

Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today

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A Dismal Scenario

The main aim of a religion is to enable its followers to live a good moral life based on truth and justice but when we look back and examine the role of religion during the last three millenniums of recorded human history, we are shocked to discover that instead of inspiring people to follow an ethical code of conduct and abstain from sinful acts it was instrumental in generating bloody conflicts and causing discord and disharmony in society. Our beliefs result from our social and cultural environment. No two persons think alike hence it is natural that there will be different beliefs, different languages, different dresses and different cultural, moral and social values. Diversity of beliefs and views is a natural attribute of humanity. As the civilizations grew there were threats of schisms within a sect and new sects came into existence. We find that all the major religions were fragmented into various sects. Buddhism was divided into Hinayana and Mahayana, Jainism into Digambara and Svetambara, Christianity into Catholics and Protestants and Islam into Shia and Sunni. These schisms within the major religions caused conflicts which often took the form of ghastly battles and civil wars.

In UK the people of the North Ireland suffered heavily at the hands of the warring Catholics and Protestants. Saddened and disillusioned by what was happening in UK in the name of religion the noted Irish satirist Jonathan Swift once wrote, "*We have just enough religion to make us hate but not enough to make us love one another.*" When we look at the world today we realize that what he had uttered about the Irish society in the 18th century is true in respect of the whole world today.

The situation is extremely grim and complicated since the extremists are exploiting religious differences to further their selfish ends and fulfil their political aspirations. Economic disparities, abject poverty and unemployment are also adding fuel to the fire of religious tensions. It makes it imperative for all those who are involved in the activities that promote interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace to face the challenge jointly. India is facing the worst crisis of terrorism. Thousands of potential innocent people

have lost their lives and the threat still exists. It is time we took immediate steps to strengthen interreligious and intercultural cooperation.

Main Actors of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation : What it Means to be a Main Actor

There are many actors of interreligious and intercultural cooperation and each 'actor' is making its own contribution today. They include civil society organizations as well as government and UN agencies. They are trying to reconcile divergent ethnic, cultural and religious groups by persuading the tension-gripped groups to sit together at a table and resolve their conflicts nonviolently. In almost all major religious traditions there are interreligious committees which are active in this direction. At UN and government level too there is a realization that they can work more effectively if civil society is involved. By a main actor I mean an organization which is exclusively dedicated to the cause of interfaith harmony. It studies the problem without any prejudice and bias, collects data and documentary proofs to establish its point and has deep commitment to the cause of religious reconciliation and rejects the theory that the clash between civilizations is inevitable.

I will designate civil society as the 'main actor' of interreligious and intercultural cooperation. There are many civil society organizations which are creating an environment of reconciliation and many joint-action-plans are being implemented which include poverty elimination projects, employment generation schemes and development of such villages as are steeped in poverty and illiteracy. These actors have been organizing highly successful global interfaith assemblies and thousands have come forward to join the global campaigns.

When the followers of different faiths – Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Christians, Sikhs sit together in fellowship as people, they find they have so much in common. Hindus are not Hinduism, Christians are not Christianity, Jains are not Jainism and Muslims are not Islam. Our beliefs and doctrines will bind us in all kinds of knots – they can become a dreadful tyranny to us so that we look at people through 'doctrinally trained eyes' and we arrogantly think that we have the right to pronounce quick judgements on them. But Buddha, Jesus, Mahavir, Mohammad, Sankara never did this. Would that we could all follow the spirit of the messages of our spiritual teachers. Our doctrines and beliefs as Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Jains are very different. They are bound to be because they have developed in different cultures. When Christians, Jains, Hindus, Muslims meet together in faith all the superficial differences quickly fall away and they become one in

universal love. There is a difference between faith and belief. There is no denying the fact that a growing sense of alienation between major religions is creating an environment of mutual distrust and hatred but it is also true that some groups within these religions are in the forefront of interreligious dialogues and are endeavouring sincerely to create harmony.

It is the duty of the actors of interreligious and intercultural cooperation to create awareness among the followers of different faiths that *dharma* is one and is shorn of labels. All religions emphasize purity of means and ends. We must respect diversity of views and follow the path of righteousness and humanism.

Current Modalities of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation

Humanity is beset with a plethora of problems today. Globalization has robbed the marginalized groups of society of their means of survival. The incidents of religious intolerance are on the increase. Fanaticism and terrorism are raising their ugly heads. Environmental degradation and global climate change may hasten the extermination of all life forms from the face of this globe.

A culture of violence and hatred is spreading fast across the world. We cannot do anything to arrest this trend without the support and cooperation of all religious groups. It has, therefore, become essential for all of us to deepen our interreligious cooperation. The current modalities of their cooperation include dialogues to dispel misunderstandings that alienate one religious group from the other, establishment of interfaith councils and participation in each others religious festivals. We have to make it clear that by sharing our religious life and thoughts together our faith is not threatened or shaken. It is enriched and the bonds of love and fellowship between us become stronger and firmer.

Globalization is causing the mass emigration of people from one country to the other country and from one region to the other region. It is obvious that when people flock to a particular region in search of jobs and livelihood, they face violent protests from the natives who fear loss of their meagre resources or sharing them with others. As a result these conflicts soon change into communal or caste-oriented conflicts. When a group of a region migrates, its food habits, dresses and religious and cultural festivals are different which the local people do not approve of. The actors of interreligious cooperation thus face a serious challenge on account of regional differences and mingling of culturally and religiously diverse groups.

Most Pressing Current Issues and Barriers to Interfaith Harmony : A Jain perspective

The main issue before humanity today is whether we can co-exist despite diversity of beliefs, languages and cultural values : whether we can live as friends rather than as enemies notwithstanding different traditions we might follow. I believe in the unity of humanity and as a Jain my answer is that it is possible. Diversity, as a matter of fact, is the beauty of the universe. If a person thinks that only one belief should prevail on this globe, he is obviously living in an illusion. Just as it is impossible to expect only one shop of cloth in a city so it is impossible to have just one religion in the world.

Lord Mahavira – the twenty fourth Tirthankara of the nonviolent Jain Tradition who lived 2500 years ago and was a contemporary of Lord Buddha said asserted that ahimsa (nonviolence) was the basis of our survival. He said, *“The Arhats (venerable perfect souls) of the past, those of the present and the future narrate, discourse, proclaim and assert that one should not injure, subjugate, enslave, torture or kill any animal, living being, organism or sentient being. The doctrine of ahimsa is immaculate, immutable and eternal.”* He further said, *“Those who resort to and remain engrossed in violence suffer (the miseries of) transmigration again and again.”*

In Acarang Sutra ahimsa has been proclaimed in the following words : *Injurious activities inspired by self-interest lead to evil and darkness. This is what is called bandage, delusion, death, and hell. To do harm to others is to do harm to oneself. “Thou art he whom thou intendest to kill ! Thou art he whom thou intendest to tyrannize over !”*

The main cause of religious tension that prevails today is the attempts by some misguided religious groups belonging to all major religions to lure the follower of the other religions into becoming the members of their religions and thus increase the number of their followers. Lord Mahavira opposed it and proclaimed that was against the spirit of true religion. He said, *“Many followers of different sects assert that liberation is possible only through their spiritual practices and modes of worship. If the head of a particular sect says, ‘come and join my sect else you will not be liberated’, such person creates misunderstanding by regarding the partial truth as the whole truth and thus generates animosity.”*

According to Lord Mahavira such exclusive views are the greatest hindrances and barriers to interfaith harmony. In order to create a feeling of friendship and reconciliation towards other sects Lord Mahavira propounded the philosophy of Anekant which means that truth is many-sided. Only God or

omniscient being knows the whole truth. Everyone may be right from his standpoint and wrong from the other's standpoint. There is no need to quarrel. There is no viewpoint that is perfect as there is no science that is complete. Anekant approach or the non-absolutist attitude alone can remove these barriers from the path of interreligious and intercultural cooperation. It stands for complete freedom of thought and forbids the disparagement or contradiction of other religious beliefs. Elucidating the philosophy of Anekant Acharya Mahapragya the eminent Jain thinker says that *anekant* is the third eye. Ahimsa (nonviolence) is not possible without non-absolutist attitude is not possible without ahimsa (nonviolence). In the present circumstances Anekant can become a universally acceptable principle the interreligious and intercultural cooperation.

Acharya Mahapragya – a leading Jain Acharya and the head of the Anuvrat Movement (a Jain peace movement) which is the first Jain campaign to open its doors for the followers of other sects has imparted a new dimension to interfaith unity by embarking on Ahimsa Yatra. As the Ahimsa Yatra passes through villages, cities and towns, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains and common people join his nonviolent march and extend support to him. In the course of his *yatra* the Acharya not only heals the wounds of the people affected by violence but also imparts training in nonviolence to children, youths and even elderly people of that area. Ahimsa Yatra has two immediate objectives i.e. elimination of hunger and poverty and interfaith harmony. Like many other Jain Acharyas he is carrying Mahavira's legacy of *ahimsa* and *anekant* which I find as most helpful in promoting interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace. His *yatra* has generated a new wave of interreligious cooperation.

This statement from Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a celebrated philosopher and former President of India further strengthens the Jain view. At the end of his admirable study 'Recovery of Faith', he wrote :

“In every religion today we have small minorities who see beyond the horizons of their particular faith, who believe that religious fellowship is possible, not through the imposition of any one way on the whole world but through an all-inclusive recognition that we are all searchers for the truth, pilgrims on the road, that we all aim at the same ethical and spiritual standards. Those who thirst for a first-hand experience are prophets of the religion of spirit, which is independent of all ecclesiastical organizations and the subtleties engendered by human learning, which looks for the formation of an earthly community governed by love. The widespread existence of this state of mind is hope of the future.”

Relationship Between Culture and Religion