Trans-Faith Dialogue and World Peace: An Antidote to the Malign World of Sectarianism

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Abstract- Peace and harmony have been sought by humanity ever since the dawn of civilization. And yet the whole of human history, from the very earliest times, is replete with wars and violent conflicts from the tribal right up to the international level. Communism, socialism, democracy, capitalism- all claimed the desire to establish peace, but all invariably waged war. Over last few years many incidents have occurred in which world is seen through a singular lens of 'good' and 'evil' and 'us' vs. 'them' beliefs. Violations of the universal right to practice religion are systematic and widespread all over the world. The politics in the name of religion has been seen as a major phenomenon and which has led to sectarian violence.

Index Terms- Sectarianism, Sectarian conflicts and Politics, Inter-Faith Dialogue, Trans-Faith Cooperation, World Peace

I. INTRODUCTION

"F*aith is not the belief that God will do what you want. It is the belief that God will do what is right.*"
-Max Lucada, He Still Moves Stone

Different types of violence flavoured by faith are perpetuated by sectarian activists who have deeply divisive single exclusive identity and who want people to ignore all affiliation and loyalties in support of one specific identity (Puniyani, 2008: 25). Such exclusive identities are negative, as they flavor or stress upon difference, diversity, opposition and violence rather than belonging, unity, support and peace. In 'The Clash of Civilizations, Samuel Huntington states that the dominant characteristic of the Post-Cold War global order is violence between different religious groups (Huntington, 1996: 38). An awareness of the plurality of religion inspire a variety of theological questions. Why in the world we have so many religions? If it's said that God is One, then why there are so many religions?

'When the Holy One created the first man, he took him and led him all the trees of Garden of Eden & said to him: 'Behold my works, how beautiful, how splendid they are. All that I have created, I created for you. Take care, therefore that you do not destroy my world, for if you will do there will be no one left to repair what you have destroyed.'
-Midrash, EcclesiatesRabbah*.

So all the great religions of the world teach humanity as the same fundamental principle, but the juxtaposition of harmony and conflict, global peace and holy war, good and evil, seemed to be a fitting metaphor for the century we have entered in. It contributed to a sharp rise in sectarian tensions, as seen in Afghanistan and Pakistan, using religion as an instrument of policy. The ideological underpinnings of attitudes & behaviors labeled as sectarian are extraordinary varied.

'Sectarianism is bigotry, discrimination or hatred arising among attaching importance to perceived differences between subdivisions within a group, such as between different denominations of a religion, class, religion or factions of a political movement'.

So sectarianism is present throughout the world, wherever people of different religions live closely, religious sectarianism is seen in different forms. The chief characteristic of our civilization has been unity in diversity. We have never attempted to impose uniformity or dilute diversity. In Indian scenario, the words 'socialist' and 'secular' were added in the late 1970's but till today, we see fault lines* developing between different sects. So to think of religion and world politics is often to think of violence. **World Peace** is an ideal of freedom, peace, and happiness among and within all nations and/or people. World peace is an idea of planetary non-violence by which nations willingly cooperate, either voluntarily or by virtue of a system of governance that prevents warfare (www.wikipedia.com). So, world peace can be achieved through interfaith understanding among peoples and communities.

Sectarian Identities and Politics

As the Cold War came to a close, the Soviet Union collapsed and the rhetoric of economic and political liberalization swept the globe, there were more than thirty violent conflicts raging around the world, most of these ethnic and sectarian in nature (Crawford, 1998: 9). These ethnic wars have been significantly more devastating to civilians. In World War I, 14 percent of the deaths were civilian. That figure rose to 67 percent in World War II (ibid.10). Five thousand people have been killed in Kashmir since 1990. In October 2006, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Iraqi government estimated that more than 370,000 Iraqis has been displaced since the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque, bringing the total number of Iraqi refugees to more than 1.6 million (UNHCR Agency). The Red Cross has also stated that Iraqi's humanitarian situations remain among the most critical in the world. According to Failed States Index*, produced by Foreign Policy magazine, Iraq was one of the world's top five unstable states from 2005 to 2008 (Failed Index List, 2005). These figures shows that war between states seem to be decreasing, ethnic and sectarian violence within them is on the rise. I think one of the reasons of the situation is the division between 'inter' and 'faith' in the people's life. There are many spaces like Universities, Corporations, Schools and Malls where

people of different religions come together. These places are spaces of 'inter' whereas there are many spaces where people of particular religion or community come together to talk about religion. These are mosques, churches, temples which are spaces of 'faith'.

*Ecclesiastes Rabbah or Kohelet Rabbah is an haggadie commentary on Ecclesiastes included in the collection of the Midrash Rabbot. It follows the Biblical book verse by verse

*Fault Lines is a potentially disruptive division or area of contention.

But there are few spaces where people from diverse religions communities come together and are interested about inter-faith understanding. A motion was debated in India's Parliament that censured the government over its handling of religious rites in the State of Gujarat which had claimed more than thousands lives. The more it is examined, the worse it looks (Economist, 2002: 20). Religion is the currency of politics in India. Politicians use religion and caste as a weapon for their vote bank before impending elections. Creating or engineering religions out of thin air before an election is an old track which the politicians have used. Creating an 'us versus them' schism is their only stratagem to get the flock together (Nadkarni, 2012: 67). So what we see in today's world is that after gaining independence since 1947, still masses of people are falling prey to such trickery. We need new ways to understand both particularly and universality and should respect the integrity of each other's religions. Mahatma Gandhi once said,

"*Intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit.*"

When we shift our attention from the notion 'being identical to oneself' to that of 'sharing an identity with others' of a particular group, the complexity increases further. While global religious war has not erupted, bloody as ever (Smock, 2002: 20). In the opening remarks at the National Integration Council on Oct 13, 2008, Indian Prime Minister said:

'*The most disturbing and dangerous aspect today is the assault on our composite culture.*'

The story of Tansen, the master musician at the court of the Mughal Akbar sets an example of how listening can build understanding. He had some fifteen musical instruments in the Emperor's Chamber, which he had tuned to one frequency. Upon playing just one instrument's musical note, the other fourteen started to resonate. So this story serves ideally as a metaphor for how communities can work in harmony to achieve an enlightened result. Not every community has achieved peace within itself and also certainly not every community is tuned to same frequency, efforts should be made to promote and link them and to create inter-faith understanding to promote cross-community collaboration bringing more peace, toleration as an antidote to the malign world of sectarianism and politics.
"*Discord is the great ill of mankind & tolerance is the only remedy for it*" - Voltaire, *PhilosophicalDictionary.**

Issues of Sectarian Conflicts and Role of Inter-Faith Understanding

With the increase in sectarian tensions there are calls for new solutions to tackle this global turmoil. This search for the new solutions has intensified to look for answers outside the box that will address the turmoil and their causes. One such solution emanated from the Commonwealth People's Forum, held in Uganda in 2007 where the communiqué issued to heads of governments called for programmes to support Inter-faith exchange to build understanding and cooperation and world peace (Saleem, 2012: 18). Clarke and Jennings (2008) put forward that inter-faith understanding across national and religious boundaries provides a potentially significant anti-dote to conflicts.The latest figures from Beat Bulling, the UK's leading bulling prevention charity, show that one in four young people of all faiths have been bullied,

*A Failed State is a state perceived as having failed at some of the basic conditions and responsibilities of a sovereign government. Since 2005, the US think-tank Fund of Peace and the magazine Foreign Policy, publishes an index called the Failed States often violently, because they have a religious position or their peers think they represent a particular religion or practices (Interfaith Report, 2008). If young people are surveyed they say that their groups or their friend circle comprised largely of peers from same religion or community. So the question arises. Why most people are 'other' people? Why their thoughts and beliefs are someone else's opinions? Why we are largely influenced to an amazing extent by people with whom we identify?

I am here going to specify some important teachings of different faiths which talks about peace and dealing rightly with other people-

- Buddhism says, '*Just as mother would protect her only child with her life, even so let one cultivate a boundless love towards all beings* - Khaddaka Patha Melta Sulta.
- Christianity believe '*Do to others as you would have them do to you*'. -Luke 6:31
- Islam preaches '*No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself*'. -An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith, 13
- According to Jainism '*I forgive all beings, may all beings forgive me. I have friendship towards all, malice towards none* '. -Pratikraman Sutra 35:49
- Sikhism says '*No one is my enemy and none is a stranger. I get along with everyone* '. -Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p.1299

So all the great religions in the world teach humanity as a fundamental principle. If religion is considered as the greatest savior of humanity and also considered as a destroyer which leads to division and conflicts, it can also be used as a motivator to harness and bring together the energies of its religiously diverse youth, which can lead to cooperation and peace.

'*We have the vision, the power and the faith to make our dream a reality. We as people of faith, can transcend the boundaries that has divided us for long. Let us begin none, celebrating our diversity and in the face of challenges, offer a bright and bold leadership for all*'. – Sarah Talcott (Patel, 2006: 25).

Lives of faith are lived out, for the most part, in the public sphere, faith and politics have been intersecting for centuries. This exploration of faith and politics lead to continuous conflict between political expediency and religious ideas. Fact is that religious intolerance and extremism are real factors in some conflicts, including those in fragile states makes it all the more important to identify genuine religious potentials for helping to transform conflict (Vendley, 2010: 34). In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers,* Kwame Anthony Appiah writes the urgent need for ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become. The roots of all global crises can be found in human denial of the eternal principle of peace. Addressing these challenges will offer an antidote to sectarianism. This will never be easy, but remains vitally important for communities in need (Appiah, 2006: 18).

*Voltaire: The Philosophical Dictionary, translated by H.I.Woolf, New York, 1924

Before talking about Interfaith understanding lets first discuss what we really mean by it. The interfaith movement is working to build bridges of understanding and respect between people of 'difference' in every culture on every continent. From my own experience as a young person growing in one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, I feel more alive when exposed to the new and different ways of people. I really appreciate the rich diversity we live in as they are like mirrors that reflect one subconscious assumption. According to Huntington and many other scholars, religions play a decisive role in the forming of attitudes of individuals and societies towards the 'other'. We have to make distinctions between diverse world religions that have more or less violence in their histories. At the same time we must acknowledge the examples of caring for the 'other' which can be found in all religious traditions. To face the destructive and divisive elements of religions more effective ways of dialogue and cooperation are needed between the world of politics and religions (Boehle, 2002: 229). In 1994, former US President Jimmy Carter in his foreword to 'Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft', stressed the importance for such dialogue and cooperation.

'*Far away in the heavenly abode of the great God India, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out indefinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each 'eye' of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the 'jewels', glittering 'like' stars in the magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface, there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all other jewels, so there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.*

-Hua Yen Buddhism:*The Jewel Net of Indra (Patel, 2006 :25)*

The idea in Indra's net symbolizes a universe where infinitely repeated mutual relations exist among all members of the universe. So if religion is seen as the world's greatest motivator of service and also as the most potent force of division, it can also harness the energies of religiously diverse youth, it can bring transformation and world peace. For more than 100 years, there have been efforts to promote interfaith understanding on an international scale, so new structures like councils, networks are needed to facilitate this type of dialogue and understanding. It is now imperative to build inter religious bridges for understanding, dialogue and cooperation wherever possible and also to create international structures which are considered vital to facilitate cooperative efforts across civilizations and religions. Kofi Anan, Secretary General of the UN highlighted in 1999 the urgent need for dialogue among civilizations and cultures in order to prevent major conflicts and to promote peace. In order to promote effective inter-faith understanding and cooperation, (which can be locally rooted and globally connected) religious traditions, spiritual movements and indigenous groups can find necessary global organizational structure. Sectarianism, which is a creation that dates back no further than the beginnings of the modern era, has raised disingenuous call by certain leaders to 'abolish' it and a discourse of national unity has emerged in the post cold war era. NAM countries aligned themselves behind the call for interfaith dialogue-an implicit admission that the fault lines threatening the world's unity today may no longer run across ideological lines, but rather more profoundly across religious lines (Lamdag, 2010: 84).Thus the Manila Declaration adopted by the NAM delegates stressed the need for 'dialogue among cultures, civilizations and religious' in direct opposition to 'clash of civilization' theory. Human beings which are called as speaking animals stand unique from other animals due to their intellect and power of expression and also they share their life together with other fellow human beings forming social bonds. According to Helmut Reilfeld, in present day pluralist society a multi layered dialogue is needed as it will lead to the establishment of a set dialogue that will have a set destination, clear principles and strategies, thus leading to the establishment of a universal human fraternity where mankind will be free from all discriminations (Wasef, 2010   : 54).

In recent years efforts for interfaith understanding have been taken seriously in the academic world. Organised inter religious activities began with the founding of the first international religious organization, known as:
●International Association for Religious Freedom,
  ●Then most prominent one , The World Congress of Faith in 1936
   ● The World Fellowship of Religions in 1950 in India.
●The Temple of Understanding in 1960
● The World Conference on Religions and Peace in 1970.
● The Council for a Parliament of World Religion in 1988.
●International Interfaith center in 1993.
● The United Religions Initiative in 1996.
● The Interfaith Center of New York in 1997.
● The World Faiths Development Dialogue in 1998.
● The Millennium World Peace Summit in 2006.
● Inter Faith Encounter Association in 2001.

The values of inter religious activities at local, national and international levels rapidly increased through the 20th century

(Boehle, 2002: 30). So interfaith cooperation is a social necessity in the globalized world for survival and peace. Interfaith understanding and cooperation is seen as a means and end in itself. It is an extension of a particular faith perspective, as it does not try to bring about some future common good as it is good in itself. Swidler asserts that interfaith understanding operates in 3 areas: '*the practical*, where we collaborate to help the humanity; the depth of '*spiritual'* dimension, where we attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology 'from within'; the *cognitive*, where we seek understanding of the truth (Swidler, 1998: 24).

'*There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religion. There will be no peace among the religions without understanding among the religions'.*
–Dr Hans Kung.

Therefore, interfaith understanding is the spiritual expression of the globalized world. In this age of globalization, this step is seen as a massive change in the religions landscape of the world. Additionally, it is seen as a necessary response to the world of diversities and is seen as a motivator for believers of various religions to engage, interact, respect and better understand each other. Certainly this movement is an essential force for good that will help humanity meet the challenges of the modern world and will help in promoting peace and cooperation.

Diana Eck asserts that interfaith understanding can be basis for the creation of one world. 'One world cannot be built on the foundation of competition and polarization between the superpowers. One world cannot be built on the foundation of science, technology and media. One world cannot be built on Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Sikh triumphalism. One world cannot be built on the foundation of mutual fear and suspicion….Laying the foundation for one world is the most important task of our time. These foundations are negotiated statements and agreements. These foundations are rather, in the stockpiling of trust through dialogue and creation of relationships that can sustain both agreements and disagreement (Eck, 1985: 25). Time is a strange factor in life. Time is very important for all of us. And the future is, what is present. The future is now, because the present, which is also the past, modifying itself now, becomes the future. This has been the cycle of time, the path of time. But now, at the present time if there is no radical change, fundamental mutation, the future is, what is now. And that has been historically proved, and we can prove it in our daily lives.

II. CRITICISM

There is absolutely no reason what so ever to take the life of the most innocent of the Lord's creations: our children. Despite the various initiatives, there is still a disconnect between theory and practice. There are some groups who criticize the working of interfaith dialogue and understanding. They say 'Interfaith is the perfect do-good agenda with which to legitimize their reputation and obfuscate their genuine, more sinister intentions.[23] They have labeled some organizations as extremist and have accused them of adopting interfaith dialogue as a political front, as well as to raise funds.

III. CONCLUSION

While progress on this interfaith understanding can be slow, but religious faith leaders instead of acting as a problem-maker, can act as a mediator or agent to promote peace. Faith based identities will continue to be present in some form or the other in the picture but on other hand these interfaith organizations (based on peace, harmony, cooperation) should thrive as part of Civil Society.

"In order to have faith in his own path, he does not need to prove that someone else's path is wrong"
-Paulo Coelho,*Warrior of the Light.*

However different theologically, many religions are, but their common purpose is to serve humanity and aid the disadvantaged. So Inter-faith understanding is a necessary pillar of grassroot relief and development which can work along with Civil Societies.

'The great Sufi Mystic Rumi also made clear that the divine love transcends religious differences:

'The religion of love is apart from all religions: For lovers the only religion and creed is God'.

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