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Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue: Necessity, Concept and Scope

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Abstract

The encounter of people of different faiths is the hallmark of our times. It may be a dangerous encounter where difference is wielded as a weapon of conflict. It may be a passive and inattentive encounter where difference is glossed over or avoided. The first claims the use of media as a teaching tool incorporated within a particular teaching methodology and subject. The second that is more important yet less prevalent, is to ensure that media consumers are well informed about media ethics so that they can deconstruct media products and judge the value of the content with some objectivity.

Keywords: Interreligious; Intercultural; International

Introduction

In her preface to the book, 'Building the Interfaith Youth Movement- Beyond Dialogue to Action', Diana Eck writes:

"This book is the first fruits of a revolution, the most important and ultimately consequential revolution of our time: the interfaith revolution. Gone are those days when we could imagine that the religious worlds of our various families of faith do not overlap and intersect. The encounter of people of different faiths is the hallmark of our times. It may be a dangerous encounter where difference is wielded as a weapon of conflict. It may be a passive and inattentive encounter where difference is glossed over or avoided. Or it may be an international encounter where people of different faiths set out to get to know one another to work together, talk together, and serve together in the hard work of bridge-building. Whether we analyse the religious dynamics of the world of the twenty-first century from a global, national, or local standpoint, ours is a world of profound diversity, a world marbled with many ethnic groups, cultural traditions and families of faith [1]."

The question that perhaps assailed the minds of men when televisions all over the world displayed the gory scene of the aerial attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, was: why would anyone do such a thing?

When it became known that the perpetrators of the unholy act appealed to religion in their justifications, the shock that characterized the response of most people turned to anger. Whatever the reactions are, the most important issue lies in our collective ability to make sense of the incident and the challenges it poses to humanity.

While there had been pragmatic responses, there had also been emotional outbursts. An example of the latter is the widespread fallacy that without religion there would be no more wars [1]!. While it is true that religion has been a factor in several international conflicts, it is also true that it is rarely the principal cause of conflict, even where the warring parties, such as Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, uphold different religious ideologies [2]. Hijacked however by political extremists and politicians in cleric's garb, it is a contributing factor to conflicts in places as widely scattered as the Middle East, the Balkans, Sudan, Indonesia, Kashmir and Nigeria [3]. Politics thus combine with the lower qualities of men to create ideological exclusivism and theologies of hate. It was in this light that Hans Kung declared that the 'most fanatical and cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired, and legitimized by religion'. This paper therefore reflects on the challenge of conflicts purportedly inspired by religion and calls for functional global interreligious, intercultural and inter-ideological dialogue with total commitment which seeks to evolve a global ethic common to all faith traditions through strategically designed and consciously implemented educational programmes so that the true role of religion as an agent of peace rather than conflict can be achieved.

Dynamics and Dimensions of Conflict

Conflict may be defined as a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals [4]. It is inextricably a part of human experience. It is indeed difficult to visualize a human society or group that is free of conflict. The varied experiences of men make the outcome of conflicts uncertain. While some are resolved beneficially and lead to quality final products, some escalate and lead to negative outcomes.

There are several causes of conflicts among humans and their interrelatedness is as complex as the cosmopolitan diversity of human social intercourse. Experts and conflict management professionals sometimes overlook this complexity. In the effort to resolve a conflict or the damage that results from it, the tendency is to search for some semblance of order in the chaos and nebulae of conflicts by looking for one overriding causal factor. Individuals and institutions thus gravitate toward singular causes to promote singular solutions in which they specialize. They also tend to suppress evidence of certain causal factors which they have a phobia for. Class, culture, religion, and race related issues may surface as factors in conflict, and because of particular ambivalent feelings about those phenomena in his social universe, and the fact that they can open a Pandora box of emotional vulnerability in him which he would not want to share or struggle with during the peacemaking exercise, a conflict resolver may suppress evidences related to such [5]. In conflict resolution therefore, the study of culture and anthropology is essential as the infinite variability of human experience challenges the universal definitions present in several

theories of intervention which approach issues as if persons, groups, culture or creed can accommodate a uniform approach. Any effective intervention strategy in cases of conflict must be premised on principles which truly respect the uniqueness of every culture, person and group because it is in the deep study of the peculiarities of individual persons or groups that we discover our humanity, and gain wisdom that could never be gained through man-made structures-material or conceptual-super-imposed, sometimes violently on the matrix of human life in question.

In the light of the above, every conflict must be properly located within the psycho- social context of its major actors. The acclaimed perpetrators of the 9/11 heinous act, in a deliberate act to cloak their political motives with a garb of religious sentiment, declared that the Muslim world was at war with the Judeo-Christian world. The *Economist* sums it, 'Making artful use of history, theology, and current geopolitics, {Osama bin Laden} has, in effect, urged all the world's billion-odd Muslims to bury their internal differences and consider themselves at war with all the world's Christians and Jews. In his efforts to galvanize and unite fellow Muslims, he has made a careful choice of the message,' focusing on the conflict over holy sites in Israel/Palestine, labeling the entire western world as 'Crusaders,' and reminding Muslims of past glories in what is now Spain when Muslims were in control, before being displaced by Christians'.

Here the shrewd politician attempts to recruit innocent Muslims into his totalitarian ideology through a radical rhetoric that is symptomatic of a pandemic pathology within many sub-groups who claim exclusive truth among various religious traditions. These sub-groups do not often consciously initiate conflicts. The problem naturally begins with the notion of truth within a particular social setting. If the truth is seen by a group as an absolute, static, and exclusive concept which must be presented in an 'either-or' manner, such a group's capacity to relate to the 'other' whose conception of the truth may be different is to be doubted. Many conflicts in the modern world have emanated from how woefully we have failed to engage and relate to the 'other'.

Religion, whenever its adherents refuse to peacefully relate to the 'other', thus seems to be united in an unholy alliance with violence everywhere. The September 11, 2001, attacks were only the most shocking of a series of bloodsheds the perpetrators of which clothe their rhetoric in the garb of religion. Religion's good image is smeared virtually everywhere there is conflict. In the not too distant past, right wing Christians have perpetrated violence in the US in the name of religion; angry Muslims and Jews have done the same in the Middle East, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims have battled in South Asia, Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, Boko-Haram and Muslim – Christian conflicts in Nigeria, and the Buddhist Aum Shinrikyo assault in Japan. The list is inexhaustible.

It is obvious from what we have seen in recent history that violence is not exclusive to any single religion- all religions have the capacity to serve as resource material for violent actors. It is therefore not fair to use labels such as Islamic Terrorism for an act perpetrated by Osama bin Laden just as it would be unfair to call Timothy McVeigh a Christian terrorist as if their religions have enjoined such acts. However fair we chose to be, it is obvious that all religions are inherently revolutionary, and religious teachings are capable of providing ideological resources for an alternative view of public order. The search for peace in public and private life is therefore a global obsession.

Engaging the 'Other', Affirming Identity

The advent of globalization has challenged our view of ourselves and the world. Increase in immigration has super-imposed the phenomenon of trans-national living realities. Immigrants do not migrate for economic survival; they carry with them different cultural orientations and religious traditions. Socio-cultural transfer and commerce involve processes of adaptation and, in a world with an increasingly complex and interactive structure, do not usually take place without several other interconnecting factors. Cultural ties are deep-rooted and in most cases transcend the reach of exogenous influences. Speaking of the American challenge, Peggy Levitt, in her thought provoking book,' *GOD NEEDS NO PASSPORT*', submits:

"Our deeply held assumptions about immigration and religion don't reflect this reality. We assume that what happens in America is made in America. We expect newcomers to assimilate, becoming part of "our" community by severing their ties to their homelands. And we tell ourselves we are religiously diverse even when our expectations about what religion is and where to find it are based on Christian models. Protestantism is what Martin Marty calls the " wallpaper in the mental furnishing department in which America lives, always in the room but barely noticed". While American culture claims secularity and tolerance, and that of a certain kind, which leaves increasing numbers among us out [6]"

In obvious realization of this reality, UNESCO, in its World Report , No. 2 of 2009 titled,' *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*', declares that *'globalization is best seen as a multidimensional and multidirectional process involving accelerated and increased flows of virtually everything – capital, commodities, information, ideas, beliefs, people – along constantly evolving axes. Generally speaking, the globalization of international exchanges is leading to the integration of a diversity of multicultural exchanges in almost all national contexts, paralleling and nurturing the trend towards multiple cultural affiliations and a 'complexification' of cultural identities. This is not to ignore, however, the negative impacts of globalizing forces on the diversity of cultural practices.*

At the local level also, the reality of the 'other' in our social life can no longer be denied. Most of the conflicts that have devastated our world began with refusal of some person, group, or nation to acknowledge and embrace the 'other' as a social reality. It is therefore clear that what that has outlawed peace from our society and indeed from most countries of the world is our refusal to admit that people who differ with us in faith also have claim to God. The breakthrough in Information technology that has reduced the world into a global village, and increase in immigration have further changed the world into a haven of profound diversity harbouring many ethnic groups, cultural traditions and spiritual families. This diversity has given birth to a number of problems that have brewed conflicts of varying dimensions in the modern world.

Writing in the mid-1960s, Martin Luther king Jr painted the image of what he called the "World House"

This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together – black and white, Eastern and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, we must somehow learn to live with each other in peace" [7].

This declaration at the time of Martin Luther King must have

sounded strange because the world had not become as complex and diversified as today. He was obviously thinking globally while observing the changes that were taking place in the American Society of his days. Similarly, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, with clairvoyant precision describes the challenge he and others had to face while living in the religiously diverse Pakistani city of Lahore in the 1940s: to learn to live together with our seriously different traditions not only in peace but in some sort of mutual trust and mutual loyalty [8].

Diana Eck opens one of her writings on Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism with the following:

In Chaim Potok's novel The Book of Light, a young rabbi from Brooklyn on a leave from his post in Korea during the Korean War travels for the first time in Japan. One afternoon, he stands with a Jewish friend before what is perhaps a Shinto shrine with a clear mirror in the Sanctum or perhaps a Buddhist shrine with an image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The altar is lit by the soft light of a tall lamp. Sunlight streams in the door. The two young men observe with fascination a man standing before the altar, his hands pressed together before him, his eyes closed. He is rocking slightly. He is clearly engaged in what we would call prayer.

The rabbi turns to his companion and says,

"Do you think our God is listening to him, John? I don't know, Chappy, I never thought of it" "Neither did I until now. If

He's not listening, why not? If He is listening, then – well,

What are we all about, John? [9]

The scene described above is not limited to a particular religion. We have all wondered whether "Our God" listens to the prayers of people of other faiths. While more enlightened ones among us may "include" adherents of other faiths in their catalogue of "access to God" and secretly believe that God listens to members of their own particular faith traditions with a special attention, the majority among men of faith would prefer to exclude others. Jews, Christians and Muslims are all involved.

In virtually all scriptures, there are portions that lean towards exclusivism and inclusivism at the same time. Quotations from these scriptures therefore must be placed within their proper historical context. Throughout history, men have manipulated text of "exclusion" in their scripture for various selfish ends. The truth however is that such quotations tell us more about those selecting them than about the religions they represent.

In pre-modern situations, exclusivism was possible. It was easy to limit interaction and dictate codes of living in accordance with a prescribed standard inherited by the community. The reality of modernity, however, is that we no longer live in "encased" worlds where we can determine what happens and what does not. Increased interaction, greater access to information and social and economic inter-dependency has imposed upon us a new social structure. We now hear even if we do not listen to messages other than the ones we were used to. We find ourselves compelled to live in a world of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Unlike in the past when our identities were determined by our communities, we are now exposed to a plethora of alternatives and our identities now depend on the choices we make.

The vision of such a world order is already entrenched in the Sacred Scriptures. The Qur'an for instance begins by recognizing the freedom of the individual to choose the faith tradition he wants to belong to.

This is premised on the declaration that God has sent messengers to all nations. There is therefore no compulsion of faith. The Qur'an is therefore replete with several passages that bear this message:

- "Let there be no coercion in matters of faith" (2V256)

- "If it had been your Lord's will, they would all have believed, all those who are on earth. Will you then compel people against their will to believe?" (10V99)

- "… shall we compel you to accept it when you are averse to it?" (11V28)

- And so (O Prophet), exhort them; your task is only to exhort; you cannot compel them."(88 V 21-22)

- "And you can by no means force them to believe: Just remind through this Qur'an, all such as may fear My warning." (50 V 45)

- "But would you perhaps torment yourself to death with grief over them if they are not willing to believe in this message? Behold, We have willed that all beauty on earth be a means by which We put people to test showing which of them are best in conduct." (18 V 6-7).

Man is accorded in all these verses, the respect due to him. The only arbiter in matters of faith for him is his intellect. He therefore has the freedom to choose his religion. But this freedom is often abused by man as he refuses to acknowledge the freedom of others. He strives therefore to mould others into the form he has fashioned in his mind and if they resist him, he turns into their enemy and rejects them out rightly.

Rejection of the "other" is a major cause of exclusivism. Islam however insists that Muslims must learn to accept the "other", and in fact, be ready to live in a pluralistic world:

"Unto everyone of you have we appointed a law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community, but (He willed it otherwise in order) to test you through what He has given you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works: unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that in which you used to differ"(5 V 48).

Such verses of inclusion are found in the scriptures of all the great religions of the world. There are, however, other verses from the same scriptures that seem to lean towards exclusion. The various interpretations that have been given to these verses and the edicts that have been issued by religious authorities in different lands and climes have shown that what causes conflicts in reality is not what we believe but how we believe it.

For example, the Frankfurt Declaration of the Evangelical Church of Germany declared in 1970 that it rejected 'the false teaching that non-Christian religions and world-views are also ways of salvation similar to belief in Christ' [10]. This is in fact an echo of the famous dictum which dates back to the third century, *'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus',* - 'outside the church, there is no salvation.' Within the same faith tradition, the United Church of Canada meeting in Naramata, British Columbia in 1985 authored a declaration of inclusion- 'If there is no salvation outside the church, we reject such a salvation for ourselves. We came to this notion of the salvation of others through being loved by Christ. We should be diminished without others as others.'

Let us reflect on the two following quotations from the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an:

-'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved'. Acts 4:12

-"And whoever goes in search of a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted from him."(3V85).

Supporters of theologies of exclusion in both faith traditions may manipulate the biblical text to project 'how' non-Christians are doomed to eternal perdition if they don't become Christians. Theologians of inclusion on the other hand, rely on the text and the context to bring out the true meaning of the message. Concerning the passage, Diana Eck writes: 'it is true that it says 'no other name'. In those remarkable days following Pentecost, when the energy of the Holy Spirit made Peter bold in his faith, he healed a man lame from birth saying, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk, Peter was asked by the elders and scribes of the temple, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' He was unambiguous. It was not in his own name he had healed the man, nor was it in the name of a foreign god, as the elders of the temple suspected. It was no other name than that of Jesus Christ.'

This explanation by Diana Eck shows that the passage has nothing to do with the salvation of others as theologians of exclusion often argue. The Quranic passage too has been used by exclusionists to banish non-Muslims from the circle of salvation. It should be understood that the word "Islam" is a noun derived from the verb aslama which means to submit. In the Qur'anic usage, the religion of all the Prophets before Muhammad (s.a.w) was the religion of submission to the will of Allah (Islam). It is in the light of this that the words "Islam" and "Muslim" should be understood – "Muslim" (he who has submitted to the will of God) is a term used for the followers of all religions in the Qur'an as it is used in particular reference to the followers of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). The following verses could be cited:

"And Moses said: O my people! If you believe in God, place your trust in God

– If you have truly submitted yourselves to Him, " (i.e., if you have been Muslims) (10 V 84).

Similarly, the followers of Jesus are reported to have declared:

"We believe in God, and bear witness (O Jesus) that we submitted ourselves to Him (are Muslims)"(3 V 52).

In fact, Islam is the name given to the monotheistic creed by the Qur'an. This so-called verse of exclusion should therefore be understood in this light. Whoever seeks a religion other than submission to the will of God shall have such an enterprise rejected from him. We are reminded thus of Goethe's verse:

"Foolish, that each in his own case Prizes his opinion so

If Islam means "to the will of God" We all live and die in Islam."

It is this universalistic and pluralistic vision that Islam upholds by the declaration: "Surely, those who have believed in Muhammad, and the Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians – whoso believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good deeds, on them shall come no fear nor shall they grieve" (5 V 69).

Dialogue towards a Global Ethic

A call for dialogue to resolve conflicts is not new; neither is the call for the adoption of a global ethic. Since Thomas Kuhn revolutionized our understanding of scientific development with his notion of paradigm shifts by which he meant the large frame of thoughts within which we place and interpret all observable data, religious reflection has been largely dialogic, particularly in the West. He held that scientific advancement inevitably brings about shifts in paradigm-like from geocentricism to heliocentrism, for example, that are always vigorously resisted but finally prevail [11]. The above insight is as relevant to religious thought as it is to scientific reflections. There had been several paradigm shifts in religious thought, and with the growing complexity of the human society and its structure, the shifts tend to be more radical and frequent. The whole notion of truth has had to be deabsolutized in the western world in obvious realization of the folly of having such notions of truth that are absolute static and exclusive [12].

Dialogue therefore is not new in religious conflict resolution. Why then, have we not seen any significant reduction in religious conflicts? One may be tempted to quickly point out that it is because all the dialogues that have been held have not evolved a global ethic of religious understanding. This too is not novel because the earliest attempts in modern times at developing a global ethic was in 1993 when the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago issued a declaration to that effect. This declaration was vigorously publicized in the writings of Hans Kung and his Global Ethic Foundation. Celebrated as a noble vision and endorsed in all lands and climes, the global ethic initiative too is yet to be achieved.

In author own view, he think the approach often adopted by some of us- avoiding points of dissent and controversy, and starting from established consensus- poses another problem. Differences should be confronted, understood and appreciated. Author agree with John Bowden that patience, tolerance, understanding and a spirit of cooperation are needed, and that the courage to engage in argument to tackle differences is a part of the challenges to be faced [13].

According to Swidler, interreligious dialogue operates in three areas namely, the practical, where we collaborate to help humanity; the depth or 'spiritual' dimension, where we attempt to experience the dialogue partner's religion or ideology from within; and the cognitive, where we seek understanding of the truth [14]. Our approach to dialogue in order to achieve international peace building must therefore be committed to go beyond collaborating to help humanity alone to experiencing the 'other' by understanding him and his 'world' from within. It is in so doing that we shall truly embrace pluralism while at the same time affirming our identity. This will be made possible through a carefully prepared curriculum for peace education and its adoption as a policy, and implementation by African states in accordance with their peculiar challenges. It is my conviction that a commitment to such a policy will open our hearts to the 'truths' contained in other traditions and give us the moral courage to confront ourselves at the personal level, as well as our congregations and communities, and thus lay the foundation of a new global ethic which will herald a better world built on trust, love and understanding.

It is, however, important to assert that media education must form an integral part of the curriculum. Our actions most often are determined by the ways we receive media information and respond to them. Youth in particular need to be given adequate media education because of the volatility of their nature and the propensity of their being used as recruits for social disturbance. Abdul Waheed Khan captures this need for media education so well:

Increasingly, media are shaping the meanings and practices of their daily lives based on the information they receive through print media, radio, television, and the Internet. As a matter of fact, young people themselves point out that media can unlock gateways to social

mobility, economic improvement, prosperity and creativity. As radio, television, film, and the Internet increasingly reach young people around the world, these media take on power to initiate social change by acting as a motivating and mobilizing force…

Conclusion

But what are the implications of these developments for education? Most obviously, they seem to widen the gap between young people's experiences outside school and their experience in the classroom. While the social and cultural experiences of young people have been dramatically transformed over the past fifty years, schools have not always kept pace with change. The ways in which teaching and learning are organized, the kinds of skills and knowledge that are valued in assessment, have changed only superficially over time. Yet, much of our learning about important social issues, such as global warning or poverty, have not emanated from school. Rather, much of the knowledge that we gather on these and other global issues come from the media. Schools need to make much stronger attempts to address and build connections with young people's media cultures. And this makes the case of media education all the more important. Some countries have recognized this importance. Media education curricula are used effectively in Canada and North America, Europe, in some countries in the Mediterranean and Asia…

A secondary school teacher who has been trained in the subject will have a better understanding about the factors contributing to young people's socialization, the culture of media and the power relations it promotes, the use of semiotics and how semiotic references compare to natural languages, the relationship between fiction and non-fiction productions, the notion of genre and the hybridization of genres and so forth. Schematically, we observe two schools of thought on media education. The first claims the use of media as a teaching tool incorporated within a particular teaching methodology and subject.

The second that is more important yet less prevalent, is to ensure that media consumers are well informed about media ethics so that they can deconstruct media products and judge the value of the content with some objectivity [15].

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