Peace a Universal Forum for Dialogue of Life Among Believers

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In a pluralistic World, as a lot of spontaneous and intentional dialogues are taking place, peace can be a widespread forum for a meaningful Dialogue of Life among believers of various religions. A purposeful and decisive move to work for peace and to promote it at all levels going beyond every prejudice is a must. Training our personnel to be facilitators of peace groups, equipping them with skills and techniques for conflict resolution is possible and is a necessity today. This can be worked out together as believers. To respect our religious identities and at the same time come together and work together as much as possible for common good is the challenge that Religious Pluralism is offering to people of different religions today.

The Religious Pluralistic Context

Today, each one is journeying with believers of other religions in the midst of an active and vibrant pluralism because "Religious pluralism has become an intellectual and spiritual fact for contemporary life".[1] The question is how much pluralism can we accept or better still how can we strengthen our religious identity in a pluralistic World? The whole process of net-working in a pluralistic context among people belonging to various religions opens enormous challenges. Another significant question we can address together is what are the possibilities and risks pluralism brings to the field of education? Certainly the need for a life-long education is a must in a religiously pluralistic society.

Meaning and Significance of Religious Pluralism

The concept of pluralism is characterized by the idea of 'plurality', of 'multiplicity'. Pluralism acquires specific significance according to the field in which it is used. In Philosophy pluralism refers to a theory or system of thought, which recognizes more than one ultimate principle. The knowable world as it is evident is made up of a plurality of interesting things.

We can say that pluralism is the "fruit of modernity"[2]. Today there is a conscious receptiveness of the need for a positive evaluation of the phenomenon of pluralism. It is definitely an expression of the recognition of personal rights and of course contributes to the promotion of justice and peace. Pluralism brings possibilities and risks to the field of education.

"Our deepest need, as philosophy and theology in our period show, is the drive to face otherness and difference" (Tracy1990: 67). This is a very delicate and challenging task.

> "The others must become genuine others for us – not projections of our fears and desires. The others are not marginal to our centers but centers of their own. Their conflicts and their liberationist self-namings demand the serious attention of our centre on their own terms" (Tracy 1990:67).

Religious pluralism and education

An important field where people of all religions can work together is the field of education. Alberich lays emphasis on the following points: in a pluralistic society educative work can receive not few stimulations and to profit from possibilities unknown in the past: promotion of the personality open to dialogue and respect of difference, wider horizons of cultural enrichment; overcoming of prejudices and closed up attitudes, new possibilities of maturation in the critical sense, etc.

The existence of negative consequences of pluralism cannot be overlooked. In the field of education of the young, Alberich points out that: the process of socialization is strongly modified and shaken as much as the multiplicity exasperated and contradictory of cultural messages is often translated in the impossibility of a coherent personal integration, in the lack of values and therefore in the incapacity of maturation of one's identity.

> "Religious education must be open ended. No one has all the answers in a pluralistic society. In a pluralistic society there cannot be one answer. These little truths are not easily accepted. Each of us has wished for the grail-like single answer, and whole religious communities have claimed the one, single, clear answer. Our fear of the unknown, of change, of differences must be overcome, and our religious

education must open us to new conclusions as temporary conclusions or even no conclusions".[3]

Strengthening of Identity

Plurality is a natural phenomenon in every sphere of nature. Diversity adds to the richness of life. Beauty can be found only in diversity. In such a context the plurality of religions becomes a captivating challenge; "what is required of us is to face the fact of plurality of religions with a sense of admiration and respect for diversity, and sincere attempt to establish a harmonious human society. This is what we call 'religious pluralism' in the positive sense".[4]

Our identity refers to who we are. The best contribution we can offer to those around is a robust identity built up on genuine knowledge, nourished by true humility and willingness to serve. Religion plays a major role in determining our identities. Who we are and whose we are is of much importance. When the core values of our religion are assimilated and made part of our being then our identities are strengthened.

Healthy and Realistic Response to Growing Violence

Today, in the world, violence is ever on the increase. The media is bringing it to our notice day after day. Instead of getting discouraged and frustrated, there should be a healthy and realistic response to the situation of growing violence. In a time when conflict and tension are on the increase, it is necessary to evidence how religions can contribute to bond together peoples and nations. Today there is greater urgency for all religious leaders to come together and dialogue together. Fellowship and cooperation among religions is indeed the sure way for peace and harmony in the World. How eloquent are the words of Heschel:

> "Life is a partnership of God and man … God is a partner and a partisan in man's struggle for justice, peace, love, and beauty, and it is because of His being in need of man that He entered into a covenant with him for all time, a mutual bond embracing God and man, a relationship to which God, not alone man, is committed… God's dream is not to be alone, to have mankind as a partner in the drama of continuous creation. By whatever we do, by

every act we carry out, we either advance or obstruct the drama of redemption; we either reduce or enhance the power of evil."[5]

Option for Peace – A Priority Choice

All religions advocate for peace. Today, peace is no more a wishful dream of persons or communities. It is the most essential need of the hour. In the midst of growing tensions, war and hatred, in our communities, we can sustain and support those who opt for peace. Right from early childhood, we can initiate our children to be lovers and builders of peace. In the daily dialogue of life our religious communities can continue to sow seeds of peace, dialogue and harmony. Pope Francis has proposed *nonviolence* as a style of politics for peace.

> "I ask God to help all of us to cultivate nonviolence in our most personal thoughts and values. May charity and nonviolence govern how we treat each other as individuals, within society and in international life. When victims of violence are able to resist the temptation to retaliate, they become the most credible promotors of nonviolent peacemaking. In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms."[6]

To Network to establish peace and harmony

The comparative study of religions has shown how religions can collaborate and must collaborate. The political ideal of the world as it emerges is not so much a single empire with a homogeneous civilization and a single communal will, but a sisterhood and brotherhood of free nations differing deeply in life style and thinking, habits and teaching existing side by side in peace and order, harmony and co-operation, and each contributing to the world its own exclusive and specific best. When this ideal is extended also to the religious sphere then there is greater hope for people of different religions to network to establish a world of peace, harmony, justice and peace.

Inclusion of Peace Modules in our Religion Classes

Is it not the right time to introduce modules of Peace into our religion classes? We can take care to initiate children into the truths of their religion. We can come together to prepare peace modules and to introduce them to our younger generation. In dialogue we have to overcome our fear of the unknown, of change, of differences and our peace education modules must lead us to new horizons of cooperation and networking.

Moving beyond normal fear and prejudicewe can join hands together to build a more harmonious society. We need to comprehend the real significance of Religious pluralism. Religiouspluralism is a blessing affirms James Michael Lee.

Religious pluralism a blessing

"*The blessing of religious pluralism*" this is how his contribution is titled in the book named: ***Religious pluralism and religious education***[7].Right at the introduction, Lee emphasises that Religious pluralism is a:

* ❖ *Salvific blessing of the Spirit*
* ❖ *Emancipatory blessing of the Spirit*
* ❖ *Enriching blessing of the Spirit*

"Religious pluralism is a *salvific blessing of the Spirit* in that it enables persons to vastly expand their vision and their contact with the God whom no human endeavour can ever adequately contain.

Religious pluralism is an *emancipatory blessing of the Spirit* in that it enables religious instruction to burst free from those parameters and contents which have so often crippled its primary task of helping learners to touch the God in all and of all.

Religious pluralism is an *enriching blessing of the Spirit* in that it constitutes an extraordinarily rich and privileged way in which the triune God is operatively and ontically present in the modern world"[8].

Lee offers a clear description of Religious pluralism. "Religious pluralism refers to that condition in which individuals or institutions coming from anywhere in the entire spectrum

of sacral orientations interact with each other autonomously but relatedly within the boundaries of a common allegiance to the Holy. Religious pluralism means that members and institutions of various religious orientations not only intermingle with one another and respect each other's faith, but also actively cooperate with each other in order to broaden their own personal and corporate religious existence so as to infuse all reality with the full actuality of the Holy"[9].

Lee offers four well sustained reasons to uphold the necessity of religious pluralism:

> "First other religions are there. They are all around us in their resplendent richness and dazzling diversity. Non one religion stands alone; it is just one among many.

> Second, religious pluralism is necessary because it enables us to more profoundly appreciate and to more deeply live our own particular form of religion.

> Third, religious pluralism is necessary in order to correct, modify, and transform our own particular religion and to move it into the future.

Fourth, religious pluralism is necessary to bring the fruits of our religious tradition to persons and institutions representing different traditions. Each religion exists not only for its members but for the enrichment of others outside its direct ambit"[10].

Gaining Interreligious Competence

Interreligious competence is becoming a key social skill. Contact with adherents of other religions is not only increasing on a global level, it is augmenting within individual countries as they become more heterogeneous and pluralistic. It is no longer possible to ignore other cultures and religions. Knowledge of other religious tenets, traditions and customsisone significant prerequisite for peaceful coexistence among the diverse cultures present in society today. Only such knowledge can help us understand and benefit from our everyday experiences.

With gaining of experience in interreligious competence, today there are colleges and educational institutions that are developing new approaches to successful interreligious dialogue. As a first step, the initiatives and organizations that are already

focusing on interreligious dialogue are being networked to help them intensify their exchange and to pool the resources available to them. In addition, there are organizations that are examining the role interreligious competence currently plays in school and university curriculum. As part of this focus, approaches are being developed for assessing interreligious competence among professors and students and for using innovative methods to impart it, such as virtual competence centers or certification programs. Expert panels, exchange programs, discussion forums, seminars both national and international are also being organized to help increase the interreligious competence of opinion and thought in the political, social, educational and spiritual spheres.

> "Indeed informal contact and friendship between those of different religions may well be a powerful incentive to learn and to explore more in their respective faiths, so that as well-informed religionists they will be able to begin to dialogue! Perhaps it is not too utopian to envisage a day when inter-faith schools of Nurture and the Academic Study of Religion may be set up in spiritually mixed communities to prepare believers for dialogue."[11]

Students are encouraged to move into grassroots, to assume voluntary services in slums and in less developed areas as part of their interreligious commitment. St. Andrew's College Bandra has excelled in this. Twelve teenage Student representatives of the Cardinal Paul Poupard Foundation Chair of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, St. Andrew's College Bandra together with their Professor Sharmila Dhote made possible an Educational workshop voluntarily for around 120 children, at Cheeta Camp in Northeastern Mumbai suburbs. Every Sunday, for three months, these volunteers would spent eight to nine hours at Cheeta Camp. The children were taught basic communication skills in English, computer skills, arts, crafts and Maths which could be utilized in daily life. They were also given possibilities to learn the basics of living together in peace and harmony.[12]

A "UN Decade of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace"

The idea of a "UN Decade of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace" was proposed for the first time on March 2006 in the framework of the Project "Towards the creation of a spiritual forum for world peace at the United Nations", which had been launched two years earlier (May 2004) at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, near Geneva, by an international group of volunteers belonging to different religious/spiritual traditions and linked to several interfaith organizations. That group called as the "Partnership Committee" (PC) prepared and circulated a draft proposal, starting a process of consensus building.

After an extensive process of consultations, which included Mr. Kofi Annan when he was still the UN Secretary General, the idea of creating a permanent forum was replaced by a more realistic goal: to have the United Nations declaring 2010-2020 as a "Decade of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace."[13]

There are a number of national and international seminars and symposiums taking place among believers of various religions and are oriented towards building up better understanding, exploring new ways of working and collaborating together for peace and harmony.Interreligious or interfaith forums in this context arefor surepraise worthy initiative which would certainly facilitate internal dialogue and cooperation within the religious spiritual constituencies as well as resolute actions for peace with relevant partners.

Conclusion

Our reflections have human beings all over the world belonging to one religion or another as the main focus. Our concern has been to become aware of those levels of existence where people of every religion can meet as brothers and sisters to address the challenges increasing violence bring to us. Peace can become a Universal Forum for Dialogue of Life among believers. This calls for urgency to get to know other religions, interact with believers and enter into dialogue with them in profound humility and mutual respect. Genuine dialogue would certainly lead to a mutual enrichment and transformation. Cobb has expressed it pertinently:

> "The Christianity which will be transformed by incorporating the Buddhist understanding of reality will be very different from any form of Christianity with which we are already familiar. Buddhism which incorporates Jesus Christ will be very different from the Buddhism that we know. This will not erase the difference between the two religions; rather, it will offer a new basis for a new renewed dialogue and an unprecedented transformation. All those entrenched positions will gradually begin to disappear."[14]

Education can and ought to play a noteworthy role in bringing believers together. Therefore today, academic magnificence is challenged to be part of the crowd and to open the way to the responsible task of preparing personnel who facilitate the process of dialogue, peace and harmony. In a religious pluralistic world, we are co-pilgrims with our brothers and sisters of every religion and as such we need to elucidate our respective scriptures and communicate our belief in a heart to heart dialogue. We can only comprehend from the perspective we occupy; we can only understand whatever truth is from the specific cultural, religious, social, gender-specific perspectives we dwell in. Perhaps Shakespeare expressed it best of all: "***There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them though we may***". This means to know the story of our religion, and what riches of religious traditions do we have to contribute to the building up of the human family. In a world of growing violence, there is urgency to network with believers of other religions to ensure peace and harmony in society and the world at large.

> "Men have called their eternal Other with many names. When they were singing of the One whom they call this way, they were intending always Other; the first myths were songs of praise. Consequently the names took their abode in the language of it; for men it became always more strong impulse to think and to say their eternal Other as an it. But all names of God were saved: because in them not only of God, but also to God was spoken."[15]

This article from an interdisciplinary and interreligious perspective highlights what unites believers to each other and how important it is for us to live our lives in unity and peace empowering and commissioning each one to be an ambassador

of peace and harmony. The vision of unity that sustains our cultures, philosophies and religions is our greatest strength.

> "In fact I am convinced that the various religions, now and in the future, will have a pre-eminent role in preserving peace and in building a society worthy of man. Indeed, openness to dialogue and to cooperation is required of all people of good will, and in particular of individuals and groups with specific responsibilities in the areas of politics, economics and social life, at both the national and international levels." [16]

Encounters among people of different religions are one of the strongest signs of our times. Getting to know other religions is the key to the heart of joint collaboration. "The Church examines with greater care the relation which she has to non-Christian religions…she reflects at the outset on what men have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them" (n.1).[17]

Dialogue is of great importance in establishing a secure basis for peace. "The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: a name of peace and a summons to peace". Through net-work we learn to discover our common origin and common destiny. The persuasive words of Pope Francis are so appropriate:

> "All of us want peace. Many people build it day by day through small gestures and acts; many of them are suffering, yet patiently persevere in their efforts to be peacemakers".In 2017, may we dedicate ourselves prayerfully and actively to banishing violence from our hearts, words and deeds, and to becoming nonviolent people and to building nonviolent communities that care for our common home. 'Nothing is impossible if we turn to God in prayer. Everyone can be an artisan of peace'."[18]

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