

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE FOR PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

Stanzin Dawa

Email: stanzindawa@gmail.com

Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding.

~Albert Einstein

Abstract

We are living in a world marked by growing conflict, both in terms of its frequency and intensity. Filled with a constant overflowing tension within our communities, our countries, our world, we have seen that any interaction at any moment can erupt into violence. Diversity is the law of the nature, and respect for diversity ensures peace within and between the communities and regions. While celebrating and nurturing the diversity across the world we must promote a culture of peace so that generations to come will live in peace. At present the world is facing many, often overlapping, crisis including financial, security, environmental and other socio-economic challenges hindering the peace and development. Considering what we have achieved and lost over the decades, I believe that peace and development are the two most common interests across the world. Our political standpoints may differ, our faith may differ but we share many common interests which are extremely important to ensure sustainable peace and development in the world. The greatest challenge for the current leadership is to ensure meaningful engagement of people in creating an enabling environment for sustainable peace through dialogue.

Keywords:

Dialogue, Diversity, Conflict, Mutual Understanding, Peace Education, Meaningful Engagement, Sustainable Development And Peaceful Coexistence.

Interfaith dialogue also referred to as interreligious dialogue, is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term refers to cooperative and

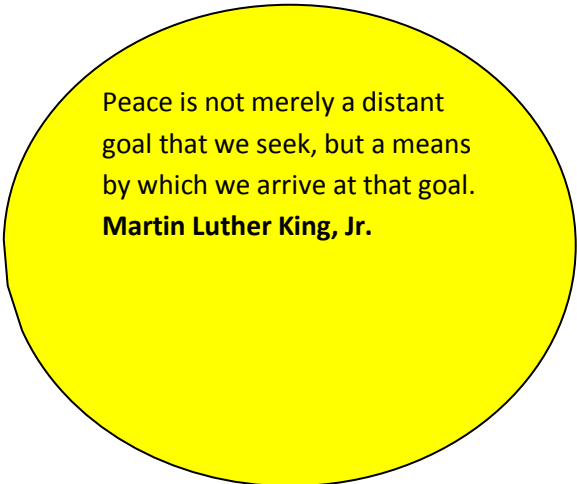
positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. "faiths") at both the individual and institutional level. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practise their faith freely. Interfaith dialogue is not just words or talk. It includes human interaction and relationships. It can take place between individuals and communities and on many levels. For example, between neighbours, in schools and in our places of work - it can take place in both formal and informal settings.

Broadly speaking, interfaith dialogue is commonly understood as aiming to facilitate understanding and tolerance between different religious communities or traditions. Although understanding seems like a personal enterprise, dialogue is seldom done only for personal objectives. In different historical and political contexts, that understanding is expected to serve different purposes.

Peace and harmony have been sought by humanity ever since the dawn of civilization. And yet the whole of human history, from the very earliest times, is replete with wars and violent conflicts from the tribal right up to the international level.

All religions preach peace, but in fact, religion has been one of the major sources of violent conflict down through the centuries,

and remains so even today, despite the worldwide growing interfaith movement. Science was supposed to help establish peace, but it has created increasingly deadly weapons of mass destruction so that a single nuclear warhead now packs explosive power equal to one thousand of the bombs that obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki half a century ago. Communism, socialism, capitalism, democracy - all claimed the desire to establish peace, but all invariably waged war. As against these negative approaches, however, all the great spiritual traditions of the world tell us that there is, deep within our



Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.
Martin Luther King, Jr.

of

consciousness, a creative power that, if invoked and nurtured, can bring about a benign transformation in our thoughts and behaviour.¹

We live in an information age where the world is getting smaller and faster, in these times we need to construct a culture of cooperation, coordination and dialogue among different religion. As Hegel said, the essence of conceptualization of the term existence is fundamentally coexistence. Peace is the goal where the communities and countries have to leave their old prejudices and walk in hand with each other to attain it. As Dr Hans Kung, Professor of Ecumenical Theology and President of the Foundation for a Global Ethic emphasis that, "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions", the need to establish adialogue between different nations is amust. Mohammed Abu-Nimber, Professor at the American University School of International Service in International Peace and Conflict Resolution in Washington, DC defines four phases of development in an effective interfaith dialogue is jointly studying of the sacred text for each religion, shared texts and deeper bonds between different religious sects, exploring the values of different religions. A path towards interconnectivity across all the religions of the world needs to be explored to establish a well-defined value system of brotherhood, human rights and mutual coexistence.

We need to take religion as a common platform to bind the world into one stream so that we could save the future generation from the fear of terrorism, thearms race, poverty, food insecurity, migration etc. Religion could become a platform to connect different culture, communities and identities. As Professor Diana Eck, Professor of comparative religion and Indian studies at Harvard University affirms "One world cannot be built on the foundation of competition and polarization between the superpowers. One world cannot be built on the foundation of science, technology and the media. One world cannot be built on Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Sikh triumphalism. One world cannot be built on the foundation of fear and suspicion. Laying the foundations of one world is the

¹http://www.karansingh.com/index.php?action=idialogue&subaction=idialogue_dialog

most important task of our time. These foundations are not negotiated statements and agreements. These foundations are, rather, in the stockpiling of trust through dialogue and creation of relationships that can sustain both agreements and disagreements.”

In a world which is so diverse yet inclusive in each functioning, it is important that we need to understand the issues arising due to lack of peace in the world. The acts like 9/11, Mumbai terrorist attack, gulf crisis, etc are the issue which paves the way to the staunch role of religion in these issues. Religion is fast becoming a global force in the world. Religion in the contemporary world has become identity and belief system which not only drive individual but a nation itself. The role of the religion in political identity brings into consideration the prophecy of Samuel P. Huntington ‘clash of civilization’ where he mentioned that the future war in the world would be based on the civilization and these civilizations were based on religion.

Any use of religion to support violence is an abuse of religion. Religion and peace go together: to wage war in the name of religion is a blatant contradiction. Religious leaders must show that they are pledged to peace precisely because of their religious belief. The task before us, therefore, is to promote a culture of dialogue. Individually and together, we must show how religious belief inspires peace, encourages solidarity, promotes justice and upholds liberty.²

In recent times, a number of countries across the globe have been experiencing conflicts arising out of a desire among some ethnic groups to assert their identity and make demands to realise this objective. In many cases, this ethnic divide gets identified with religion, language or culture. These groups, which have been living with other groups of the society within the overall national framework, have started asserting themselves politically and socially in search of a separate political, social, and cultural identity. While some of them demand special legal and constitutional provisions to safeguard their rights and position in the society, some others go further and demand devolution of

² John Paul II, “Collaboration among the Diverse Religions,” in Joel Beversluis (ed.), *Sourcebook of the World’s Religions* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000), 160-161.

political power to them and even independence. The methods they choose to put across their demands take widely different forms, ranging from street protests to full-fledged armed struggle.

In religious conflict, we find sectarian conflicts or religious conflicts. This kind of conflict is either within the religious or between different religions. Within religion, there are sects, which cause sectarianism e.g. in Pakistan Shia, Sunni conflict due to their ethnocentric attitude towards each other's belief and between Catholics and Protestants in Christianity. Between religions e.g. Hindus and Christians, Sikhs and Hindus, Muslims and Christians in different places of the world, these religious conflicts occurred. What we need an interfaith dialogue between different religions of the world. We need an atmosphere of coexistence. Coexistence learning to live together, to accept diversity and implies a positive relationship to the other.

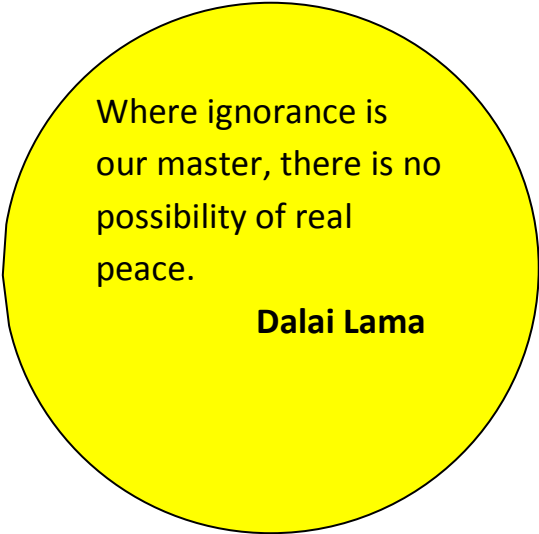
I have extracted the following text from His Holiness Dalai Lama's speech delivered during the interfaith seminar on the Preservation of Religious Harmony, Coexistence and Universal Peace organised by the International Association for Religious Freedom Ladakh has been a predominantly Buddhist area 'for so many centuries. But other religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism have also flourished here. Although it is natural for the people of Ladakh to have an attachment to and love for their own religions, yet this place has a very peaceful environment with no major problems of religious intolerance. During my maiden visit to Ladakh, I heard elderly Muslims using the phrase "community of Sangha" in their speeches. Although such phrases are not found in Islam, yet a reference of this kind invokes a lot of trust amongst the Buddhists. Therefore, people from a different religious background in Ladakh are very close to each other and live in harmony.

As far as the Muslims are concerned it is appropriate for them to have complete devotion to Allah while praying in the mosques. This is also the same with Buddhists who are completely devoted to the Buddha when they pray in Buddhist temples. A society, which has many religions, should also have many prophets and sources of refuge. In such a

society it is very important to have harmony and respect amongst the different religions and their practitioners. We must distinguish between belief and respect. Belief refers to total faith, which you must have in your own religion. At the same time, you should have respect for all other religions. This tradition of believing in one's own religion and having respect for others is in existence in Ladakh since your forefathers. Therefore you do not have to invent it. The most important thing at the moment is to preserve and promote this tradition.

If a harmonious relationship is established amongst societies and religious beliefs in today's multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural world, then it will surely set a very good example for others. However, if all the sides become careless, then there is a danger of imminent problems. In a multiethnic society, the biggest problem is that of between the majority and the minority. For instance, in the

capital Leh, Buddhists constitute the majority of the population whereas Muslims belong to the minority community. The majority must consider the minority as their invited guests. The minority, on the other hand, should be able to sensitise with the majority. In other words, both sides should live in harmony. In order to sustain this harmony, both sides should not take lightly the sensitive issues of themselves. Indeed, the majority should pay attention to and appreciate the views and opinion of the minority. Both sides should discuss and clearly express what they think about the other's view and opinion. The minority, on the other hand, should be careful about where the sensitive issues of the majority lies and express whatever doubts they have in their minds. If problems are resolved in such a friendly manner; then both sides will gain. Suspicion of each other will only harm both communities. Therefore, it is very important to live in harmony and



Where ignorance is
our master, there is no
possibility of real
peace.

Dalai Lama

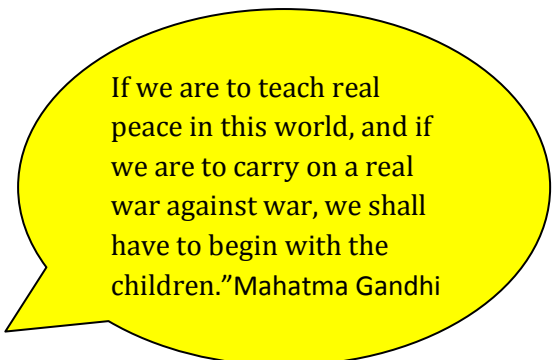
analyse where the opinion of the other lies. The best way to do this is to engage in dialogue, dialogue and dialogue.³”

True peace with ourselves and with the world around us can only be achieved through the development of mental [inner] peace. ...[It] starts within each one of us. When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us. When our community is in a state of peace, it can share peace with neighbouring communities, and so on.⁴

Mark Twain "There is nothing training cannot do. Nothing is above its reach. It can turn bad morals to good; it can destroy bad principles and recreate good ones; it can lift men to angel ship In 1945, the United Nations was established to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”, “to reaffirm faith in the ...dignity and worth of the human person [and] in the equal rights of men and women”, “to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained”, and “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...”. (*Preamble to the UN Charter*)

Framework of peace education and its co discipline

Peace education has developed as a means to achieve these goals. It is education that is “directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”. It promotes “understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups” and furthers “the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.” (*Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights*)



If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.”Mahatma Gandhi

3 <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/religious-harmony>

4 Tensin Gyatso, “Zone of Peace,” 91

The term 'peace education' can cover many areas, from advocacy to law reform, from basic education to social justice. It is generally agreed that there is a difference between peace education and peacebuilding. Peace education is an attempt to change people's behaviours; peace building incorporates social and economic justice (and legal reform where necessary). Both try to make a reality of human rights.⁵Peace education should be included in the school curriculum as a compulsory subject.

Interreligious dialogue is a challenging process by which adherents of differing religious traditions encounter each other in order to break down the walls of division that stand at the centre of most wars. The objective of interreligious dialogue is peace.

Peace comes from being able to contribute the best that we have, and all that we are, toward creating a region that supports everyone irrespective of differences. But it is also securing the space for others to contribute the best that they have and all that they are. Respect for others, their belief, religion, political ideology, culture, brings an inner peace and tranquillity instead of anger and resentment. The conferences and conventions around the world have condemned terrorism of all forms and by any means; it also reaffirmed the significance of dialogue at different levels. This is crucial as the current phase of conflict and potential for development across the world needs a strong mechanism for regional understanding and cooperation more than ever.

Peace and development are directly proportional to each other; one cannot exist without the other. Thus, without peace, development cannot be sustained. For instance, Kashmir used to be the paradise on earth, where people from every corner of the world loved to spend their holidays. The valley was peaceful and people were prosperous. Today we have an altogether different scenario in Kashmir. This is a critical time to channelize our energies, resources and wisdom in meaningful engagement of people in peace building through dialogue.

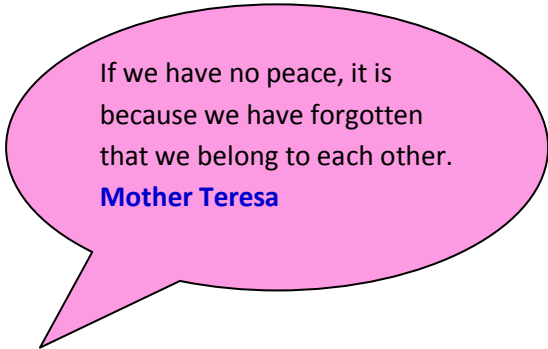
⁵Reardon, Comprehensive Peace Education.

India has the privilege and fortune of being the mother and matrix of many religious traditions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are born and have grown in India. Zoroastrianism (the Parsi religion), though not originated in India, exists only in India today. Judaism struck roots in India long before the common era. Christianity came to South India just after the death and resurrection of its founder Jesus Christ. And Islam also came to India immediately after the death of prophet Muhammad.

Thus India in its entire history never was a country with a single religion. In its continuous search for the Absolute, India has not only given birth to several major religions but also accommodated a number of world religions. It has been aptly called the cradle of religions. According to the religious census of 1991 there are 672.5 million Hindus, 95.2 million Muslims, 18.8 million Christians, 16.2 million Sikhs, 6.3 million Buddhists and 3.3 million Jains in India⁶. Religious pluralism in Indian context simply means democracy among religions, in which beauty is understood as unity in diversity. The foundation for this unity and harmony is seen in ancient Vedic literature, where it is said, "Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti" - 'Truth is one, but the wise speak of it variously' (Rg. Veda 1. 164.46). In such a religiously pluralistic society, encounter between religions has become an unavoidable necessity and a day-to-day experience. There is hardly any public function or celebration without this intermingling of several religions. In short, no religion and religious function can be thought of in isolation. Thus, in Indian soil, religious amity is at the heart of every human endeavour

From where are all of these feelings of frustration, insecurity, anger, hatred, fear, competition, and purposelessness coming from, and why are they continuously getting channelled into our way of life. To face this, we must learn to see conflict from another angle...

as a positive opportunity for building greater harmony in our lives and creating new



If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.

Mother Teresa

⁶Manorama Yearbook १९९६, ३१st Year of Publication, Kottayam, India., p, ४६१

paths of peace and development. Rather than hiding from conflict, we must embrace it by facing fear and uncertainty, and become more open to and appreciative of the diversity that exists in the World. The cause of conflicts can be so many, but the causes of peace are limited and sometimes if we don't understand the causes of peace can be the causes for conflicts. Can we sense the potential conflict of future? Do we have some common strategies to build a culture of peace in the World? How can we stop fragmentation of communities, countries and regions in the name of religion, politics, sects, region and development? Through Dialogue and Mutual Understanding, we can promote the ideals of peace, development, respect for human rights and solidarity across generations, cultures, and religions in shaping a world where everyone and everywhere can live by choice, not by chance.