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SEEKING DEEPER ENGAGEMENT

However, most of the dialogues tend to be at a very superficial level. We often refer to what is best in our tradition while completely ignoring what is worst in it. Thus all sides praise their own religious tradition, and then disperse, but the problems of suspicion and misunderstanding continue. One wonders, if dialogue is working, why conflict takes place at all. Thus, like other rituals we also perform one more ritual and we feel our duty has been done.

First of all, interfaith dialogue has to become a much deeper encounter between faiths. It must bring out not only the good and desirable elements in tradition but also the problem areas with the conflicts which occur due to these problem areas, and how to resolve these problem areas. Interfaith dialogue should be followed by an attempt at conflict transformation, in order to make it more useful.

The work of conflict transformation also needs a deeper engagement with the causes of conflict so as to discover ways to resolve it. Interfaith dialogue per se may be useful, but it can become much more so if there is this deeper engagement and the sincere attempt to understand the causes of conflict. Then dialogue might bring resolution to conflict through mutual cooperation.

Interreligious dialogue also needs some strict discipline. It requires a true religious attitude, by which I mean the acceptance of the truth of all religions. Any sense of superiority about one's own religion, however subtle, defeats

the very purpose of dialogue. This sense of superiority finds ways of asserting itself through our ego, individual as well as collective. One must realize that no religion can ever be based on falsehood, though their faith traditions may differ for any number of reasons.

Maulana Azad, a great Muslim theologian and commentator of the Qur'an, also realized this and maintained, quoting scriptures of all great religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity, that the core of religion – what he calls Deen – is same but what differs is customs, traditions and legal practices – what he describes as shari'ah. These differences, he maintains, are not due to different core teachings but to the origins and manifestations of these religions in different cultures. Thus differences in cultures play a greater role in conflict than do different teachings.

We often miss this point and find in these differences causes of conflict. Also, we are so much lost in rituals that we completely miss the spirituality of each faith tradition. A great seer like Ramakrishna realized the commonality of spirituality by practicing all three religions, i.e. Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, and found no significant difference in their spirituality. Both Azad and Ramakrishna, as great religious thinkers, understood the problem at a much deeper level and after serious engagement with the theologies of these religions.

MISUSE OF RELIGION

One should also understand that religion and religious communi-

ties are two different entities. Religion resides in the theological domain whereas religious communities exist in secular space with secular interests, and what conflicts are not religious theologies but the secular interests of these communities. Often the clashes of communal interests are projected as clashes of religions or religious theologies.

A good example of this is Samuel Huntington's much discussed book *The Clash of Civilizations*. In fact there is absolutely no clash between civilizations; it was a clash between the USA and the Arab nations during the Bush presidency which was projected by Huntington as clash of civilizations. In India, it is the political interests of a section of Hindus and Muslims or Christians which clash and these are often projected as clashes between Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

Also, religion is often misused by vested interests, with the result that the misuse of religion becomes part of the problem. What is often discussed is politicized religion rather than religion by itself. There are number of examples of this in history as well as in the contemporary world. The crusades are perhaps the best examples of this. It was not a clash between Christianity and Islam but a fight for political supremacy over Palestine.

Similarly, the Ramjanambhoomi-Babri Masjid issue was in no sense a religious issue. It was purely an attempt to politicize a controversy related to a religious place and the correct place to resolve this controversy was a court of law. The issue was artificially created by

the Sangh Parivar in 1948 by installing the idols of Ram and Sita with a political project in mind. To fulfil the aim of controversy these idols were installed inside the mosque at the dead of the night. Thus the controversy was raked in the late 1980s.

As religion is often politicized in the contemporary world so it has also been politicized in history. And all of that history became part of religion and now we are unable to separate the chaff from the grain, and what is more unfortunate is that we fight on these issues even in the contemporary world. I would like to illustrate this with some examples. One such example is the concept of *jihad*. Some extremist elements among Muslims are grossly misusing it for their own political project.

MISREPRESENTING JIHAD

What is described as *jihad* by these extremist elements is in no sense a Qur'anic discourse. *Jihad* means, as far as the Qur'anic discourse is concerned, nothing more than the strenuous effort to spread good and contain evil. It is in fact more about intellectual efforts and involves no fighting with weapons, though some maintain that this could be a last resort if evil aggression takes a violent form. The Prophet of Islam himself described *jihad* as speaking truth in the face of a tyrannical ruler and to acquire justice for the oppressed.

However, *jihad* came to be grossly misused by many Muslim rulers in history for territorial expansion and every fight with non-Muslim rulers on territorial issues came to be construed as *jihad*.

It is important to note that the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him [PBUH]) himself was forced to fight some battles but he never described them as “*jihad*”. They were described as “*ghazw*” which was the prevalent term in pre-Islamic Arabic also for intertribal raids and battles. Of course there were no major wars in pre-Islamic Arabia and violence was limited to intertribal fights.

Had *jihad* been a war or battle the Prophet (PBUH) would have freely used it, and who could be entitled to use the word *jihad* more than the Prophet himself? But the rulers who grabbed power after the period of khilafat (30 years of rule by the prominent companions of the Prophet) called their mutual fight *jihad*, or they named any fight with a non-Muslim ruler as *jihad*. This constant misuse throughout history had rendered it part of Islamic discourse.

Thus today those who are non-state actors fighting Muslim rulers and killing Muslims and non-Muslims from civil society describe it as *jihad* and those who have no deeper understanding of religious tradition accept it as *jihad*. Even many Muslims are no exception to this. It should be abundantly clear to anyone who tries to engage with Islamic history at deeper levels that the killing of innocent people for political purposes cannot be construed as *jihad* in any sense of the word.

Jihad as such implies only efforts, not weaponry and even if it does supposedly imply weaponry it cannot be permissible to kill innocent members of civil society. From 9/11 until today those who style themselves as *jihad* is

have killed only innocent people. Be it in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iraq they are killing only Muslims, as there are hardly non-Muslims in these countries.

Jihad was never so grossly corrupted as by Al-Qaida and the Taliban in the Afghan-Pakistan region. To describe these killers as “jihadis” is a great insult to the term *jihad* and I say there can be no greater insult to this noble concept which implies peaceful intellectual efforts for the greater good in our conflict torn world. However, politicized jihad of today has become a curse for the peaceful world.

It is in this context that a deeper encounter with our own and other’s religious traditions is necessary and it is in this sense I maintain that superficial dialogues, in which we just mention what is best in our tradition while completely ignoring what is worse, will not help. And such deeper encounters should not be restricted to a few dialogue circles only.

More and more people should be involved, especially through the mass media. Today the media has become a part of the problem rather than the solution. The media hardly takes an interest in interfaith debate. It spreads prejudices about the other rather than enlightens its readers or viewers. The media has not only been commercialized but has also been politicized. There is a great need to involve media personnel in deeper interfaith encounters, in order that a better truth about religion may prevail. Beyond that, interfaith dialogue has to embrace the whole of society.