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Interfaith Dialogue – A Personal Experience

Issues relating to inter-faith dialogue have become, in the present time, both politically charged and global in scope. This intensifies the spiritual sensitivity, which has always characterized the relationship between different religious communities. These burning contemporary issues concerning the theme of dialogical encounter have engaged many proponents of dialogue in the whole world including Pakistan who are seriously struggling to reconcile a spiritual vision with a concrete exigency: a vision of the unity of religions on the level of ultimate principles with the practical requirements of dialogue in the actual world of competing and often conflicting religious communities.

Pakistan, as an independent Islamic democratic republic, appears on the map of the world in 1947. This newly emerged state claims to follow strictly the basic injunctions of Islam (a word which means “devotement” to the will of God and which is closely related to the Arabic word for “peace” – salâm) based on the Qur’an, i.e. the revealed book to the prophet Mohammad. The Qur’an contains more about relations between the faith it proclaims and other forms of faith, both in general declarations and often in specific statements about Judaism and Christianity, than any comparable text.¹

Historically speaking, Lahore, metropolis of the country and an old cultural centre, has played a vital role in promoting the intercourse among the various religions, such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism. It was in 1575 A.D. when the Mughal emperor Akbar (d. 1605) started a system of religious conferences in the ‘Ibâdât Khâna first at Fatehpur Sikri (now in India) and then at Lahore whe-

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re the representatives of all the afore-mentioned religions participated. Apart from others, two Christian missions, in 1591 and 1595, joined this religious debate and expressed vehemently the basic tenets

of their religion. The Catholic Fathers also described Lahore as being a delightful city.² Afterwards, particularly in the period of colonial India, contacts between religious traditions increased rapidly, and along with them actual conversational encounters among believers of different religions started. Simultaneously, a serious attempt began to bring the religious leaders of the Indian subcontinent together in a spirit of reconciliation, concentrating on what united them rather what kept them apart.

Jinnah and Iqbal

Since its inception, Pakistan followed a policy of friendship and tolerance with other religions. In this regard, Quaid-i-Azam (which means the famous leader) Muhammad Ali Jinnah (d. 1948), the founder of Pakistan, on his election as the first President of the Constituent Assembly, delivered a Presidential Address (11th August 1947), in which he has defined clearly the status of religions. Other relevant excerpts of this historic speech are as under:

You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State

There are some States in existence where there are discriminations made and bars imposed against a particular class. Thank God, we are not starting in those days. We are starting in the days where there

is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and other, no discrimination between one caste or creed and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State...

Now I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time Hindus will cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State.³

Likewise, the scattered writings of Muhammad Iqbâl (d. 1938), the poet-philosopher of the Indian subcontinent, who conceived the idea of a separate homeland for the Muslims, can be of considerable value to those engaged in interfaith dialogue. Certain trajectories, which we might call that of “communal realism”, or “exoteric solidarity”, can assist proponents of dialogue who are struggling to reconcile a spiritual vision with a concrete exigency. Another principal trajectory is that deriving from a metaphysical conception of love. Released from its entanglement with emotion and the self, from race, nation and even religion, the principle of love in Iqbâl’s vision generates a disinterested attitude embracing all – Muslims and non-Muslims, believers and non-believers alike.

Impediments to dialogue

No doubt, dialogical development has not been without its difficulties and like many other countries of the world, Pakistan is also confronting such problems. Furthermore, the growing wave of extremism is of great concern for all people, even in the Islamic world. Apart from this pitiable situation, there is an urgent need for the common religious roots of peace found in major religions of the world and to work together for the future of humanity. This is the time of great violence, conflicts and turmoil in most parts of our country. In some regions there are ethnic conflicts and in other parts there is suffering due to religious extremism, which ultimately disturbs peace and weakens the economic and political structures. If the political and religious leaders promote the true religious values of sharing, caring, loving, justice and peace, and make sincere efforts to resolve the conflicts through dialogue and tolerance, and educate the masses to do the same, furthermore, if the nation

adopts more honourable and compassionate ways to solve the conflicts, then it would be possible to live without inhuman and painful disasters.

In order to combat the present challenges confronting Pakistan, to protect the national solidarity, freedom and sovereignty and to strengthen the dialogical process among the different religions, several governmental and non-governmental organizations are striving incessantly. Inspired by the epoch-making Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the religious scholars and several reputed personalities of different religions emphasized the need to curb the factional tendencies and promote harmony among their followers.

Under the aegis of our Federal Ministry of Religious Affairs (Islamabad), several national and international conferences were held for promoting the significance of the interfaith dialogue. Besides, many privately organized societies such as the Metaphysical Society (Lahore), founded by Fr. R. A. Butler, (a Swiss German), The Truth Society (Lahore) etc. are doing commendable service for spreading the culture of dialogue, the peaceful coexistence of humanity and the acceptance of others.

Despite best intentions and hopes, the attempt to engage dialogically at times flounders, especially through the 9/11 incident and its frenetic aftermath. But such perilous happenings have not vitiated the intrinsic need and inherent value of dialogue, as the religious scholars, academics, researchers, influential media personnel and the devoted members of the concerned organizations of Pakistan are striving for constructive dialogue between followers of different faiths towards better understanding and harnessing of distinct religious principles and teachings to the benefit of all humanity, on the basis of mutual respect and acknowledgement of differences and through cooperation with related individuals and associations.

These days we should hope that the people of Pakistan will be able to revitalize the thinking of its political founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah and its mastermind and great poet Muhammad Iqbâl. Their ideas as mentioned above could help that Pakistan can do its duty in the global scope of interfaith dialogue activity with regard to the concrete exigency and the spiritual vision.

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