

Interfaith Dialogue and Comparative Religion: For a Better world Order

(In the context of Religious Pluralism)

Dr. Jyotirmoyee Devi

The word 'dialogue' is derived from the Greek word 'dia' which means 'going through' and 'logos' means principles and significant cohering realities. In its etymological meaning 'dialogue' stands for conversation between individuals, groups and communities to go through their own respective logos. Therefore 'interfaith dialogue' means a practical activity of listening and sharing of others' faith by means of dialogue.

'Interfaith dialogue' is the recent development of religion in the field of comparative study of religion. Religious dialogue is the very important aid to challenge the problem of religious pluralism. Dialogue may be regarded as an ongoing process that involves mutual discovery and working with others so that empathy grows and strengthened the relations.

Inter faith dialogue helps one to find out the basic ideologies of all faiths, teaches to adjust with newer situations, resolve conflicts among the followers of different faiths. According to Ursula King dialogue seems to be primarily a very practical activity of listening and sharing and at its best, it might imply an in depth participation in another mode of thinking, believing, praying or worshipping."¹

It is important that the aim of the supporters of Interfaith dialogue is better acquaintance with other faiths in the hope of eradicating misunderstandings and false views that caused animosity or enmity.

Comparative Religion is the comparative study of the beliefs, values, symbols, cults, practices and institutions of the religions of the

world. A. C. Bouquet defines Comparative Religion as “a survey and comparison of the great religions of the world”. But as a very sensitive study comparative study of the religions is not an easy task. Religions of the world both agree and differ together in many important points. In this context of real comparative study K. N. Tiwari observes that “factual comparisons with point of real similarities and differences must be brought about in making a real comparative study of the religions of the world”.²

There is a danger that becomes serious when comparative study of religions is undertaken due to ignorance of theologians with regard to the psychology of believers. To avoid these dangers, a special kind of scientific attitude i.e. all sorts of preferences for or against any religion must be avoided. To be a scientific study comparative study of religion is not only the study of bare externals like rituals, methods of prayer, ceremonies etc. but also of the inner faiths and involvements of the followers of religions. In the comparative study of religions mutual understanding of believers of different religious faiths leads to common ground of recognition among religions. Y. Masih observes about the phrase ‘mutual understanding as “understanding of men belonging to different faiths taking full cognizance of their conviction, commitment and existential decisions involved in their practice and beliefs.”³ According to Vander Leeuw⁴ the student of comparative religion should be firmly rooted in the beliefs and experiences of his own religion, and the mutual comparison of religion ‘is possible only by thus beginning with one’s own attitude to life.’⁵

For the practice of interfaith dialogue three considerations are of utmost importance, i.e. cognitive, affective and objective. The cognitive aspect covers two components i.e. the participants in a dialogue are well acquainted with their own religious traditions. Another aspect is that their aim is to acquire sufficient knowledge of others’ religion. For a meaningful exchange of different religions these prerequisites must be fulfilled.

The second one i.e. the affective attitude is that a sympathetic attitude towards others religion is indispensable to achieve the true understanding of the same.

The third point i.e. the objective aspect as mentioned by E.J. Sharpe in the context of his discussion of attitude of the Christian towards other religion. According to Sharpe, there are four kinds of dialogues.⁶

the first one is known as the discursive dialogue as “a shared quest for intellectual clarity and understanding.” The second one is the human dialogue as an encounter on the level of a common humanity. The third one Secular dialogue that is shared involvement in a secular situation. The fourth one is the interior dialogue that is common quest for ultimate reality or God. Of these four types of dialogues as mentioned by E.J. Sharpe, the first and the second type express attitudes whereas, third and the fourth type refer to goals of interfaith dialogue.

There are four Guidelines for dialogue of the ‘British council of Churches’ as that

1. *dialogue begins when people meet each other*
2. *dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust.*
3. *dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community*
4. *dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.*⁷

Regarding the implications of interfaith dialogue it is important to realize that in this age of globalization, we share a common humanity and we must learn to move towards greater mutuality by taking part in different dialogues. Today due to the influence of inter religious encounter and dialogue each religious tradition requires new kind of reflective theologies that meet the challenge of religious pluralism. In this context Ursula King observes that “the experience of religious pluralism and inter faith dialogue invites us to a global vision which requires a new mode of theologizing.”⁸ Interfaith dialogue can lead the participants to realize that each religious tradition has more or less valuable glimpse of the total vision of ultimate reality. And dialogue can help the participant to learn to complement each other’s insight and disclosure of the Divine.

Among the World Religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam are of the Semitic group. Likewise, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism are of the Far Eastern group and the Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are of the Indian Group of religions. Besides these main groups there are also some sub-group of religions. Comparative Religion aims at representing all religious faiths in the way that all the respective members can recognize themselves in its description. Religious Pluralism holds that

there are many ways to the same ultimate goal. As John. Hick observes, “it is not appropriate to speak of as religion a being true or false, any more than it is to speak of a civilization a being true or false. For the religions, in the sense of distinguishable religiocultural streams within human history, are expressions of the diversities of human types and temperaments and thought forms.”⁹ But the problem arises due to the heterogeneous views of participants of different religions. Religious pluralism is an ideology which holds that there are many ways to reach the ultimate reality. Ursula King observes this problem of Religious pluralism as that, by acknowledging our situation of religious pluralism not only as a fact, but by theologically reflecting on it and by engaging in dialogue with others and within ourselves as individuals and communities, we can enlarge that vision, strengthen it and perhaps feel at home in more than one vision of faith.”¹⁰

In Summary, comparative religions contribution to interfaith dialogue lies in its information on the religions it studies and helps to gain knowledge necessary for any interreligious encounter. But in relation to interfaith dialogue comparative religion remains a preparatory stage .that aims at acquiring knowledge of different religions. Religion has played an important role in developing a more harmonious form of relationship not only amongst individuals and communities but also among nations especially in the widest context of global vision. We cannot deny the fact that there is variation in religious traditions, in the form of worship, plurality of beliefs etc. But the need of the hour is to bring a common platform where we meet together and have an interfaith dialogue for a better human relationship and World order. Comparative Religion, Interfaith dialogue are the possible strategy on the basis of which we can achieve the ideal social conditions in a global society, Interreligious dialogue also referred as Interfaith dialogue, is that the believers of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and co-operate with each other in spite of their differences. Dialogue as observed by Ursula King is linked to openness and tolerance but it only develops at the deepest level if it is transfigured by love.¹¹

References:

1. Balasubramanian. R and Thomas V.C (Ed), Perspectives In Philosophy, Religion And Art, P-143, 1993.

2. Tiwari K.N., Comparative Religion, P.3, 1990.
3. Masih Y, A Comparative Study of Religions P-11, 1990
4. Leeuw Vender Gerard, a Dutch historian and Philosopher of religion.
5. Religion Today, A Vedanta Kesari Presentation, Pub by Sri Ramakrishna Math, P-113
6. Sethi Singh Amarjit and Pummer Reinhard (Ed) Comparative Religion, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi P-8.
7. Balasubramanian. R and Thomas V.C (Ed), Perspectives in Philosophy , Religion And Art, P-147, 1993
8. ibid P-149
9. Hick H.John, Philosophy of Religion, P-112
10. Balasubramanian. R and Thomas V.C (Ed), Perspectives in Philosophy , Religion And Art, P-148, 1993
11. ibid P-160

—x—