

DIALOGUE OF RELIGIONS – A FIELD APPROACH

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1 Introduction

The dialogue vision of the church, with its roots in the sixties of the last century, has journeyed over a period of many decades and has evolved many a new theory and approach. Challenged by the Asian-Indian context as well as awakened by the inner realization, it has certainly reached a much broader setting and application. All the same, it needs to be sadly observed that much of the apostolate of dialogue is lagging behind the above vision, for diverse reasons. Most of the dialogue programmes seem to be hierarchy-centered and is dominated by the officials of different religions. Experts monopolize much of the programming and the content handled is very much doctrinal and theoretical. Often the conferences are held in English and the interactions are superficial. Concepts of dialogue guiding the activities are very much a western worldview and superimposed. In spite of all sincere efforts, the mission of dialogue today, it appears, has to travel a long way before it gets settled in the local, regional, national and continental milieu. This is the context of these reflections, which are processed from personal life experience.

2 Personal Relationship

The very meaning of the word ‘dialogue’ suggests an active involvement of persons. Institutions or associations, even though they are collections of persons, cannot dialogue, in the strict sense of the word. Dialogue, basically, is a conversation between persons. A good conversation between persons is less formal and more informal and spontaneous. As an exchange of words between two or more persons, it is often more freestyle and less organized. Conversational dialogue is initiated by personal sentiments and is governed by divine inspiration. It is guided by personal experiences; and it is motivated by open-ended dynamics. These whereabouts and characteristics of dialogue underline its ‘personal’ dimension.

Dialogue is a relational concept and goes beyond mere conversation. It is a natural inclination towards the other. It is a way of taking interest in the other. It is a positive attitude to the other. By way of getting related to the other, dialogue introduces ideas, feelings and personal experiences between the partners. It recognizes the existence of the other. It pays good will, courtesy and respect to the other. It means searching for good in the other. Through dialogue the partners pass over to the other and encounter,

understand and experience the other. Dialogue is a way of being present to the other, in view of knowing and witnessing to the other. It means accepting the other, loving the other and serving the other. An other-oriented attitude is the essential spirit of dialogue. Dialogue, thus, becomes a powerful medium of getting the other in a sense of relation.

Dialogue is a two-way process between persons. It takes place on an equal footing. Listening and speaking gain equal importance. As a spontaneous interaction between persons, dialogue does not accommodate a feeling of superior and inferior or majority and minority. In the act of give and take, dialogue becomes a bridge building. The dialogue partners are learning from each other. At this juncture, a joint search for the higher Reality starts and it takes the partners towards a reciprocal conversion, in a spirit of mutual sharing. The ensuing touch of transformation simultaneously draws each other towards a spiritual communion. Dialogue, then, serves as a mirror to each other, to check the fitness of the partners, as individual believers and seekers. Walking together in life in the process of dialogue would, thus, mean getting purified and enriched in the spiritual as well as human values. Complementariness and mutual interaction take dialogue partners a step further in life, which otherwise does not seem a possibility.

Dialogue has open-ended dynamics. It is the meeting of minds. When partners decide to break new grounds by probing the unfamiliar, individually in each other and together in the Ultimate Truth., dialogue turns into a jointly undertaken truth-inventing mechanism. This experiment with truth by the searching minds becomes a basic submission of life to the Unknown. As a meeting of hearts, dialogue gives expression to the basic need of loving and being loved. It would mean rising above the animal instincts of selfishness and domination and affirming the commitment to mastering the inherent human perfections. It also means to jointly imbibe the supreme divine attribute of love, as a mark of perfection. Further, dialogue is a meeting of spirits. The Higher Spirit is always above and beyond full comprehension. It is both transparent and dynamic. The Spirit facilitates an inner dialogue, i. e., an inter-personal dialogue, in the partners, leading them to an interpersonal dialogue. The ulterior dynamics of the Spirit shower new perceptions and insights. At this juncture, dialogue becomes a common spirituality of a higher quality. In this sense, dialogue is a tri-sided journey of 'togetherness'.

Dialogue is a personal relationship. Being and feeling close to one another is the essential spirit of relationship. This is what dialogue means, too. Dialogue suggests a brotherly-sisterly style of life. It is a familial and communitarian way of life. It is a democratic and an integrated way of living life, as well. Getting related to person of other religious belongings in the above fashion, in fact, is the dialogue of personal

relationship. This is the most effective form of dialogue. From this point of view, relationship has to be established with people who belong to different faiths, traditions, languages, classes, genders, castes, denominations, professions, convictions, ideologies, cultures, etc. It may be difficult to establish such a friendship across the above mentioned boundaries. But to succeed in doing so is a great achievement. It is a common enough experience to have friends of one's own kind as is indicated in the popular saying "similar seeks similar." But friendship beyond the dividing walls is a great treasure in life and is a worthwhile endeavour. It is highly enriching, too.

In personal relationship, discussing religion or religious ideologies is not necessary at all, unless it pertains to the context or occasion. Applied religion, by way of spiritual and human values, would be more appealing. Even discussing values need not be the focus of the meeting. Sharing the perspectives, experiences, joys, sorrows, problems, needs, struggles and aspirations of life; reacting to the current issues or anything pertaining to personal and societal life will certainly be guided by the faith position of the dialogue partners. More than verbal sharing, working together for a better society can strengthen the friendship of the dialogue partners. Humanitarian involvements will help go beyond the petty personal and communitarian boundaries. Such an endeavour will maintain the personal friendship intact. Personal family or community of brothers, sisters and friends, who have risen above and have grown up to a level of common faith and belonging, both in a human and spiritual way. This 'faith meets faith' approach on the personal level is an integrated approach to life and the friendship thus achieved is normally of a life long duration. Thus it is apt to state that there is no inter-religious dialogue, out only interpersonal relationship between persons who belong to various religious persuasions.

3 Neighbourhood Community

To situate oneself near another is the inner concept of neighbourhood. The neighbour is a person who has a sense of being near another person. Persons living together in a given area form a neighbourhood. Sharing the same geographical area is the basis of neighbourhood. A friendly feeling extended to and exchanged between the members of the locality is the spirit of neighbourhood. An attitude of neighbourliness is the pivot of a community of neighbourhood. When neighbours prove themselves to be truly neighbours to one another, there is a neighbourhood in the full sense of the word. When values of unity govern the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood becomes active.

Neighbourhood has different forms and dimensions. On the one hand, different neighbourhood concepts are formed on the basis of the extensiveness of the geographical area. Village, town, city district, division, state, country, world, etc., are neighbourhoods in terms of small and large geographical application. On the other

hand, there are certain relational forms of grouping like family, community, society and humanity. Communities based on caste, class, creed, profession, ideology, etc., are concepts of belonging. New approaches of relationship are being conceived and practiced today. Basic Christian community, basic human community and small human community are some of them. They are meant to foster mutual interaction on different levels, in spite of their being geographically scattered. But, neighbourhood community is a concept, which, while being basically applied on the geographical situation, is an approach of relationship. This concept has been successful experimented in many places from a sociological perspective. Application of the 'neighbourhood' concept in the interfaith dialogue context is perhaps new. The requirement for this application is an understanding of dialogue and faith in a much broader setting.

Neighbourhood Community is a multi-dimensional reality. The world is becoming smaller and smaller today; a global village is in the making. Earlier, people of different belongings preferred to reside separately, with hardly any interaction with each other. But today, people who hail from different communities of caste, class, profession, denomination, religion, ideology, conviction, language, culture, etc., need to more freely inter-mingle for a more meaningful existence. It is true that there are many geographical areas, at the national, regional and local levels, which are homogenous in many respects. But, especially in the cosmopolitan cities, increasingly so today, freer mixing and living with each other have become a significant characteristic of modern life. Inter-community dining, marriage and friendship are becoming a common feature especially in the cities. In such a context, to appreciate the merits of a neighbourhood community, I suppose, is not difficult.

A neighbourhood Community is, and all the more it has to be, an inter-linguistic, inter-caste, inter-class, inter-professional, inter-traditional, inter-ideological, inter-cultural, inter-denominational; inter-religious and inter-faith reality in the respective neighbourhoods. Such a human community, governed by a compressive concept of life, is and should be a highly welcome idea in the mission of dialogue.

A closer look at the natural fabric of neighbourhood Community would create a good appetite in those engaged in dialogue to experiment it whole-heartedly. The members of the neighbourhood, though they have diverse or even contrary, features, need each other, some way or other. We could say that they are complementary to each other. Having a small or at least a manageable number of people, the neighbourhood becomes a small human family. The whole human family is too large to be easily comprehended. The given neighbourhood is the human society proper. The kind of neighbourhood that people live in can make a lot of difference in their lives. The neighbourhood gives a strong sense of personal identity and assurance. There is a

sense of belonging, a sense of community and sense of unity. Living together, thus, becomes a joy. A 'We-feeling' is the central spirit of the neighbourhood community. Such a noble sentiment makes all those who happen to belong to the neighbourhood feel at home. Meeting and knowing each other; having good will, respect and an equality feeling towards each other; helping and supporting each other and gathering discussing, praying and working together to make the neighbourhood a good piece of human family are the details of the mosaic of harmony a neighbourhood community should always treasure and uphold. Values like mutual belonging, inter-action, sharing and solidarity should make a 'community' out of the neighbourhood. The 'homeliness' each member celebrates is the significant feature of the neighbourhood community. Promoting the concept of 'neighbourhood community' takes care of an applied dialogue across the diverse faiths. Considering the increasingly individualistic cultural set-up of today's world, especially in the cities, harmony attempts of this sort should gain unconditional priority.

4 Linguistic Facility

Language, as medium of communication, is innate to all living beings, because all of them interact and have to interact with each other, in some way or other, for their survival. There is a silent language of signs and symbols; there is an expressed language of sounds, as well. The human have the privilege of having developed a verbal language, which is the best characteristic of the human culture. The Sanskrit root for language 'bhaash' means 'to speak'. To articulate is the most basic function of language. Thinking precedes speaking. It mirrors the human mind. So it can be said that word is thought. Today language means writing as well as speaking. Anyway, language is a significant skill the human have cultivated to associate with each other, closely and effectively.

Language is essentially related to culture. It is part of culture; it is the product of culture; and it is an expression of culture. It is the door to culture, as well. Language is power. To learn a language is to know the culture of a person or a group. Language is knowledge. It is the medium of communication between human cultures. It is the door to human hearts. Language makes the human culture 'human'. Knowing a language is to know both the sound and the meaning of it in depth. It keeps the individual and social culture alive. Flair for language means not only clear thinking, articulation and stylistic speaking, but the ability to touch the hearts and minds of the listener. Language is the very nature of the humans. Language is fundamental to the identity of a human being as well as that of a culture.

In line with the above implications of language, the most basic requirements of dialogue of faiths is a facility for the language one is encircled by. There is a national

language; there is a regional language; and there is a local dialect. Without being proficient in these tongues, as per the requirement of the context, dialogical communication wouldn't take off. Inter-communication of faiths would need penetrating into the literatures, thought patterns, convictions, traditions, cultural expressions, art forms, festivals and celebrations, professional aptitudes, etc. All these would necessitate an ease with the language in hand. A process of inter-faith dialogue becomes effective only when the dialogue partners are spontaneous with the language of communication.

Unfortunately, most of the dialogue programmes are conducted in English and are directed by those who have been educated abroad. A majority of the veterans in the mission of dialogue are below poverty line with regard to the local-regional and national languages. Even though there is an increasingly bigger bulk of books, periodicals and other write-ups on or related to dialogue, there is hardly any material available on dialogue in the Indian languages. A majority of those, who are engaged in the mission of dialogue, do not give sufficient attention to the mastery of the field language. The hierarchy, with certain exceptions, is perhaps the most backward section when commitment to the local, regional and national language is considered. Hence the dialogue mission places a clarion call before all missionaries, especially those committed to the profession of dialogue, to get awakened to achieving a facility in the language on hand, for a better effectiveness in dialogue.

5 Joint Efforts

Social dimension is a significant feature in all the living beings. It is highly developed and qualitatively expressed in human beings. Inclination toward the other is innate and it takes the humans to a 'we-feeling' shared among the embers. A sense of togetherness governs the way the humans conduct their life. Marriage and friendship are the basic manner of coupling. Family and community are defined ways of living and working together. That would mean to say that joint efforts underline the very way of being human. An act of dialogue cannot even be conceived other than as a united activity.

The mission of dialogue can in no way be monopolized by a section of people. It cannot be implemented on a contract basis. It is a shared responsibility. It is a collective endeavour. It should incorporate all sections of people. It is a participatory concept. It is a collaborative action. The achievement of the same is not of one individual or community, but is a common one. All share the fruits produced. The search for the Higher is not an individual effort, either. It is a joint seeking. It is a joint spirituality. A task jointly undertaken and implemented together is definitely a higher one. Joint efforts are higher spirituality and an advanced journey of life. This is the

sum and substance of the spirit of dialogue. The experience of harmony which awaits can be achieved only with such a collective vision and attempt.

Dialogue is a spontaneous activity. Partners who are officially assigned to the task may not dialogue well enough. Leaders who are appointed or elected are no leaders. Only born leaders are genuine leaders. Dialogue is a mission of leadership. Even then, it is not only an activity of leaders. The leader is supposed to take the lead. The involvement of the general public is inevitable. Often the so-called leaders of the different religions monopolize inter-community dialogue by their representative prerogative and drown the general public. This is not in line with the spirit of dialogue at all. Besides, the official task of dialogue in the church is very much taken care of by the professionals. Those who are specialized in it and are experts are to be extended to the unspecialized general public. There are different levels of dialogue, too. The so-called non-experts also can and should engage in dialogue, according to their own capacity and life contexts. Often the dialogue of life is lived more effectively by the general public. The spirit of dialogue is to involve everyone. Dialogue begins at home. Hence dialogue has to be collective endeavour. It should be a shared task of the whole community. Only then will it bear good fruit.

Dialogue is a united frame of mind and life. It is an integrated approach to life, in all its diverse dimensions of life. In the Christian context, it has to be a joint effort by the religious and the laity, by men and women, and by Catholics and other Christians. The commitment to dialogue must be shared by people of good will from all religious backgrounds, all professions, all castes, all classes, all languages, all ideologies, all genders and all cultures. Dialogue is a multi-community cooperative scheme for the making of 'a better society' 'a brighter tomorrow' for the humanity. It is a joint existence, a joint effort and a joint journey, in a spirit of one family and one community-not only in its target but also in its process.

7 Areas of Activity

The mission of dialogue is a comprehensive one. It is an all-embracing scheme. There are immense possibilities, which could be experimented. Human society is always in the process of change. The needs, struggles, problems, aspirations and approaches of life keep changing. Dialogue is not between the different aspects of the religious and cultural heritage of the human society. It is between the diverse living traditions and patterns of behaviour of the people. It is not with the past; it is with the present society. It is geared to a better future, by way of unifying the various spiritual and human energies and forces of the current society. Methods and approaches need to undergo change with the moods of the society in hand, in view of effectively responding to the

arising needs. That would mean to say, the areas of activity of dialogue are diverse and are ever evolving.

The most fundamental area of dialogue is dialogue with oneself. It would, first and foremost, start with self-study. Knowing one's own faith, sacred scriptures, religious tents and values more thoroughly and qualitatively, builds up a clearer vision and self-confidence. It adds to a facility in passing over to other faiths. It will elicit an interest in one to know the other's faith in greater detail. Reading the religious scriptures of other traditions, knowing their perspective of life and imbibing common values from them is the scared fruit of one's study. It also enables one to do intra-faith dialogue. One's own perspectives and faith positions get purified and enriched. Such a maturing and growing process takes the partners to newer vistas of faith. Personal study and reflection, thus, equip one for a meaningful interaction in dialogue.

Moreover, there are certain scientific ways of awareness building for harmonious living across the boundaries, which are traditionally being practiced, to some extent. Ice-breaking sessions, prayer gatherings, awareness programmes, symposiums and seminars on common themes, comparative topics, emerging human and spiritual values and the current issues of the society are some of them. They need to intensified. At the same time, these programmes do not reach the general public sufficiently. They need to be extended to the popular levels. Visiting the places of worship of other religious communities, searching for common meaning in their symbols, learning from other ways of approaching the divine, interviewing people of all categories as to their faith experience, highlighting the universal human and spiritual values present in different religious traditions, promoting those values in art forms, getting various write-ups on harmony themes published etc., are some other areas of dialogical interaction and bridge-building.

A significant level of dialogical engagement is co-operative schemes of a multi-religious pattern, in view of a better society. Working together is the best way to get united. It presupposes a common vision. It further unifies the vision, too. Concentration on the current problems and needs of the place, chalking out a common action-plan and getting involved together beyond the communal boundaries is the best part of this dialogical relationship. Yet a very important area of dialogical co-operation is making a concerted campaign against the perverted cultures of the present society, especially I religions. To name a few extremism, fundamentalism, infallible claims, ethnic-mindedness, hidden agenda, corruption, commercialization, politicization, consumerism, hate campaign, violence, terrorism, murder, disappointment, communalism, suicide, polarization, self-centeredness, jealousy, indifference, etc. Though hard, the coming together of well-intentioned to make a committed attempt to attack these common enemies is a proof of genuine unity. Such a consolidated effort

will also assure a more dignified human life and a more qualitative human society. The mission of dialogue, when it proceeds towards such heights, is more realistic and worthwhile. The areas of its activity are ever evolving and always diverse.

8 Conclusion

Dialogue of religions is not an office work, but it a field exercise. It is not an armchair reflection, but is a movement of life. It is less institution-centred and more people-oriented. It is less an official engagement and more a personal relationship. Inter-faith dialogue is not an exchange of doctrines and dogmas, but it is a mutual sharing of life values. It should not merely be a hobby for the elite and the old. The active involvement of the general public is very much important. It should not be a slavish implementation of a concept developed in the western context and Christian campus and set as normative for all times and places. The tongue of the people should get priority, as the medium of thought and communication. The fundamental concerns of human life should get attention. As a positive tuning of the mind, dialogue should be an active and joyful experience of living together in the given situation and a united style of action for a better tomorrow. The above approaches should underline the concerns of one who is genuinely committed to a dialogue of faiths, while in the active field. The apostolate of dialogue should keep evolving in the diverse contexts and faith traditions of the unique soil of Asia, especially in India, in a process of deep personal interaction with the basic faith culture of the humans.

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