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Some Thoughts on Interfaith Dialogue

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Q: There's much talk today about interfaith dialogue. Why do you think people are talking about it now?

A: It isn't that dialogue between followers of different faiths did not take place earlier. Yet, maybe not much such dialogue took place in the formal sense, because for dialogue on a large scale you need communications to relate with others, to dialogue with others, and in the past, the means of communication were limited. Today, communications are highly advanced, and so not only is dialogue much more possible, but has also become a pressing need.

I think interaction and intellectual exchange between people of different faiths are very important. We are really blessed to find ourselves in a period of history where possibilities for such exchange and interaction abound. These possibilities were relatively limited in earlier times, and so we today are truly fortunate.

Q: We live in a very closely interlinked world today, where there's a lot more interaction between people of different faiths at the global level than ever before. While that presents great opportunities for mutual benefit, it also means great challenges in handling interfaith relations. If such relations aren't handled skillfully, it can easily lead to terrible conflict, as we witness today. In this regard, interfaith dialogue has become a pressing necessity, and there's much talk about it. What do you think should be the purpose of interfaith dialogue?

A: There could be many interrelated purposes for interfaith dialogue—for instance, to help improve social relations between people of different faiths, to promote peace and harmony in a particular society or globally, to enable people to better understand each other's religions, or to grow intellectually and spiritually through learning from others. The purpose of dialogue should also be to find ways to promote harmonious religious coexistence or religious tolerance. But such dialogue should not seek conversion of people from one faith to another, from one community to another one. It should not aim to establish religious or cultural uniformity or to eliminate religious differences.

Differences are a part of nature. It is quite impossible to eliminate differences. The real target of dialogue should be mutual learning. The target of dialogue should not be to establish a society where there are no religious or other differences at all. Those who wish to eliminate differences between religions—and some people do try to do that in the name of interfaith dialogue—are really trying to establish a utopia, but such a utopia is possible only in the mind, not in the real world.

Q: Could you suggest how we could arrive at a point of union between diverse religious traditions and recognize our shared, our common, values? Maybe interfaith dialogue could aim at that?

A: Differences, including religious differences, are a part of Nature. We can't eliminate them. So, the only option before us is to learn the art of 'difference management', instead of trying to wipe out differences.

According to my experience, differences are not an evil at all. In fact, differences can be a great blessing.

Why and how, you might ask?

This is because differences create challenges. In turn, challenges lead to discussion. And discussion results in development.

This is the formula of life actually.

I, for one, always invite differences. I always invite criticism. Why? Because through criticism and differences we can develop our mind and our personality and thereby grow.

This is my experience.

Now, about the question of religious diversity, it is a fact of life that this world is full of differences. Everywhere you have differences—in our family, in our societies, and in every religious community, too. So, what is one to do? How should this issue of religious differences be handled?

A very appropriate answer was given by Swami Vivekananda: follow one, and hate none. This same answer is also given in the Quran (109:6), in this way: “You have your religion and I have mine.”

So, the one solution to this issue of handling religious diversity is to follow this formula: *Follow one religion and respect all*. This is the only practical solution, the only practical and meaningful way to deal with religious (and other) differences. We can't eliminate these differences. They are part of life. So, we have to manage differences, instead of trying to eliminate them.

Here, I'd like to cite a beautiful example from the life of the Prophet Muhammad. When he shifted to Medina, there were two major religious groups there—Jews and Muslims. So, the Prophet prepared a declaration, the *Sahifah al-Madinah* or the Medina Declaration. In it, he affirmed his acceptance of the religion of the Muslims for the Muslims and the religion of the Jews for the Jews.

This is an excellent example of managing religious differences.

Let me cite another example from the Prophet's life. One day—this was when he was in Medina—the Prophet saw a funeral procession pass by. He was seated at that time. Witnessing the procession, he stood up, in respect. One of his companions told him that the deceased had been a Jew, not a Muslim. And the Prophet responded saying, *alaysat nafsan*, which means, “Was he not a human being?”

The Prophet was a human being, as was the deceased Jewish person, and so he was pointing to this commonality, our basic and common humanness.

This is the right approach to dealing with the issue of religious diversity. According to my experience, this is the simplest and most natural formula—to follow one religion and respect all.

I have no hate for anyone. I can live with total love and compassion with anyone, no matter what the person's religious or other ideological beliefs and background. Why? Because I recognize in my mind, in my heart, every person as a creation of the One God. Since everyone is created by God, how can I hate anyone? There's no difference at all between us in our capacity of being fellow creatures of the same God.

This is the only formula for living together in harmony.

Q: In your view, should the focus of interfaith dialogue be on religious beliefs, tenets etc., or should it also include exploring ways in which people of different faiths could work together to deal with issues of common concern—such as war, inter-community conflict, poverty and environmental destruction?

A: I think that social problems and religious problems are two different issues. If we mix the two, it will not serve much purpose. Religious dialogue ought to be strictly a religious matter, while working for the elimination of poverty or the protection of the environment are humanitarian or social concerns. They are important issues no doubt, but they must be dealt with separately.

Q: Are you comfortable with the term 'interfaith dialogue' or 'inter-religious' dialogue? They give the impression of religions or faiths that are dialoguing with each other, while it is actually people who claim to follow or represent various faiths or religions who are trying to dialogue with each other. So, do you think the term 'inter-community' dialogue might be more appropriate?

A: I feel 'interfaith dialogue' is not a very suitable term. Perhaps 'dialogue between people of different religions' is more appropriate. 'Interfaith dialogue' or 'inter-religious dialogue' might inadvertently give the impression that in order to establish harmony between people of different faiths or religions we have

to eliminate the differences in their teachings, which is something impossible. But what is certainly possible is to find some formula for harmonious living between people belonging to different faiths. In this sense, then, 'interfaith dialogue' is an unachievable goal, while dialogue between people of different religions in order to establish harmony is certainly achievable. We have to adopt what is achievable and avoid that which is unachievable. Achieving harmony between people adhering to different religious beliefs is undoubtedly attainable. But even then, the differences in terms of doctrines of various religions will remain. They cannot be eliminated.

Q: What do you feel about dialogue efforts that seek to ignore the very real differences between the different religions in the name of promoting harmony? Sometimes, this takes the form of claiming that all religions are actually one and the same, that they have the same message, that they are just different equally-acceptable paths to the same goal, etc. Is this intellectually honest and acceptable?

A: I don't think that anyone can sincerely believe that all religions are one and the same because there are clear differences in the various religions. If you are not sincere about religion, you can say that all religions are the same, that they are identical. According to my experience, this kind of talk is nothing but a kind of 'religious politics'. Here I would like to add that denying the reality of the differences between different religions in the hope that this would promote harmony does not actually help that purpose. These differences are there, so how can you deny them?

The Islamic position with regard to this is given in this Quranic verse: "For you, your religion, for me, mine" (109:6). It means that Islam recognizes that there are differences in religion. But, at the same time, it advocates mutual respect. Without this formula, we cannot live in harmony in society. Religious harmony means harmony between people of different religions—harmony, not between the texts of different religions, but, rather, harmony between people of different religious or faith communities. So, in fact, it is a social formula, and not a religious formula.

Q: If denying or seeking to overlook the differences between the different religions is not a meaningful way to seek to promote better understanding between adherents of different religions, then what is?

A: The only possible formula for harmony between different faith communities is that which is based on mutual respect. This is the only realistic formula in this regard.

Q: Who do you think should be partners in dialogue between people of different faiths? Just religious experts? Or others, too?

A: Who are 'religious experts'? I am skeptical of this very term! These days, just about anyone who acquires a degree in religion from a university or seminary is considered a 'religious expert'! But according to my definition, a religious expert is one who sincerely involves himself in religious activities and who has studied the scriptures with an objective mind.

Q: Do you think dialogue should be restricted to participants presenting their respective religions, or should it also allow for them to critique (on a rational or ethical basis) aspects in the other's religions that they find problematic?

A: It all depends upon the academic tolerance of the participants. There are two conditions to be borne in mind while following this approach: first, the critique should be very sympathetic and completely hate-free; and, second, the listener should be objective. It is the result that will decide whether this kind of discussion should be allowed or not. If participants in a dialogue can accept this sort of academic critique, then there's no problem.

Q: Often, in inter-faith dialogues, participants hesitate to voice their critique of the beliefs and practices of the other that they have differences with out of politeness or because they do not want to alienate or antagonize their dialogue partners. Do you think this is the right approach to handling the issue?

A: Yes, this approach is right. As a principle, it is right, but if the other participants are ready to hear something more, then I think others should be allowed to speak on other aspects. All these matters depend on the results that follow. If the result of this approach would be positive, then it can be adopted, otherwise not.

Q: Do you think it is possible for followers of a tradition that believes in proselytization to truly respect religious diversity? Are they not bound to treat religious diversity as a temporary state of affairs while hoping that this state of affairs will eventually be overcome via religious conversion? Do you feel this passion for converting others to one's religious fold is a barrier to genuine interfaith dialogue?

A: According to my study, Islam focuses on *marifat*, which means realization of the reality of God. According to Islam, the reality of God is something that a person should seek to realize. And this is very different from proselytization.

When people use the term 'religious conversion', it means there are two persons—one, the person who converts from one religion or religious community to another, and the other, the person who engages in trying to make others convert from one religion or religious community to another. But Islam teaches that everyone must try to discover Reality on her or his own, because without this kind of discovery, without self-realization, there can be no firm conviction. Conviction is very important in Islam.

Now, about the question of religious diversity, I would say that dealing with religious diversity is not a matter of religious belief. Rather, it is a matter of social ethics. Religious belief is a personal matter, while religious diversity is a social question. It poses the issue of how to live in a religiously diverse society, a religiously-diverse world.

Now, it is a fact that there are differences in every aspect of life. These differences are due to the law of nature and cannot be eliminated. In such a situation, it is unrealistic, during dialogue, to try to establish one's superiority over others. The purpose of interfaith dialogue is to find out how different sections of society that follow, or claim to follow, different religions can co-exist peacefully. Religious (and other) diversity in society can never be brought to an end. So, bringing an end to religious diversity should not be the goal of interfaith dialogue. Rather, its goal should be to search for a solution whereby there can be peaceful co-existence of diverse religious communities, of people following diverse faiths.

With regard to the question of Truth and searching for it: this is a matter of personal pursuit. Human beings ought to search for the Truth so that they can lead a meaningful life and live so with firm conviction. This issue, therefore, has two aspects. One aspect relates to the individual. Every individual must try to live in conviction and so he should try to realize or experience the Truth to the extent possible. The other aspect is to maintain social harmony. Experience shows that social harmony can be achieved only by adopting the formula of peaceful co-existence.

Everyone should be free to adopt whatever religious beliefs he or she wants to, but at the same time, we all live in society, and so we must learn to live peacefully with people who may hold other religious beliefs. Believing strongly in a particular religion, being firmly convinced about it and at the same time living peacefully with people who follow or believe in other religions are not contradictory to each other. The human mind has enormous capacity, including being able to believe in something very firmly and at the same time being committed to living at peace with people who believe or think differently.

Allow me to cite my own example. I believe in one Reality or in one religion, but, at the same time, I can say that I have love for everyone. I believe in Jesus Christ's call to love one's enemies. I have no hate for anyone. I love every person, no matter what her or his religious beliefs.

I've cited this example before but it is useful to repeat it here. Once, when the Prophet Muhammad was in Medina, the funeral procession of a Jew passed by. The Prophet was seated at that time. On seeing the procession, he stood up in respect. One of his companions said to him that the deceased was a Jew, not a Muslim. And the Prophet responded, "Was he not a human being?"

So, as this example teaches us, every human being has an equal status and deserves equal respect simply in his or her capacity of being human, no matter what his or her religion or ethnicity. On that score, there is no difference whatsoever.

Q: You have participated in interfaith meetings over many years. Could you reflect on your own involvement in such initiatives?

A: Yes, I have participated in a number of interfaith dialogue events. The gist of my contribution was basically this: I have always tried to establish the point that religious uniformity is impossible, but what is indeed possible is to find a formula for social harmony between people of different religious groups. And that formula, according to my experience, is only one. It is based on mutual respect, not on denial of differences between religions.

Q: What productive insights have you gained in your many years of engagement in dialogue?

A: I must say that while these dialogues resulted in no major breakthrough, personally I learnt many things through dialoguing with others.

Let me cite an instance. Once, I attended a meeting, where most of the participants were Hindus. I found it a very useful experience. Some of the participants spoke in a negative language. For instance, they spoke against the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. They had many complaints against him. But I explained to them, "Aurangzeb was not a representative of Islam. I'm here as a representative of Islam, not as a representative of Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb was a member of the Mughal dynasty. And Mughal rule wasn't Islamic rule. It wasn't even Muslim rule. It was simply the rule of a certain Muslim dynasty." In this way, I detached Aurangzeb from Islam, and I spoke at length on Islam. This was appreciated by many people in the audience. They were very interested in what I was saying.

This is the path of wisdom, the wise approach to dialoguing, to relating, with others. In dialogue meetings, I often find Muslims trying to advocate or defend Aurangzeb and other Muslim rulers. This fails to create a favourable atmosphere for dialogue and for putting your position across.

So, we need to know the wisdom of how to engage in dialogue.

My personal experience is that I always achieve something positive from dialogue through this sort of wisdom. Other Muslims always try to defend the behaviour and policies of Muslim kings. But I never do that. I just say, "That person was a Muslim king. That was a Muslim dynasty. It wasn't Islam." I always stress that one has to differentiate between Islam and Muslims and that one should gauge Muslims according to Islamic teachings, and not Islamic teachings according to the behaviour of Muslims, including Muslim kings.

In this way, I have been able to promote a positive and open attitude among dialogue partners and engage in positive interaction with them.

Q: What message would you like to share with people of other faiths?

A: We need to respect all other faiths. The Quran (109:6) says that for you your religion and for me mine. This means that you should follow one religion, and respect the right of others to follow other religions. When you adopt this formula, you will inculcate peace in your mind, and this will enable you to achieve spiritual development. You will also be able to engage in peaceful and positive dialogue with others. You should be positive towards the goodness in other faiths so that you can enter into positive dialogue with their followers. This is very important and beneficial.