



# INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS A WAY TO PEACE BUILDING

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## ABSTRACT

The term interreligious dialogue refers to positive interaction between people of different faith communities. Interreligious dialogue, also referred to as interfaith 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 practice their faith freely. Interfaith dialogue is not just words or talk. It can take place between individuals and communities and on many levels. For example, between neighbors, in schools and in our places of work - it can take place in both formal and informal settings. In Ireland, Muslims and Christians live on the same streets; use the same shops, buses and schools. Normal life means that we come into daily contact with each other.

The rise of interreligious dialogue has been made possible by the twofold processes of unprecedented global interaction in the modern age, which has provided abundant opportunity for religious communities and individuals to interact with each other, and a dawning awareness and pragmatic realism of the need to overcome religious conflict often associated with theological imperialism and colonialism. Although interreligious dialogue has been sporadically practiced in localized multi-religious areas such as India and North American cities, the movement on a global scale is rather new. Interreligious dialogue takes many forms, but is essentially a conscious attempt to build bridges of understanding, respect, harmony, and friendship among religious communities. Those involved in dialogue tend to focus on common ground rather than that which divides them to overcome stereotypes and historical grievances.

### Introduction:

The term interreligious dialogue refers to positive interaction between people of different faith communities. There are many points around which dialogue participants can seek common ground and make common cause. One of the most difficult and perhaps most challenging points involve a discussion surrounding core belief, which if approached incorrectly tends to divide. For this reason, much dialogue revolves around other, easier core values upon which all people of goodwill can agree. Reuel L. Howe has explained the concept of dialogue thus: "Dialogue is to love, what blood is to the body, when the flow of blood stops, the body dies. When dialogue stops, love dies and resentment and hate are born. But dialogue can restore a dead relationship. Indeed, this is the miracle of dialogue. It can bring relationship that has died. There is only one qualification to the claims for dialogue. It must be mutual and proceed from both sides and the parties to it must persist relentlessly.

Lectures, advice, preaching etc. are good examples of monologue. Conversation and dialogue are not identical. Conversation may be casual or social or for the sake of company. But dialogue is a special form of conversation. Here there is a purpose. Both sides consciously and willingly involve in it; both sides respect one another; It is new and it may lead to new and unknown destinations. There needs to be courage to face the unknown: It is a journey and pilgrimage. It is an adventure as well. So dialogue is not easy and comfortable to achieve. That is why dialogue rare. In another words to enter into dialogue means, the concerned two sides achieve a common communication.

### Positive aspects of inter-religious dialogue:

#### 1) *Inter-religious dialogue at the intellectual level*

The discussion of God, creation, death etc., from the perspective of different religions. Comparative religion may also come under this. It is usually an academic exercise or an honest quest at the intellectual level.

#### 2) *Inter-religious dialogue at the people's level*

Religion is not only for specialists, intellectuals, priests etc. Religion, in a big way, means its people. Religion becomes a living reality and "being" through its people. People of different religions often come into contact with one another. The chances for this will increase more as our communication systems and interdependence increases in an increasingly "global village". But here one should also remember the anti-dialogue trends as well. Dialogue at the people's level may be spontaneous or organized.

#### 3) *Inter-religious dialogue at the spiritual level*

People of different faiths meet in the "Core of the heart". There is sharing at the spiritual level. Inter religious prayer is one dimension of it.

#### 4) *Inter-religious dialogue for liberation, justice, humanism and prosperity*

This may be termed as secular dialogue. Here people of different faiths come together for a common concern and share inspiration from different religious sources. For example, World Conference on Religion and Peace, a non-governmental, inter-religious, international organization has been working for issues like disarmament, social justice etc.

#### 5) *Religious Tolerance*

People accept the presence of different religions and live in tolerance and mutual respect.

### Hurdles for Dialogue:

The following are the major hurdles for the interreligious dialogue.

- 1) **Absolute Claims:** The tendency of most of the religions is to have absolute claims about their "truth" as the only "truth" and the only "way". This implies that other religions have no truth and they are all less valid. Absolute claims to have the absolute truth are incompatible with dialogue.

- 2) **Conversion:** Some religions especially missionary religion or certain sects of some religion have active conversion of other people to their faith as their primary or major activity. They even tend to follow unethical or any means to achieve this. Further they positively create hurdles for people of other religions. Such conversion and subjugation activities even today continue to remain as a major hurdle for dialogue.
- 3) **The burden of history:** If we look into the records of different religions all of them have committed serious errors and sins which include genocide and brutalities in an unimaginable scale.
- 4) **Isolation and alienation:** People of different religions, even if they live in one particular area, sometimes may live in 'unconnected island'. There may be several unbreakable "Berlin walls". These may be due to indifference, uncaring nature, uneasy tolerance and unconcern.
- 5) **Lack of dialogue tradition:** Inter-religious dialogue, presuppose certain values, attitudes, developments etc. These have to be nourished and cultivated over a period of time. Dialogue may not be automatic or it may not like plugging in to get the electric power. Peace time, rather than the active conflict period is the right time to make preparations for dialogue.
- 6) **Fear for dialogue:** People may be afraid of dialogue. This fear may come from various sources like fear of openness, fear to move to new position, fear of losing a "final" position "valid" for all times, fear of an adventure into unknown, fear of insecurity and uncertainty, fear of respecting and recognizing the other person etc.
- 7) **Is dialogue possible?:** Some argue that to know and experience one's own religion itself would require more than a life time, How in such a situation one may be involved in inter-religious dialogue. They argue that it is like blind leading the blind. Though this approach has some truth in it, it cannot be accepted.
- 8) **The contemporary dialogue scene as a hurdle:** The contemporary dialogue scene tends to threaten people in many ways rather than attracting them. Current dialogue movement in India is often controlled by the upper castes, elites and educated people.
- 9) **Dialogue as a way of sharing things:** In a dialogue sharing takes place. But people in dialogue, instead of sharing good things may also share bad and questionable things. A Hindu may learn from a Christian "centralization and the dominant institutional mode". A Christian may learn from a Hindu "the cancer of casteism".
- 10) **Legitimization of wrong elements:** In inter-religious dialogue, one group of a religion chooses another group of another religion as its dialogue partner. Here the question is how one group chooses another group. In this process a "bad group" or "black sheep" may gain legitimacy. Thus inter-religious dialogue may be seen as a way to gain legitimacy in the eye of others.
- 11) **Problem of understanding other religion:** Each religion has its pluralistic dimensions. In inter-religious dialogue one may encourage some aspects of a religion and tends to ignore some other aspects of that religion.

#### **Inter-religious dialogue as a way to peace building:**

There is no peace among nations, and within nations, unless there is peace among religions. It is also stated that religion (religious leaders in particular) has a major role to play in conflict resolution. In crisis situations, these statements are remembered and

recalled with vigor when religious sentiments seem to fuel conflicts. The perversion of religious message is condemned and a greater need to reappropriate religious symbols is felt or expressed. Religious leaders, together or in parallel, affirm that the conflicts at stake are not, "religious wars". This affirmation is symbolically pertinent but is, in many instances, hardly effective in socio-political terms. It implies a measure of utopianism often coupled with and prepared activism. In order to be effective, a short-term intervention necessitates a long term effort religious leaders should, equally develop discourse on inter-faith relations. Many shortcomings can be attributed to the double language and the duplicity it sometimes denotes. During the period of "normal" coexistence, a little attention is paid to mutual ignorance or "cold war" relations. In moments of tension the value of symbiosis and "common denominators" are highlighted, somewhat artificially. The double language exist at another level: What is shared publicly by religious leaders as they meet, in different albeit divergent, from what is said within the "closed doors" of one's religious community. Only a longstanding sincere, inter-faith relation, sustained by a continuous effort, theological and otherwise, makes possible an efficient common action in crisis situation.

In the time of crisis (such as Gulf War), sensationalism, vehicle by the media, depicts religious communities as monoliths. An essentialist approach is favored: religious communities are reduced to "what they were essentially remain and will be". As the enemies are demonized, their religion is likely to be caricatured. The least is often that the differences between religious traditions of the protagonists in the conflict are accentuated. This cannot be resisted, corrected or redressed unless fears and prejudices have been removed through patient dialogue. In dialogue we constantly learn that our respective communities are pluralistic. This enables us to be sensitive, in times of crisis. To different voices: those of moderation, criticism, opposition or dissent. It is no accident that "dialogue minded" people during the Gulf war were attentive to the statements and exportations of H. H. Pope John Paul II, the WCC and other church bodies. They were equally attentive to Muslim voices that differentiated between various attitudes of Christians and to the fact that the Islamists themselves were divided. Likewise, the experience of dialogue informs us that the Holy War ideology is not the monopoly of a particular religious community, neither is the use of religious sentiments for the purpose of political legitimation. The fact is that more has been said by way of explicating a Christian "just war" theory than of arguing about the war in terms of the Islamic Jihad notion. The confusion between religion and politics, religious identity and national-cultural identity is noticeable among Muslims and Christians alike, though expressed differently.

Inter-faith dialogue has to take seriously and creatively the tension between the "time of politics" and the "time of spirituality". There is often a temptation for inter-faith dialogue to bind itself to political preoccupations or initiatives, follow or parallel them. On the other hand, the "warmth" of dialogue is sometimes so much cherished by its partners to the extent they sacrifice the responsibility of considering the political realities. Time does not always flow according to the rhythm of political events. There is a dense and sometimes obscure time of habitual chronology and a more subtle time. Slow and spiritual, as it were, which determines in a fundamental manner, attitudes and behavior. Inter-faith dialogue has to take seriously and creatively the tension between religious alterity and common humanity. For quite some time, in mostly secularized societies, there was a inclination to minimize and sometimes discard religious difference. People's identities are defined primarily in terms of class and culture. More recently, one could see a greater tendency to over-emphasize the religious identities of people. The temptation to "over-Islamize" or "over-Christianize" him/her has been, sometimes, at the expense of what makes our humanity common. It is forgotten then, that human beings cannot be reduced to their religion but that religious identity is one dimension of their humanness.

During the Gulf War there was, across the media, a form of communication that, in a way, proved war inevitable. Many Arabs, who condemned the occupation of Kuwait with varying degree of enthusiasm yet were opposed to the coalition-led war spoke about an equitable distribution of resources, the occupies Palestinian territories, double standards in international politics, protection of small countries even if the happen to export olive oil only. The answer they were often entitled to spoke of fanaticism, obscurantism, violence, tyranny and accumulated frustration. It was suggested or insinuated that the real conflict was between the humanist democratic values of the West and the "Muslim mind".

Inter-faith dialogue may have become, after the Gulf War a more difficult endeavor. In the Muslim world, historical memories are alive. They may seem dormant on some occasions, yet they are awakened in time of crises. Very little seems to be said now about the War, as people try, though forgetting to recover from its traumas, or they are overwhelmed by other problems. There is a sense of disempowerment and vulnerability that makes opposition to the "new political order" unrealistic. But many people fear it may be another "disorder". Political resignation does mean amnesia. It is therefore imperative for those Christians who opposed war to be repeatedly heard so that trust built in dialogue is not washed away by bitterness or disappointment.

It is always affirmed that the search for justice and peace are inextricably linked. Nevertheless, the link is not always made in concrete situations. The Gulf War is a case in point. In the North, the peace activists were labeled irresponsible or at best romantic. In the South, those Arabs and Muslims who angrily opposed the war, seeking justice and claiming their right to dignity, were portrayed fanatic or at best emotional. Both were engaged in opposing the war, though using different languages. But they seemed to be far apart, inter-faith dialogue cannot be effective unless it draws closer to each other those who speak the justice language, both founded in their respective spiritual traditions.

Inter-faith dialogue may have, more than ever before, to work towards a world ethic for world peace. It is a corrective to international politics when cynically determined by the multiple balance power. Without many illusions, people of faith may have a specific contribution to make, jointly rather than separately, in the realm of international legislation for a more just world order.

### Conclusion:

The term interreligious dialogue refers to positive interaction between people of different faith communities. There are many points around which dialogue participants can seek common ground and make common cause. One of the most difficult and perhaps most challenging points involve a discussion surrounding core belief, which if approached incorrectly tends to divide. For this reason, much dialogue revolves around other, easier core values upon which all people of goodwill can agree. The rise of interreligious dialogue has been made possible by the twofold processes of unprecedented global interaction in the modern age, which has provided abundant opportunity for religious communities and individuals to interact with each other, and a dawning awareness and pragmatic realism of the need to overcome religious conflict often associated with theological imperialism and colonialism. Although interreligious dialogue has been sporadically practiced in localized multi-religious areas such as India and North American cities, the movement on a global scale is rather new. Interreligious dialogue takes many forms, but is essentially a conscious attempt to build bridges of understanding, respect, harmony, and friendship among religious communities. Those involved in dialogue tend to focus on common ground rather than that which divides them to overcome stereotypes and historical grievances.

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