

Collisions Among Different Religions And Cultures – Urgent Requirements for Inter-Religious Dialogue

- Archbishop Felix Machado

Introduction

A Bengali poet of the 11th century A.D., Bhattanarayana, has composed an interesting story based on the war of Mahabharata: In his musical play, towards the close, when incessant bloodshed has continued unabated for eighteen days, we are shown an interlude, a dialogue between a monster, Rudhirapriya, and his spouse Vasagandha. The monstress soliloquizes on the fine conditions of their leader and says that she has laid by enough stores of blood, flesh, bones and fat out of the bodies of the fallen heroes to last them a long time. She invites her husband to come and feast with her. He praises her for her house-wife's instinct, says that he is thirsty and asks for fresh blood. She offers him such a drink and he is satisfied. They gleefully recount the course of the internecine war, the piling corpses which yield them plentiful and delicious provisions. She shows him her larder, her old stock and the replenished fresh store, she says, "**if only the battle proceeds well, then they will never run out of provisions**".

I am sorry to begin this reflection on a rather sad note. But the predicament of our world must be seriously taken into account for two reasons:

- 1) in order to face the prevalent situation and overcome it and
- 2) in order to identify the locus of the problem - are religions really part of the problem? Or are they not rather its solution? The present predicament of our world can be described by noting the following: self-doubt and disillusion with regard to democratic politics, confusion in regard to family life and questions of morality and ethics, degradation of cities into wilderness of poverty and squalor punctuated by fortresses of wealth, the conflict of old tribalisms and nationalisms, the rape of non-renewable resources for short-term gain, profit-centred economy, hedonism, xenophobia, child bonded labourers, exploitation of women, etc.

Obviously, what is evident in our world is a crisis of confidence. A brother does not trust his brother; a sister is suspicious of her sister. And reasons for distrust and suspicion may be said to be colour, caste, status, race, religion, etc. The deeper reasons are selfishness and egocentrism which create in the human person fear of the other and obsession for self-security. Selfishness and egocentrism are at the root of distrust and suspicion which, in turn, give rise to prejudices; then fear is born and it turns into hatred and finally all ends in violence. “**if only the battle proceeds well, then they will never run out of provisions”.**

In such a world marked by conflict between economic, political and social systems some people would like to project divisions among the followers of the world’s religions. Advocates of this projection put forward the happenings of the tragic events of 11th September 2001 in the United States of America and after that date in other parts of the world as a proof of their thesis. It is often declared that religions are at war. I wish to show, through my brief reflection, that all religions fundamentally inspire peace as human beings, who by nature are religious, are drawn to peace. Amidst situations of anxiety, confusion, violence and war the human heart ardently longs for lasting peace. Peace is a sacred value for every religion and every religion teaches its respective adherents to search for peace.

Interreligious Dialogue is con-natural with Religious Practice

The human person is religious by nature. Religion forms natural part of life. Far from being opposed to human life religion is constitutive of being human. The thrust of religion is seen in its liberative force. Obviously, each religion must be seen in its own integrity. All religions are not same. However, in their quest for real self religion is ultimately meant to liberate human persons from their ego and thus bring them to the abundance of life; religion claims to make them see the true nature of things; it helps them to get rid of their sins; it makes the human persons aware of their true dignity. It teaches them to see their true place in life, namely, their creaturliness.

Each religious tradition understands the meaning of liberation according to its teachings/doctrines. Religious and cultural values, such as love of silence and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non-violence, the spirit of hard work, discipline, frugal living, the

thirst for learning and philosophical enquiry, etc., are seriously practised by adherents of different religious traditions, according to their respective religious precepts and teachings, with the goal of achieving ultimate liberation.

It can be said that a religious life, if it is lived authentically, cannot fail to bring forth fruits of peace and universal brotherhood, for it is in the nature of religion to foster an ever closer bond with the Ultimate Reality, whom some of us call God, and to promote an increasingly fraternal relationship among people. Interreligious contacts promote a clearer awareness of each believer's considerable responsibilities with regard to the true good of humanity as a whole. It is when people of all religions come together in a spirit of dialogue that they can firmly determine not to allow themselves to be used by any particularistic interests or be led to be motivated for political ends. Through the spirit of dialogue, religions can tend to assume a more conscious and decisive attitude in shaping social and cultural realities in the community of peoples. This certainly enables the believers to be an active force in the process of globalization and thus to offer a sure hope to humanity. In a number of instances, it has become evident that the united activity of believers would have proved more effective had it been carried out jointly and in a coordinated manner. Such a way of working among believers of different religions can have a decisive effect in fostering peace among peoples and overcoming still existing divisions between "zones" (north-south, east-west, developed-developing and non-developed, etc).

If the purpose of religion is man's ultimate good, then dialogue among the world's religions is not only useful but necessary to allow religions to achieve that purpose. The pluri-religious situation of our world does not simply ask us to be passively tolerant of others but demands of our mutual respect and friendly collaboration, for the good of the society.

When clear and irreversible option was made by the Catholic Church for building positive relations with other religions (at the Second Vatican Council which was held in Rome from 1962-65) there seemed to be cynicism and apprehension among many people in the secular world. Despite this scepticism the Church, and also people of other religious traditions, relentlessly pursue the path of interreligious dialogue. Persuasive words and creative gestures of openness and respect by leaders of different religions, such as those of Pope John Paul II in Assisi, amaze many people.

Dialogue is a way of living today. Dialogue is vital for religious people. Dialogue has been the history of religions. Dialogue continues to be the chief characteristic of the religious world today.

Dialogue among religions presupposes, above all, an uncompromising adhesion to one's own religious conviction while at the same time an openness towards the truth claimed by the others' religions; dialogue calls for witness to one's own religious identity and, at the same time respect towards the religious identity of the other. It is also through the spirit of dialogue that people, whatever their religious affiliation, will be able to get rid of hypocrisy and self-righteousness which can lead to justifying violence and bloodshed in the name of religion.

It is through interreligious dialogue that one discovers the values which are held as constitutive dimensions of religious truths in one's own religion and also those which are propounded by others' religions. These values require, if they are to grow and develop, the support of everyone – politicians, leaders of international organizations, businessmen, and workers, associations and private citizens. What I am speaking of is a precise duty incumbent on everyone, and more so if one is a believer in the large sense of the word, to promote interreligious dialogue and harmonious relations among believers of different religions.

Interreligious dialogue is not a debate or an argumentative communication which, as J. Habermas warns, puts too much emphasis on the intellectual aspect of communication... in the reality of communication argumentation always leads to more conflicts than consensus.

Identifying Common Problems

The present day dialogue among religions has been mainly taking place on the level of collaboration. If greater and more fruitful collaboration is to take place between followers of different religious traditions, a clear process of identifying common problems of the society is an indispensable task. For this purpose individual religious leaders, representing different religions and, already formed interreligious groups in a given area, need to meet together on a regular basis. Different centres, such as this one, can provide occasions and

space for executing this indispensable task. As an example, I would identify the following problems:

- a) social and economic injustice results when the gains of modern prosperity are enjoyed by a relatively few, while many are exploited and marginalized;
- b) the mass media, which has tremendous potential for building understanding and respect among religious believers, has sometimes promoted models of an alien life-style and perpetuated suspicions and prejudices;
- c) the ecological crisis deeply affects our habitat and should engage attention of all believers;
- d) poverty forces many people, especially those from poorer countries, to migrate, in many cases leading to the break-up of families and subjecting the migrants to exploitation;
- e) all aspects of the exploitation of women and children for labour and sex is an abomination which should be effectively forbidden by law;
- f) graft and corruption demoralizes society and weakens people's initiative to work hard and serve generously;
- g) instrumentalization of religion for political and economical ends is a growing concern in our world today, and
- h) denial of human rights, particularly, religious freedom, causes not only oppression of innocent people but also falsifies religious truth itself.

Ensuring Continuity in Dialogue through Adequate Structures

Dialogue is not undertaken for any tactical or opportunistic reasons. It is rooted in the very life which one identifies with one's own religion. It is the fruit of deep spiritual life. Dialogue is not a last minute answer to crisis situations in society. It is initiated, sustained and strengthened when relations between people of different religions are good.

Preparing people to meet other believers, i.e. to learn about the scriptures of one's own religion as well as those of the others, be informed accurately about one another's precepts and doctrines, appreciate one another's traditions, work together for common good and accept every one as pilgrim and friend on the path of dialogue, is an ongoing task of each

religious community if meaningful and lasting collaboration for the good of all is to be undertaken.

Structures, even simple and minimum, can be of great help to have a systematic, effective and efficient approach to promote dialogue among believers of different religions. Structures also ensure continuity and constancy in relationships. Permanent structures for dialogue in our world have proved to be very useful. They would be too many to mention here. Various directories have begun to bring the work of these centres to the notice of a wider public. I would suggest that greater coordination and collaboration needs among these centres.

Small and large interreligious groups, with their permanent structures, have been instrumental in spreading moral values, holistic development, justice and peace in different societies. For example, the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), a multi-religious organization founded by Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others, has been helping to remove discriminatory attitudes and promote justice and peace. It has helped the believers of all religions to rally the cause of dialogue and spread the culture of peace in different regions, as well as throughout the world. It is interesting, for example, to go over different themes which the Asian Conference on Religion and Peace (ACRP), the Asian branch of WCRP, took for its reflection over the years: *“Peace through Religion – Development and Service through Interreligious Cooperation”*; *“Religion in Action for Peace – Discrimination, Disparity and Violence”*; *“Bridge of Peace in Asia – Promotion of Human Dignity, Liberation from Poverty”*; *“Dialogue and Cooperation of Religions for Harmony in Asia, Development and Environment”*; *“Our Asian Neighbour – Building a Sharing Community”*; *“Asia, the Reconciler”*.

Difficulties to Overcome and Challenges to Meet

- 1) Religions have been sometimes abused and drawn into ethnic conflicts. All such conflicts are of non-religious nature in the strict sense of the word, i.e. religions as such do not approve these conflicts. However, it must not be easily ignored that religions can intensify these conflicts. In order to closely examine such conflicts I will mention examples from the Asian countries as I am more familiar with my continent: Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India. Every ethnic group

has the fundamental right to exist as such. This right is violated when an ethnic group is suppressed or brutally forced to move or when an attempt is made to weaken its ethnic identity to such an extent that it is made no longer distinguishable. Interreligious cooperation and correct understanding of one's own religious tradition, which is based on the faithful practice and serious and unbiased study, can be of immense help in resolving these inter-ethnic conflicts. Religions also help people to examine the core of problems, such as the sinful human tendencies of pride, greed, selfishness, intolerance as well as unwillingness to forgive.

- 2) Globalization, as self-imposing, powerful and inevitable system, has intensified conflicts in different parts of the world. Perhaps, globalization is providing opportunities for many of the developing countries to join the mainstream of the world economy. But one has to admit that there are no shortcuts to genuine development. Unfortunately, the poor are becoming poorer as a result of the open market economy and multi-national corporations. Globalization means control of world economies by giant corporations which are accountable to no community and to no country. Their only aim is profit at all costs. Thus, as a consequence also of globalization, poverty has become deplorably acute in many parts of world. "According to the 1997 United Nations Human Development Report, in 1960s the share of global income enjoyed by the wealthiest 20% of the world's population was thirty times the amount shared by the poorest 20%. The ratio more than doubled during thirty years of official development efforts. It reached 61 to one in 1991 and rose to 78 to one in 1994. The great benefits of global economic growth have gone not to the poor but to those who already have more than they could ever need in their lifetime".

Religious scenario in the world has been deeply affected by the global market economy and free world trade. As a consequence, the focus of religious people has shifted from the transcendental values to material profit and consumerism. In some cases religion is even projected as an obstacle in the way of 'progress'. With increased materialism believers are tempted to live the kind of 'help yourself' religion or they tend to practice it superficially. This, in turn, affects morality: good and bad or right and wrong depend on one's personal taste or on the majority opinion polls. In this context mention must be made of various movements which are inspired by different religious traditions and

which have come to the defence and protection of the victims of globalization. Based on fundamental religious principles the dignity of the human persons and their rights are emphasised and defended. Interreligious dialogue has become a way of rediscovering common values which all possess, such as peace, justice, love, caring and forgiveness. The Catholic Church suggests that the challenge of globalization be responded to by ensuring “a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalisation”.

- 3) In the practice of interreligious dialogue it is important for believers to maintain a happy tension between being rooted in their own faith, on the one hand, and at the same time being critically but trustfully open to the other, on the other hand. These two elements, namely, rootedness and critical openness, are important in the practice of interreligious dialogue. In other words, believers today need to stand on firm foundation of their own faith and remain trustfully open in dialogue to that of the other. If one ignores one or the other of these aspects one is sure to fall in the error of either fundamentalism or relativism.

Believers who are closed in on their religious traditions, those who ignore the legitimate presence of the other in their otherness, those who overlook legitimate differences end in developing fundamentalist/extremist attitude. While rootedness in one's own religious tradition is necessary fundamentalism signifies danger, not only to one's own religious tradition and community but to the whole of society. Scholars of religion today speak of certain features of fundamentalism, which denote an active, and not a passive, movement. Fundamentalism **fights back**. It is militant, reacting to that which is perceived as a threat to the core identity of the followers of the movement. It **fights for**, defending a world view which it has inherited, by force of arms if necessary. It **fights with** a certain number of key ideas which have been selected because they reinforce identity. It **fights against** all opposition, whether without or within. It is therefore inclined to be impatient with compromising moderates. It **fights under** a religious banner, i.e. under God or in the name of some transcendent reference. This becomes for a fundamentalist a great conviction in carrying out what is conceived to be a mission.

Fundamentalism/religious extremism is not limited to any one particular country, culture or religion, although an opinion is expressed that it is easier in the case of the so-called ‘prophetic’ or ‘semitic’ religions. Fundamentalism is a problem which almost all religions face today. Even religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, which have often boasted of being ‘non-dogmatic’ and ‘non-exclusivist’ are not free of fundamentalists. Why is this happening? In the pursuit of mere material progress post-modern societies have created for its people an atmosphere of bewilderment and confusion which often is at the origin of fundamentalism; for, ‘chaos’ and ‘confusion’ is what the human nature fears the most. Many societies are forced to live today in this chaos and confusion, particularly with regard to ethical and moral values. An appeal to the idealized past and offering that idealized past as a model to the believers religious fundamentalism is gaining ground in many countries.

- 4) Nationalism is another obstacle in the path of dialogue. Based on a strong ideology this notion claims a person’s absolute loyalty and devotion. It demands a commitment beyond and deeper than all other human ties, superseding even one’s religious beliefs and duties. Yet there should be no contradiction between loyalty to religious truth and loyalty to one’s nation. True religious faith does not exclude conscientious citizenship. Nationalism, as a dominant, destructive, chauvinistic and manipulative ideology generates programmes, policies and actions. As an ideology nationalism tends to categorically exclude others. A distinction needs to be made between patriotism and nationalism. While the former is a positive value the latter needs to be rejected. Patriotism recognizes the other as an integral part of the same nation. It is right to be patriotic and to love one’s own identity as a member of a specific national community. The denial of patriotism is nationalism. While patriotism, which implies loving what is one’s own, respects what belongs to others, nationalism disdains everything that is not its own. If it does not succeed in destroying what belongs to others, it seeks to appropriate it. Political manipulation of symbols, myths, even fundamental religious essence, etc., is a mark of nationalism today in some countries. Such nationalism, in effect
 - a) creates values, defines values, edits values, correlates values, subdues values, and destroys values;

- b) tells the nationals what to feel for and what to reject;
- c) is not answerable to any authority or agent outside its state apparatus;
- d) contains elements of its disintegration;
- e) becomes its own belief system;
- f) ignites wars and other conflicts;
- g) tends to select religion that most guarantees followers for the state in its chosen policies and programmes;
- h) contains elements of religious discrimination and persecution;
- i) moves towards rendering positive religion obsolete and favours a religion which conforms to its own culture.

Conclusion

Engagement in interreligious dialogue is an occasion for a believer to understand himself better, get to know others justly and fairly, dispel fears and misunderstanding, be influenced, inspired and enriched mutually. One should not wait to enter into dialogue until situations are out of hand. Dialogue is not an ambulance which one calls when there is an emergency and a crisis. Practice of interreligious dialogue must be fostered when times are favourable. Friendships should be inculcated, relations should be deepened and bridges should be built when times are peaceful. Experiences show that these long time relations help avert disasters or help find humane solutions to them in a time of a crisis.

Present tendencies in dialogue among religions are primarily oriented towards a living together in a peaceful and constructive way among people of different religious traditions, and living a common spiritual witness to these traditions for mutual knowledge and enrichment. It entails, above all, ‘contact’ in everyday life and ‘collaboration’ in building up a world of justice, peace and love. An ‘intellectual’ or ‘theological’ aspect will certainly be necessary, sooner or later, but it is not the starting point, nor it need be the most important element of interreligious relations. What is urgent today is forging bonds of friendship across religious boundaries. We must listen attentively to one another and give interpersonal relationships a prominent value in this venture of ‘interreligious friendship’ .