
UNIT 14 INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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14.1 INTRODUCTION

Interreligious dialogue, also referred to as interfaith dialogue, is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. In other words it refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions (i.e., “faiths”) and/or spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional levels. It is distinct from syncretism or alternative religion, in that dialogue often involves promoting understanding between different religions or beliefs to increase acceptance of others, rather than to synthesize new beliefs. Through such dialogues interfaith differences, that many a time cause conflicts, can reasonably be reduced.

Some interfaith dialogues have more recently adopted the name inter-belief dialogue, (Mehta: 2014) while other proponents have proposed the term inter-path dialogue, to avoid implicitly excluding atheists, agnostics, humanists, and others with no religious faith but with ethical or philosophical beliefs, as well as to be more accurate concerning many world religions that do not place the same emphasis on “faith” as do some Western religions. Similarly, pluralistic rationalistic groups have hosted public reasoning dialogues to

transcend all worldviews (whether religious, cultural or political), termed Trans belief dialogue (Harvard: 2012). In this unit we will discuss various aspects of this.

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you will be able to understand:

- The meaning and Concept of Inter-religious Dialogue;
- importance of Inter-religious Dialogue;
- the policies of religions to Inter-faith Dialogue; and
- interreligious/interfaith organisations.

14.2 A BRIEF HISTORY

The history of interfaith dialogue is as ancient as religion itself. When not at war with their neighbours, human beings have made an effort to understand them (not least because understanding is a strategy for defense, but also because for as long as there is dialogue wars are delayed). History records many examples of interfaith initiatives and dialogue throughout the ages. The Emperor Akbar the Great, for example, encouraged tolerance in Mughal India, a diverse nation with people of various faith backgrounds, including Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Christianity. Religious pluralism can also be seen in other historical contexts.

There have been several meetings referred to as a Parliament of the World's Religions, most notably the World Parliament of Religions of 1893, the first attempt to create a global dialogue between religions. The event was celebrated by another conference on its centenary in 1993. This led to a new series of conferences under the official title "Parliament of the World's Religions". (<http://www.parliamentofreligions.com>) Early 20th Century – dialogue started to take place between the Abrahamic faiths - Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Bahá'í. In 1965 - The Roman Catholic Church issued the Vatican II document *Nostra aetate*, instituting major policy changes in the Catholic Church's policy towards non-Christian religions. On October 13, 2007 Muslims expanded their message. In *A Common Word between Us and You*, 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals unanimously came together for the first time since the days of the Prophet[s] to declare the common ground between Christianity and Islam. In July 2008 - A historic interfaith dialogue conference was initiated by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to solve world problems through concord instead of conflict. In January 2009, at Gujarat's Mahuva, the Dalai Lama inaugurated an interfaith "World Religions-Dialogue and Symphony" conference. All those are efforts to avoid conflicts by better understanding each other.

14.3 NECESSITY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Interreligious dialogue is necessary for peace. Plato says: "He seems to me to have thought the world foolish in not understanding that all are always at war with one another; and if in war there ought to be common men and certain persons regularly appointed under others to protect an army, they should be continued in peace". (Chroust: 1947, 47) This means that it is peace we need, not war. Commonly people say that if you want peace, you must prepare for war and if you want peace, you must prepare for peace. When we say that Interreligious dialogue is necessary we mean that without it we cannot

reach to the end or with it, we can reach to the end with fewer difficulties. The end can be understood as peace or justice or harmony or coexistence or cooperation. Interreligious dialogue, according to Lobo (2002), is not man's made activity but God's. The human person is dialogical individual whose whole life is marked by dialogue with God, with his fellow humans and with the world/creation. The very life of God is dialogical. So it becomes necessary that we live the life of God because that is the vocation of men and women. Both the inner nature of God and the outer relationships of God with humans are profoundly dialogical. (Lobo: 2002) It goes well with the pedagogy of God; so it must be man's pedagogy.

14.4 FORMS/KINDS OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Dialogue is a means of building the openness, understanding and trust needed to live and cooperate with each other despite their differences. It can take place in different ways and on different levels. These are briefly described here:

14.4.1 The Dialogue of Life

It can be called “unarticulated dialogue” because it could take place in all the ordinary interactions and interrelations between people of different religions, without a premeditated plan or structure. This is where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, the ordinary everyday business of getting on with each other, of being good neighbours and living in peace and harmony. This can be hard enough for a people of a common background but, where religious and cultural differences exist, more effort is needed. It takes place in our homes, families, villages, schools, towns and cities. Many ordinary but important things happen when we live, work, visit and study with people of different faiths. There will be a need to make an effort to reach out, to understand, to break down our own prejudices and to overcome the barriers, stereotypes and suspicions that are in us all. This will not be easy and it will require perseverance. We will have to be patient, be willing to listen and to accept that people are different, or have a world-view different from our own. To live in peace as our faith requires demands this effort.

14.4.2 The Dialogue of Common Action/Social Dialogue

Cardinal Arinze calls it “dialogue of action”. This happens when people of different religions cooperate and involve themselves in joint projects for a common good or common concern, such as building a road, bridge, a hospital or a center for learning. For instance, there are some joint organisations of Christians and Muslims working for the promotion of human rights and eradication of diseases (Arinze: 1990).

14.4.3 Theological Dialogue or Discourse

This takes place on academic or official levels between experts, theologians and religious leaders. This kind of dialogue helps to clarify issues, to create greater understanding and remove prejudices. By establishing links and relationships between leaders, such dialogue can facilitate and enable practical cooperation and action on the other levels. The aim of this exchange is not to reach a common belief, but rather to clarify what each partner believes, to appreciate each other's spiritual values and to have a better understanding of differences. Here, specialists or theologians in various religions listen to one another, present the doctrines, beliefs and practices of their respective religions – not in a self-protective way but in a well-articulated manner, discover and rediscover their common

points and differences. With the use of science and technology, they find a consensus where they can meet in order to face the challenges of the modern world.

14.4.4 The Dialogue of Religious Experience

Prayer and meditation, as fundamental expressions of religious faith, could be Interreligious meeting point because there are a lot of experiences to share in different traditions. These two experiences allow someone to start a journey towards the other; it takes place, particularly among believers who adore the same God (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). This involves interfaith prayers and also occasions when spirituality and religious texts are studied by members of both faiths. This kind of dialogue also requires a level of expertise.

Dialogue, in all its forms, involves a certain amount of patience and humility. Differences exist between us, but we share a common humanity and a wish to serve the God who made us. Dialogue is living our faith in the presence of people of other faiths. It is a means of loving neighbours who are not of my faith by reaching out to them in a spirit of openness and tolerance. In doing this, we do not have to engage in deep theological debate or depart from what we hold true. We do however, have to respect, cooperate, and live in peace with each other. It will take time to build up relationships, to gain understanding, and to come to trust one another. Dialogue should begin by focusing on things we have in common and on practical things we can do together. There are obstacles that prevent or make dialogue difficult. These need to be acknowledged and challenged.

14.5 OBSTACLES TO DIALOGUE

Interreligious dialogue is possible but also difficult because of some hindrances. May be that is why Jean-Mary Gaudel said that the highest form of dialogue will always be the cross, not as a dogma, but as a mystery which we cannot avoid. Dialogue with other Religions goes with some obstacles. Many scholars have listed such as: paucity of deep knowledge of one's religion, deficiency of the knowledge of other religions, fear of the unknown, suspicion, lack of self-critical assessment, superiority and inferiority complexes, disparity between those taking part in dialogue, inequality in theological development. Neglect of natural law, confusion between faith and reason, lack of theological and metaphysical language that can be used to explain certain truths. Nowadays, the presence of independent preachers constitutes an obstacle. Again, when someone does not elevate the status of other religions to the level of world religions it could be an obstacle (Capalla: 2003). We are not saying that all religions are the same.

If we cannot avoid these obstacles in order to meet, we can at least understand them and create avenues whereby we can focus on what unites and suspend what divides. Perhaps we need also a background, which can help us to meet though we are different. Just knowing who we are, that we are all human beings, that we are all citizens of this world, that we are *Capax Dei* could be a solid background for dialogue.

14.5.1 Risks of Interreligious Dialogue

The involvement of the Church into Interreligious dialogue also involves some risks, (1) because of the confusion that may arise as someone articulates his faith very well. This comes up in theological dialogue where the partner seems to be stronger and more convincing. There is, therefore, a risk of losing faith. Thus, someone must be well-prepared and well-educated before he or she engages into this form of dialogue (2)

sometimes, because of the similarities and convergences found in different religions, someone may fall into a relativism and consider all religions as the same. Different religions have different tenets. (3) There is also the risk of falling into syncretism when different tenets of different religions are put together or mixed to form a new religion. This occurs in dialogue of experience where, for instance, someone prays or dresses in a way that is not his. Rites and building styles are very much vulnerable. (4) It is the nature of man to look for more satisfying things. People involved in dialogue with other religions, particularly those who are deeply grounded in their faith, may find new pasture, cling to it and remain there. So there is a risk of losing some of members of a given religion. (5) The last risk could be likened to indifferentism whereby too much contact with different beliefs may lead someone to loose belief in any one religion. He may doubt on all religions and consider all as nonsense.

14.5.2 Preconditions for Meaningful Interfaith Dialogue

A Boston College theologian, Catherine Cornille, identifies five preconditions for any meaningful interfaith dialogue: humility (causes a disturbance of one's view of other religions), commitment (causes a commitment to faith that simultaneously rejects intolerance to other faiths), interconnection (causes the recognition of shared common challenges such as the breakdown of families), empathy (causes one to view another religion from its own perspective), and most importantly hospitality (like the tent of Abraham, that was open on all four sides as a sign of hospitality to any new comer). Breaking down the walls that divide faiths while respecting the uniqueness of each tradition requires the courageous embrace of all these preconditions (Balcomb: 2012, 40-49).

14.6 INTERRELIGIOUS/INTERFAITH ORGANISATIONS

There have come up some organisations which have been engaged encouraging and organising inter-faith dialogues at various levels. Following are the better knowns:

Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) was established in 2001 and works to build genuine coexistence and sustainable peace, through joint community building on the grassroots level, using interactive interfaith dialogue as its vehicle. The apolitical and all-inclusive approach of the organisation and its activities continuously form the human infrastructure for peace in the Holy Land and the Middle East.

Messiah Foundation International is an interfaith organisation which aims to promote mutual love, peace and understanding between members of all religions and faiths through the spiritual sciences taught by Ra Gohar Shahi. MFI has centres across the globe, including in the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom of Great Britain, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Japan.

Project Interfaith is a non-profit organisation that aims to grow understanding, respect and relationships among people of all faiths, beliefs and cultures. The goals of the organisation are approached through online media resources (particularly Ravel Unravel) as well as community-building programs that educate and engage a variety of audiences on issues of faith, religion, identity, interfaith relations, and religious and cultural diversity.

Insight Film Festival is a biannual interfaith Community Interest Company that exists to encourage filmmakers throughout the world to make films about 'faith'. It creates events and spaces where such films can be displayed, discussed and celebrated. It welcomes participants from all faith backgrounds and none, and focuses particularly on young

filmmakers. In doing so, it wants to make positive contributions to understanding, respect and community cohesion. (Public Research Institute: 2012)

United Religions Initiative (URI) was founded in 2000 to promote daily, lasting interfaith cooperation, end religiously motivated violence, and create cultures of peace, justice, and healing for the Earth and all living beings. With hundreds of thousands of members in 80+ countries representing over 200 religions and indigenous traditions, URI uses “cooperation circles” to promote dialogue and action.

The Jordan Interfaith Co-existence Research Centre is a Jordanian non-governmental organisation for promoting peaceful religious coexistence. It fosters grassroots interfaith dialogue and works on creating interreligious harmony.

Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation registered under the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs that transcends differences in culture, belief and region to engage leaders and youth in sustainable and comprehensive solutions for peace. To that end, HWPL is committed to community development through volunteer outreach, women advocacy, and cultural and religious exchange through International Women’s Peace Group (IWPG) and youth engagement through International Peace Youth Group (IPYG).

WARP Summit and a Religious Dialogue for Peace. While it may, in most cases be too simplistic to say that ideological differences based on religion or culture is the cause of war in our world today, it is not too much to say that these differences are exploited to heighten the community’s propensity for violent behaviour.

Through the World Alliance of Religions Peace Summit, HWPL seeks to create a forum for dialogue centering on the creation of a commonly acceptable value-system between secular and religious communities in all socio-political sectors of our diverse societies. Such a value system will form the basis for the creation of peace agreements and a universally applicable constitution of interfaith relations, as well as education materials which can be used across the spectrum of humanity’s diversity to begin revolutionising the basic precepts of our cultures and ideologies which provide the central tenants promoting conflict and violent behaviour.

The above are some of the well known organisations engaged in and encouraging interfaith dialogue. There are many others at country specific levels, regional levels and international levels that are continuously working for peace and conflict resolutions through mutual understanding.

14.6.1 United Nations Support

In 2010, HM King Abdullah II addressed the 65th UN General Assembly and proposed the idea for a ‘World Interfaith Harmony Week’ to further broaden his goals of faith-driven world harmony by extending his call beyond the Muslim and Christian community to include people of all beliefs, those with no set religious beliefs as well. A few weeks later, HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad presented the proposal to the UN General Assembly, where it was adopted unanimously as a UN Observance Event.

The first week of February, every year, has been declared a UN World Interfaith Harmony Week. The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre released a document which summarises the key events leading up to the UN resolution as well as documenting some Letters of Support and Events held in honour of the week.

14.7 IMPORTANCE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Interreligious dialogue increases the understanding of the beliefs and practices of other religions. This enhanced understanding can lead to a more peaceable coexistence in the pluralistic culture of the 21st century. Through sustainable and respectful relationships based on dialogue and engagement, conflicts resulting from or exacerbated by fear, disrespect and misunderstanding between communities are less likely to occur, and, when they do, are less likely to devolve into violence. As people of different religious communities encounter each other in neighborhoods where they live, in mutual service, in schools, in government, and in civic activities, the foundations established through dialogue enables and empowers these people to know the areas in which mutual activity can ease their living and working together in society, as well as to know in advance the areas in which religious differences can make Mutual undertakings difficult. Because interreligious dialogue will inevitably bring to the surface the differences between religions, the discussants are forced to examine their own beliefs in order to support their stated positions. This examination will ultimately increase self-understanding.

14.8 CRITICISM OF INTERRELIGIOUS/INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

The group *Hizb ut-Tahrir* rejects the concept of interfaith dialogue, stating that it is a western tool to enforce non-Islamic policies in the Islamic world. Many Traditionalist Catholics, not merely *Sedevacantists* or the Society of St. Pius X, are critical of interfaith dialogue as a harmful novelty arising after the Second Vatican Council, which is said to have altered the previous notion of the Catholic Church's supremacy over other religious groups or bodies, as well as demoted traditional practices associated with traditional Roman Catholicism. In addition, these Catholics contend that, for the sake of collegial peace, tolerance and mutual understanding, interreligious dialogue devalues the divinity of Jesus Christ and the revelation of the Triune God by placing Christianity on the same footing as other religions that worship other deities.

According to some Hindu critics, it has been argued that the so-called interfaith "dialogue ... has [in fact] become the harbinger of violence. This is not because 'outsiders' have studied Hinduism or because the Hindu participants are religious 'fundamentalists' but because of the logical requirements of such a dialogue." With a detailed analysis of "two examples from Hinduism studies", S. N. Balagangadhara and Sarah Claerhout argue that, "in certain dialogical situations, the requirements of reason conflict with the requirements of morality". (Balagangadhara: 2008)

14.9 SUMMARY

Inter-religious/inter-faith dialogues have emerged as important means to reduce religious, ethnic and communal conflicts. Interfaith dialogue is not just words or talk. It includes human interaction and relationships. It can take place between individuals and communities and on many levels. For example, between neighbours, in schools and in our places of work – it can take place in both formal and informal settings. Normal life means that we come into daily contact with each other. Dialogue therefore, is not just something that takes place on an official or academic level only – it is part of daily life during which different cultural and religious groups interact with each other directly, and where tensions between them are the most tangible.

Throughout the world there are local, regional, national and international interfaith initiatives; many are formally or informally linked and constitute larger networks or federations. The often quoted “*There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions*” was formulated by Dr. Hans Kung, a Professor of Ecumenical Theology and President of the Global Ethic Foundation.

At present, many people are simply unaware of the need for interreligious dialogue. Some are not interested while others actively oppose interfaith cooperation. Multi-religious and multicultural nature of society is still a relatively new experience. Therefore, for many, the need to make an effort in order to ensure that we live together in peace and justice has not yet been fully realised. As people of faith and as people who wish to build social harmony and justice, we have a role to both raise awareness of this need and to actively respond to it.

14.10 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

- 1) What is the necessity of interreligious dialogue?
- 2) Examine the obstacles to interreligious dialogue and risks involved in it.
- 3) What are preconditions for interreligious dialogue?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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