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Inter-religious Harmony – a Christian perspective

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It is an undeniable fact of our times that while religion and religiosity are in general waning in some parts of the world (such as western Europe), they not only remain strong in many other parts of the world but often take the form of fundamentalism of a rather aggressive kind. Religious fervour in any given religious community is increasingly accompanied by hostility towards a neighbouring religion. It thus becomes necessary to strengthen whatever cordial relations exist between people of different religions and to strive for an end to violence, hatred and prejudice in places where conflicts stemming from differing religious identities are currently wreaking havoc. The promotion of inter-religious harmony and inter-religious dialogue therefore assumes paramount importance today. This calls for a spirit of introspection and fresh thinking within each religious community. In what follows, I shall attempt to outline the prospects for promoting inter-religious harmony from a Christian perspective.

I must begin with a disclaimer. Christianity today is so far from being a monolithic faith that it is impossible for any single person to represent every one of the many different kinds of Christianity that are around. My personal outlook puts me at the liberal end of the wide spectrum of contemporary Christianity.

In its history of two millennia, Christianity has had many ups and downs; and its share of glorious times and shameful periods. It is also a story full of ironies. Christianity began as a sect within Judaism and became an independent religion when some of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth (a Jew all his life) began to claim that he was not only the Christ (the expected Messiah of the Jews) but also the incarnation of God. That last claim (concerning his divinity) meant that the sect could no longer be housed under Judaism's roof and hence the separation. It would however be a mistake to assume that Christianity was monolithic at least in its earliest days, because the evidence points to the existence of diversity right from the beginning. There were Ebionites, Gnostics, Arians, Nestorians, Monophysites, Docetists, and Trinitarians, among others, who differed from each other in their beliefs about where to place Jesus on the divine-human continuum. Eventually, at the council of Nicaea, in 325, convened by the Roman emperor Constantine, the Trinitarian view was declared the official one and the other views were labelled as heresies. This led to a period of conflict, often violent, between the different groups. The centralised bureaucracy of the official church finally succeeded in establishing itself as the only valid tradition, and this church, headed by the Pope in Rome, held undisputed sway over all of Western Europe until the Reformation in the 16th Century. The Eastern churches in Europe and Asia, were however, independent of Rome, and practiced a form of Christianity called Eastern Orthodoxy. With the Reformation, the Protestant traditions began and today there are hundreds of Protestant denominations.

Wars were fought between Protestants and Catholics that resulted in loss of life on a big scale, especially in the 16th and 17th Centuries. By the time greater tolerance between divergent groups was achieved, the history of Christianity had chalked up a pretty ambivalent record of events and practices. There were numerous saints who led exemplary lives but there were also power hungry clergy given to corruption. Violent episodes such as the Crusades and the Inquisition, co-existed with progressive initiatives such as the founding of orphanages, hospitals and schools.

By the 18th century the fires of sectarian violence had gradually died down, and under increasingly secular forms of government, tolerance became the norm. From the 19th century onwards, initiatives for dialogue and understanding between different denominations gathered steam, eventually blossoming into the ecumenical movements of the 20th Century. Ecumenism was a way of bringing Christians divided by dogma and creeds to the table of dialogue and creating a culture of mutual respect for differences as well as a culture of celebration of whatever common ground still remained. Thus, history became the training ground for Christians to strive for inter-denominational harmony and this experience has the potential to help them in the next stage, the movement for harmony and dialogue between the religions of the world.

In modern democracies, the state is usually committed to being a secular institution, a neutral space that neither promotes nor suppresses any of the religions that are followed by the people it serves. It protects both freedom *of* religion and freedom *from* religion. It ensures that people of faith do not trouble people

of no faith, just as it protects those of one faith from being persecuted by adherents of another. This of course is the ideal prescribed by the constitutions of democratic nations. But increasingly, one finds many secular democracies facing the rising tide of majoritarianism, religious intolerance and even violence. In such contexts it may not be enough to pin one's hopes for the maintenance of inter-religious harmony on the law-and-order machinery of the state. Civil society must become a space where citizens from different faith traditions engage proactively in dialogue and mutual understanding.

Inter-religious harmony in plural societies flourishes best when people of one religion respect the right of those from another to subscribe to beliefs and practices that are different from theirs. Inter-religious dialogue goes one step further and is premised on the realization that deeper understanding of each other's religious values and motivations is possible through conversations characterised by a desire to learn from each other. In such a conversation the dialogue partners are willing not only to affirm and celebrate shared values but also to respectfully and civilly agree to disagree on those areas of dogma and doctrine where there are major divergences between the faiths. Doctrinal differences are never allowed to come in the way of deep respect for, and friendship with, the dialogue partner. Further, it stands to reason that meaningful dialogue happens when values are given priority over doctrines. It is often the case that when values are foregrounded, people of one faith find out that they have a lot more in common with those from another faith than they had thought possible before engaging in dialogue.

It is worth looking then at the key values that Christians can bring to the sphere of inter-religious dialogue. The Christian vision of life is rooted in the concept of the "fullness of life" ("abundant life" as Jesus himself called it) that God wants all humans to possess. This is because the human person is seen as being the bearer of God's image (*Imago Dei*). Hence one must value oneself and others; no one, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or station in life, is to be stripped of dignity or diminished in worth or subjected to exploitation. Christians are called also to live lives of frequent introspection and should be ever willing to feel remorse and repentance when they stray from the core values taught by Jesus. The Christian is called to let his or her actions and motivations be governed at all times by the love of God, which always manifests itself as love of neighbour. One is also urged to seek self-transformation by giving up the self-centred nature one is born with and take on the nature of Christ, which is characterised by outgoing love and compassion and by concern for the poor and underprivileged. The concept of *Zakat* in Islam is quite close to this, making it a value Christians and Muslims share in. The core teaching about the Kingdom of God in the discourses of Jesus offers a vision of a just and humane socio-political and economic order, free of exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. Christians will find a lot of common ground here with Hindus who have the concept of *Ram Rajya*. The path of devotion to Christ is one of self-emptying and of transcending the ego. This makes Christianity a *Bhakti Marga*, (path to transcendence through devotion), to use Shankara's classification in Hindu thought. Self-emptying in Christianity and non-grasping (*Aprigraha*) in Buddhist teaching have a lot in common as well. All these values and orientations, and quite a few more, are shared widely across religions and Christians will do well to emphasise them and to encourage themselves and their dialogue partners from other faith traditions to deepen their commitment to them. This opens the way for people of different faiths to join forces in the great effort to make the world a better place for all.

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