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INTER-FAITH RELATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

Inter-faith relations mean cordial and meaningful relationship among different religious communities. It includes understanding the faith and practices of others, appreciating the good elements in their culture and valuing the contribution of the people of other faiths towards establishing peace and harmony, restoring justice and the rights of people, and working together for the welfare and equality of all. Religions play an important role in building the nation. Religions are not merely limited to an individuals' faith or set of beliefs and performing rituals. They are closely linked to society, and influence its culture and customs. Religions are powerful in changing the lives of individuals and communities for better or for worse. Leaders of different religions can teach and lead the people to believe and observe superstitions and practise human sacrifices, sati, caste and racial discriminations. They even promote religious and social oppressions. Some of them flare up riots and conflicts between communities and fuel violence and bloodshed. Religions, thus, can threaten the peace and harmony among people and even destroy communities. On the other hand, religions can build a society by teaching good values, liberating people from all sorts of religious, social, and economic oppressions and bringing peace and harmony among communities within a nation. Many of us do not understand the positive and negative power of religions when used by their leaders or politicians for their own gain. A systematic study of religions at home, schools, colleges and the workplace can help the people to know the merits and demerits of religions and to meet the need of building better relations among faith communities. This paper is written to provide information to students who are not specializing in the field of religion, philosophy, or theology but for those who are doing their studies in arts, science, business, technology, etc.

Inter-Faith Relations

Inter-Faith relations can be of different kinds namely Exclusivist, Inclusivist, Pluralist, Exoticist, and Particularist.¹ Inter-Faith Dialogue is not a comparative study of religion but an interplay of different faith experiences with the aim to foster mutual understanding, criticism, enrichment, and communion.² A formal education about religions in educational institutions is another means to enhance inter-faith relations. The need to develop other ways and means to promote relations among religious communities in villages, towns and cities is a great need of the day for the following reasons.

Need for Inter-Faith Relations

Understanding Other Religions

We live amidst people of varied faiths and ideologies. We may like or dislike their way of life and practices. Some of us' might have developed a negative opinion about the religious and social practices of our neighbors and alienated ourselves from our neighbors. Our bias and unwillingness to understand them have hindered the relationship with other local communities. We need to shed away our negative opinions and overcome the bias through a proper study of other religions if we want to develop and strengthen relationship with others. The more we try to understand their beliefs, worship, festivals, and teachings of their religion and culture, the more we can relate with them. Shallow and superficial understanding of religions of others is always dangerous. Understanding of others is a necessity. This does not mean accepting everything they believe and practice without a critical outlook. The true sense of understanding of the religions of others means willingness to learn about their faiths, teachings, and customs, appreciating the good values, accepting them as friends and continuing in cordial relationship with them. The relationship need not be for arguments and debates on the dogmatic aspects of religions. Quite often the trend of arguments can end up in breaking the relationship. One's willingness to see good aspects in other religious communities coupled with love and concern for humanity can strengthen inter-faith relations.

Reforming One's Own Religion

Learning of the religion of others can challenge one's own faith and practices. The knowledge of other religions can create critical reflection on our own religious faith and practices and lead to reform our religion. When Christianity, for example, came to India, it was

challenged by the leaders of Hinduism. Indian languages, culture and music are influencing Christian worship and art even today. Robert de Nobili took several efforts to indigenize Christianity in the Indian soil. But his 'Mission' misunderstood him as if he was compromising with Hinduism. Both his 'Mission' in Europe and the Brahmins in India questioned the genuineness of his indigenization.³ Western missionaries such as William Carey, Caldwell, and G. U. Pope were fascinated by the richness of the Indian languages. They studied Sanskrit and Tamil and compiled grammar and dictionary for these languages and contributed to the translation of the Bible in Indian languages.⁴ Indian Bhakti tradition of Saivism or Vaisnavism influenced the pietism of Christianity and enhanced the spirituality of Indian Christianity. Islamic Sufism influenced Sikhism and Zoroastrianism. Buddhism challenged Hinduism particularly the Varna system and some of its philosophical foundations and practices. Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi were influenced by Christianity so much so that they gave new interpretation to some of the philosophies and practices and brought reforms in Hinduism.⁵ S. Radhakrishnan responded to the criticism of Christian scholars against Hinduism, reinterpreted Indian philosophy and defended Hinduism. Interaction of religions, if taken in a positive sense, can challenge and shape each religion. No religious community is perfect and can claim absolute holiness. Each religious community has to learn from the challenges of the changing context and reform their own religion. Reforming does not mean defending and becoming apologetic. It means evaluating the different aspects of one's religion in a critical way and modifying the philosophies, concepts and customs which are hindrances for promoting true humanism. God values human beings and their lives more than the rituals, laws, customs, and traditions which human beings have created in the name of God and made them as legal requirements. We have made many of our rituals and practices burdensome to people. Jesus Christ criticized the Pharisees and Priests for making Judaism a burden on the people. He pointed out that the Sabbath rest is made for human beings to enjoy relaxation and to refresh once a week and that the human beings are not made for the Sabbath. He reiterated that God prefers mercy, love, and justice than sacrifices and rituals as Hosea and Amos pointed out (Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:25).

Maintaining as well as Risking Identity

Identity is an important social, religious, and political entity for people. Though people are identified by their names, each one of us carries multiple identities in terms of economic,

social, religious, cultural, and linguistic groupings. Economically people are identified as rich, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, poor, and very poor, labourer, coolie, and beggar. Socially people are identified in terms of castes, tribes, race, and gender. Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Parsi, etc., are religious identities. Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Malayalee, Tamil, Kannadiga, Kashmeeri, Telugu, and Oriya are linguistic identities. Each of these different identities attached to an Indian plays a dominant role in different situation depending upon the context. The person uses it as he or she likes it. Others too use someone's identity either complimentarily or derogatively to refer to that person as poor or low caste, or primitive or illiterate. Identity, particularly religious identity, is a sensitive issue. The majority religious community in a country takes pride in their religious identity. The minority religious communities too are concerned about their religious identity because they are unique but are afraid to lose their uniqueness by the domination of majority religious community. Deliberately trying to eliminate the identity of a religious community or suppress it or marginalize it by another religious community hurts the victims and can Arouse their protest or violent reactions. Each one should give due credit to another community and respect the identity of others. Whenever communities come together for relief work in einergency situations, charitable service, or social action, each community should be prepared not to project its identity and not to take the glory for the services. But they should be willing to tolerate, submit and even to risk the identity for the sake of accomplishing equality, justice, and progress of the people. Peace, harmony, and working together for good are more important than our own religious identities. Risking one's identity for a good cause could result in bringing more recognition to such a community.⁶

Identifying the Oppressive and Liberative Forces

Religions teach good values and demand their adherents to practise the teachings. However, in the development of religions over a period, some of the interpretations of the scriptures, traditions, and practices become oppressive. Whoever introduced such oppressive elements and in whatever period in the history, these oppressive elements need attention and careful critique.⁷ For example, the Pharisees and the Sadducees promulgated their own legal codes and introduced wrong interpretations during the time of Jesus, and he had to counter them as they went contrary to the revelation of God to Moses and the Prophets. Sati, gender

discrimination towards women, and caste system are oppressive practices within Hindu traditions. Most of these oppressive elements might have been introduced at some time in the past and were justified as religious requirements. Permission to marry more than one wife to a maximum of four could have been a temporary sanction due to the death of many men in the tribal wars in Arabia during the early Islamic period. Unfortunately, these oppressive elements became normative teachings for the respective religions. In the course of time, however, reformers had emerged to counter such evil elements in different religions, so as to bring back the true spirit of life.

An ongoing identification of the oppressive elements in any given religion is important to challenge it. It is equally important[^] to rediscover the liberative motifs within them in order to develop their liberation theology or philosophy from the scriptural sources and experience of people.⁸ The interactions, like dialogues, can lead the religious communities to identify and recognize the liberative forces within each religion, and to facilitate using them for the purpose of liberation. They can apply the messages of their religion to liberate people from social, economic, cultural, and political oppressions. The interactions of religious communities could lead them to strengthen their vision for liberation and mobilize them to express their solidarity for the poor and the oppressed.

Sharing Information and Acting Together

Information is knowledge and power. The more information we collect and analyze on the issues better can be our decisions and actions. Religious communities should meet periodically and share information about recent happenings in their own religious communities with others. They can inform the forthcoming festivals or special meetings or social services. The problems and difficulties related to the social or economic needs of a religious community can be shared with others; they could also seek the guidance and assistance of other religious communities. Political decisions of the Central and State Governments affecting a particular religious community can be discussed and voices of other religious communities in support of the affected community can be raised. Sharing and discussing the contemporary trends in society or in the world can enlighten the minds of communities and prepare them not to be carried away by wrong news or propaganda and restrain them from becoming furious and indulging in

violence. Listening to the views of others from their point of view and at the interest of the nation (in terms of the common good) can strengthen relationship among communities.

Problems and Prospects for Inter-Faith Relations

Inter-faith relations can be promoted at different levels. Three levels of inter-faith relations can be identified. At the first level, inter-faith relations can be fostered by studying one's own religion and of others either in an educational institution or at a religious centre. This exercise introduces the learners and the learning community to relate with religions intellectually and more critically. The second level is to engage in dialogue with other religions. A deeper study of religions - in terms of their doctrines and practices - can help in dialoguing with others meaningfully. The third level is to involve in socio-political action programmes organized by religious groups to transform the society.

History teaches the need for unity and co-operation among religious communities. History stands witness to a multitude of problems resulting from religious antagonism: the conflict in partitioning India and Pakistan, the ongoing struggles between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East, fighting between Protestants and Roman Catholics in the Northern Ireland, Tamils and Singhalese in Sri Lanka, and among the tribes in Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Sudan are a few events to name. It is estimated that more than 6 million people die every year in different parts of the world because of religious reasons. In spite of several hindrances, it is heartening to note that religious communities in different towns and cities have come together in times of natural calamities, riots, ethnic violence, and other critical periods in the life of the nation. Inter-faith dialogue forums, multi-religious associations, common prayer meetings, etc., have been founded in some places. They conduct peace marches, fund raising programmes for charity, human rights seminars, and involve in fact-finding study of violence against one or other group and send reports to the local government. So much can be achieved and enjoyed if we build better relationships among communities.

There are several problems in promoting and strengthening inter-faith relations. There is a fear and suspicion on the part of religious leaders that the doctrines and uniqueness of their religion and culture would be questioned and marginalized. They could be asked in the process of dialogue to change their interpretation, customs, and rituals. Their power, authority, and

5% of the rich people while 45% are in the middle class and 50% are poor. Many of the poor people are living below the poverty line without having access to the basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. The phenomenon of 'the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer' leads to the perpetuation of poverty, unemployment, bonded labour, debt, malnutrition, and deaths and violence against the landlords, business people, and industrialists. Eradication of poverty and establishing justice for the poor and downtrodden are challenges to religious communities. Growth of religious fundamentalism and cultural imperialism sponsored by political powers backed up by religions threatens the secular fabric and peaceful co-existence of people.

Fulfilling the Teachings of Religion

Each religion, whether it has a written scripture or continues on the basis of oral traditions, has a set of teachings and practices that require the devotees to follow them faithfully. The basic tenet of the teachings of all religions is love of God for humanity, justice and equality, and empowerment of the poor and marginalized. Sometimes what happens in reality is that people pick up only those teachings that suit to their convenience and leave out the other teachings because they demand more rigorous ethical practices. It is easy to accept the teachings of giving alms to the poor or feeding the hungry but it is difficult to work for establishing justice and welfare by addressing the causes of injustice and struggling against the forces perpetuating injustice. It is easy to accept the teaching of dharma but difficult to fight against caste, racial, and gender discriminations. On one side, various religions admire nature or even lead people to worship nature through their teachings. On the other side, forgetting the teachings of their religions, people destroy nature and environment causing ecological problems and threatening the very existence of lives on earth. Trying to show the love of God on the one side and making chemical weapons on the other side reveal our inconsistent stand in fulfilling the teachings of religions. Selective approach to the teachings of one's religions, if not for liberation and empowerment of the powerless, is dangerous because it is usually based on one's convenience. Theology and praxis should identify and uphold the liberative and oppressive elements of the teachings of each religion vis-a-vis the oppressive aspects found in the same teachings. The positive values of religious messages should be passed on to children by their parents at home. Furthermore, the parents and the religious leaders in temples, mosques, churches, and

gurudwaras should take effort to teach the liberative and empowering dimensions of their religions. Of course, the mass media can play a vital role in promoting the positive elements of the religious teachings.

Vision for Nation Building

Building the nation with the values of peace, harmony, equality, and economic development demands the co-operation of all religious communities and different political parties. In India, the pre-independent period witnessed the growing spirit of achieving freedom and commitment to the causes of the nation. The recent trends in our political arena, however, show the declining spirit of patriotism and growing fanaticism of regionalism, communalism, and religious fundamentalism. RSS and VHP promote their ideology of Hindutva, by irrationally demanding that the Muslims must go to Pakistan or Arabia and the Christians to Rome. There are, of course, separatist tendencies among one or the other group, though it is not shared by any significant majority. Different religious outfits propagate for different kinds of nationalism such as religious nationalism, cultural nationalism and political nationalism emphasizing their one-sided ideology, which can divide the nation and lead it into disintegration. The main thrust of patriotism for a united, secular and democratic nation of India is under threat due to religionizing politics.

The impact of globalization is another factor that influences our younger generation not to stay in India and build it up.⁹ Rather, many scientists, computer engineers, technicians, nurses, etc., are leaving India to serve other nations. Concern and commitment for this nation among the present generation seem to be declining. This is mainly due to the fact that they could not get employment, enough salaries and challenges in their profession in India. An attitude of indifference to, the problems of our society is increasingly present in them. Politicians tend to divide people for their own vested interests on the basis of dangerous foundations such as communal politics, ethnic violence, etc., which ultimately destroy unity, peace, and harmony among the people. We need to regain the vision for our nation and work to develop the true spirit of patriotism if we want to counter the evil forces. Inter-faith Dialogue on political ideologies and issues can enlighten the minds of religious leaders as well as their followers. They can instruct their own communities to have proper perspectives on the integration of the nation to prosper socially, economically, and politically

Agents of Transformation: Religious Institutions

In discussing the inter-faith relations for transformation, we should not forget that God is the main agent of transformation. God is the God of creation, orderliness, justice, and progress. God wants the unity of people and peace to be actualized. Religions teach us the way God acted in the history of humanity to transform faith, traditions, rituals and social life of people. God expects the followers to carry out the mission of transformation continuously and extends the power to the people to achieve it.

One of the powerful religious institutions, besides social, economic, and political ones, is the worshipping centres and ministerial training institutions of religions. Temples, churches, mosques, gurudwaras, synagogues, etc., are not merely centres of worship and performing rituals! Their mission is not limited to preaching and teaching of their doctrines and philosophies and charitable services. They are the agents of transforming their own communities. They have tremendous responsibility to build the nation with their doctrinal teachings, human and financial resources, and net-working services. The authorities of these centres should ask themselves the question of using their, resources and power to struggle against injustice, empower the poor and marginalized, protect the environment, and bring peace and harmony among the people. Christians for example, should not forget the insights of the Bible that the churches are to be dynamic forces to transform the people and the society the Gospels they accept as normative are holistic and demand social transformation. Why should we go on building temples, churches mosques, dharga, gurudwaras, etc., either in small or mega size in a private land or public land, on the roadside or on river banks or mountains? What is the use of such a structure for the socio-economic progress of the nation? Mere multiplication of these centres cannot transform the society magically. Direct involvement of the leaders and their religious communities in day-to-day affairs can only help the transformational process.

Institutions such as schools, colleges, and technical institutes are established and managed by the temples, churches, mosques, etc Unfortunately, commercial gains dominate the establishment of many an institution. Some of those institutions even promote religious fundamentalist among students through courses, worship, and extracurricular activities and justify caste discrimination and communalism. Some others want to provide various opportunities through their educational institutions to their own religious communities. They like

to preserve their culture, strengthen their religious faith and rituals, and employ exclusively the members of their community. Whatever be their objectives, it is important that these institutions foster relationship among religious communities. They should not function to divide the people, endanger peace and harmony, and promote oppression and discrimination' Instead, they should contribute for the promotion of inter-faith relations through their educational programs.¹⁰

Conclusion

Developing inter-faith relations in our society may seem to be a difficult task but it is not impossible if we educate and train the people through proper channels and educational institutions. Each institution may introduce, for this purpose, at least the following programs for their students to achieve the three levels of inter-faith relations stated earlier.

- Offering at least value based courses, if not a degree program on religion and philosophy, to introduce the history and teachings of religions, the importance of secularism and humanism and the value of cultures. Such courses could lead the students, on the one hand, to understand and appreciate other religions and, on the other, reform their own faith, tradition, and spirituality.
- Organizing inter-faith dialogue meetings and inviting religious leaders to discuss common issues confronting the nation and threatening the peace and progress. Since religion is interlinked with society, politicians and economists, social scientists and activists can be invited along with religious leaders to discuss various vital issues in seminars participated by both staff and students. Karan Singh sees the importance of inter-faith relations and points out that the inter-faith movements should be brought to the centre stage in our society and the educational institutions should provide a sound platform for nurturing inter-faith movements.¹¹
- Requiring students to involve in the regular on-going social services carried out by other religious groups is the third level in addition to extending co-operation with the people of other faiths during natural calamities and relief operations. Such involvement can be organized by the centres for religions and inter-faith relations, if instituted already, or the National Service Scheme (NSS) or the social welfare department of the educational institutes. Providing opportunities to work with the

people of other faiths for a common cause strengthens understanding and unity among religious communities.

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