

HIGHER EDUCATION

Inter-Faith Relations for Transformation

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1. Introduction

Inter-faith relations mean cordial and meaningful relationship among different religious communities. It includes understanding the faith and practices of others, appreciating the good elements in their culture and valuing the contribution of the people of other faiths towards establishing peace and harmony, restoring justice and the rights of people, and working together for the welfare and equality of all. Religions play an important role in building the nation. Religions are not merely limited to an individuals' faith or set of beliefs and performing rituals. They are closely linked to society, and influence its culture and customs. Religions are powerful in changing the lives of individuals and communities for better or for worse. Leaders of different religions can teach and lead the people to believe and observe superstitions and practise human sacrifices, *sati*, caste and racial discriminations. They even promote religious and social oppressions. Some of them flare up riots and conflicts between communities and fuel violence and bloodshed. Religions, thus, can threaten the peace and harmony among people and even destroy communities. On the other hand, religions can build a society by teaching good values, liberating people from all sorts of religious, social, and economic oppressions and bringing peace and harmony among communities within a nation. Many of us do not understand the positive and negative power of religions when used by their leaders or politicians for their own gain. A systematic study of religions at home, schools, colleges and the workplace can help the people to know the merits and demerits of religions and to meet the need of building better relations among faith communities. This paper is written to provide information to students who are not specializing in the field of religion, philosophy, or

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theology but for those who are doing their studies in arts, science, business, technology, etc.¹

2. Study of Religions

A few Universities and Colleges have a Department of Philosophy and Religion and offer courses on major religions of the world. Some of them specialize in teaching a particular religion or tradition. Religions are studied as an academic discipline, requiring the students to learn the original languages of the scriptures such as Sanskrit, Arabic, Pali, Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. It requires the study of the history, sociology, and philosophy of religions, as well as the life and teachings of the founders. The study demands the skill of comparing and interpreting the scriptures or oral traditions and writing the exams or research papers. These institutions are interested in promoting the scholastic aspect rather than better relations between the religious communities. Quite often, religious studies are separated from ethical living in the western context.² A teacher or a student of a religion need not necessarily have faith and commitment and he or she can be an atheist, too. The high level of critical study of religions, using proper methodologies, is useful for the learners in the universities and colleges to earn a degree but may not relate to the grass root levels. On the other hand, religious institutions such as Vedic schools of the temples, Seminaries of the churches, Madrasas of the mosques, monasteries of Buddhism and Jainism teach religions, particularly their own religion in order to train priests, mullahs, and monks for religious services in temples, churches, mosques, etc. They train their students to be the leaders of their religion and to teach and defend it, perform the rituals and propagate it. They may teach religions other than their own to their students in order to compare and contrast, criticize, condemn, or appreciate, rather than giving importance to train them to build better relations with people of other faiths. Most of them limit their training to academic exercise and lack action programmes to develop inter-faith relations. In order to reach the masses, many Indian religious leaders

¹Christian scholars, both Indian and Western, have written a number of articles and books on inter-faith dialogue defending their traditional exclusivism or reasonable inclusivism or radical pluralism. In this article, I am pleading for inter-faith relations without compromising one's faith and spirituality but using them for social transformation.

²Paulos M. Gregorios, *Religion and Dialogue*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, 81-82.

started using TV channels. One can get teachings from the TV programmes on the scriptures or information about one's 'star', *jathagam*, astrology, numerology, gemology, *vasthusashtra*, the promises for that day or on divine healing, miracles, and rituals or prayers to be observed for prosperity. Some of these TV programmes are like opium for many TV watchers and lead them to become bonded slaves to wrong values, superstitions, fear, false pietism, and pseudo-spirituality. Some of them are really addicted to such programmes and some others are frustrated and disillusioned after following the teachings of the TV personalities for a few years. Many parents, unlike the parents of Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, and Sadhu Sunder Singh, do not have knowledge of their own religion. Nor do have they time to teach the basic concepts and values of their religion to their children. Quite often the children are left on their own to watch the TV programmes like cartoons, sports, and music. Today's children are deprived of the teachings of their parents on good values and guidance on ethical living. They are let to draw whatever values they like from their peer groups and media. Families, as the basic unit of the society, are failing in properly teaching religions to their members.

Many Universities and Colleges in India are not interested in offering degree programmes for the study of religion and philosophy to promote inter-faith relations. A report prepared in 1967 points out the various reasons for the lack of instituting Department of Religious Studies, viz., India is a secular country and so the universities and colleges should be kept secular; the objective and critical study of religions could hurt the feelings of the respective religious communities; religious studies could be used for conversion and the institutions founded and aided by the government should keep the education free from religious instruction.³ This neglect has resulted in educating students without developing their understanding of religions, respect for the culture of others and strengthening their spirituality and ethical living. The Kothari Commission recognized the consequences of the lack of religious studies in educational institutions, distinguished the 'religious education' from 'education about religion' and recommended the latter aspect of education about religions to be promoted in the universities and colleges.⁴ The important question we

³*Study of Religion in Indian Universities* (A Report of the Consultation held in Bangalore, September, 1967), 1-4.

⁴*Study of Religion in Indian Universities*, 4-8.

need to raise about the study of religions in institutions or families or through the media is this: Is the study of religion useful to the learners and society in building peace and harmony among communities and initiating socio-economic and cultural transformation of nations?

3. Religious Pluralism, Interactions, and Conflicts

'Pluralism' used in the context of inter-faith dialogue and relations refers to a multi-religious context of the society and to a position that rejects the claim of superiority of one religion over another. The pluralists believe that one religion cannot be the norm for the world and each religion must acknowledge the validity of every other religion.⁵ Stanley Samartha points out four important values of pluralism: (1) It provides "spiritual and cultural resources for the survival of different people in their search for freedom, self respect and human dignity," (2) "a guarantee against fascism because it will resist the imposition of any 'one and only' religion or ideology on all people," (3) "an element of choice by providing alternative visions of reality and ways of life," (4) and "multiple spiritual resources to tackle basic problems which have become global today."⁶

The movement of people from one place to another within a nation or world has brought interactions among people. One's faiths, beliefs, customs, and practices influence others and, in turn, are influenced by others too. During these interactions people of other faiths and cultures accept the beliefs, customs, and cultures of the influencing people and incorporate certain elements into their lives. For example, when Aryans came with their Vedic religion and culture to India, they were able to influence native Tribals and Dravidians, and Sanskritized some of the aspects of the native religions. The Aryan religion introduced the *varnasrama* and divided the population according to their caste system. Applying the caste system, the Hinduism created a hierarchical social structure and a caste culture. This case is a classical example for how a religion can influence the society to the extent of creating a social order and caste culture. Felix Wilfred argues that the relationship of religion to

⁵Narendra Singh, *A Christian Theology of Religions: Recovering Dialectical Method*, Bangalore: SAIACS, 2005, 3-4; Ken Gnanakan, *Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Context*, Bangalore: TBT, 2002, 53-67.

⁶Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*, Bangalore Orbis/SATHRI, 2000, 8-9.

society can be assessed by paying attention to various socio-economic layers and groups within the society itself and explains the way religious traditions and cultures of the dominant group such as upper caste and rich class are superimposed on the marginalized groups.⁷ Religion can shape the society and culture for better or worse. When the Islamic empire and the British colonial rule were established in India, they influenced the local communities and left their culture deeply rooted in the Indian soil.

Further, some of the local people were being influenced so much by the faiths and cultures of the other; they convert themselves to that religion and culture. Conversion is a sensitive issue in the relationship between religions.⁸ Without conversion, Christianity would not have developed from Judaism nor would other religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, or Sikhism not have emerged in this world. The positive aspect of the emergence of these religions and their spreading to other frontiers is the plurality of art, poetry, scripture, dress, food, architecture, sculptures, oral traditions, etc. But the negative result is division among people. Conversion to another faith happens either voluntarily or by force. Many Hindus belonging to upper castes converted themselves to Christianity to gain better spirituality and salvation.⁹ Many Sudras and Dalits joined Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam to liberate themselves from social bondage, caste discrimination, and poverty.¹⁰ Many Christians in the West

⁷Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia: Struggles for a different society*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, 137-163.

⁸Refer to Sebastian C. H. Kim, *In Search of Identity: Debate on Religious Conversion in India*, New Delhi: OUP, 2005; Antony Copley, *Religions in Conflict: Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late Colonial India*, New Delhi: OUP, 1999; Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia*, 307-325; Ebe Sunder Raj, *National Debate on Conversion*, Chennai: Bharat Jyoti Publication, 2001, 44-51.

⁹The conversion and theology of some of the converts from caste Hinduism are described in a number of books. For example, David Packiamuthu and Sarojini Packiamuthu, eds., *Tirunelveli's Evangelical Christians: Two Centuries of Family Vamsavazhi Traditions*, Bangalore: SAIACS, 2003. Pandita Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, Kedgaon: Mukti Mission, 2001. Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 1994.

¹⁰Geoff A. Oddie, ed., *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times*, Delhi: Manohar Publication, 1991, presents different cases of conversion to different religions. B. A. M. Paradkar, "The Religious Quest of Ambedkar," in T. S. Wilkinson and M. M. Thomas, ed., *Ambedkar and the Neo-Buddhist Movement*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1972,

converted themselves to Islam, Buddhism, the New Age movement, or even atheism. Voluntary conversion is a right of an individual or family. But forced conversion is a violation of individual freedom.

Some elements of the culture of a particular community were rejected by other communities as unacceptable either because their beliefs, religious laws, culture, and customs did not agree with such cultural, religious, and social elements of that particular community, or because they could be controversial and would adversely affect their own identity. For example, monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam could not accept certain beliefs and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. They are contradictory to their beliefs. However, they do not exist aloof. These monotheistic religions in India are also influenced by Hinduism that they practise caste and racial discrimination. They realize their alienation and try to indigenize their worship, festivals, and customs to be Indian than western. In the process of interaction and inculturation, each religious community gives some of its socio-religious and cultural elements to other religious communities and accepts certain elements from them. Yet, each community maintains the uniqueness of its faith, customs, and culture and exists as a distinctive community not being controlled or assimilated completely by any other religion.

The interaction and inculturation of religions and cultures are unavoidable today due to the movement of people, influence of the media, growing power of intellectualism, the longing for freedom of individuals, etc. However, we notice a clash of civilizations in different parts of the world.¹¹ Traditional religious communities fear that modernism threatens their identity, values, culture, and practices and could wipe out their religious and cultural traditions. Modern societies fear that some of the customs and practices cherished by traditional societies are based on superstitions, and outdated practices. They are hindrances for progress in today's world of science and technology.¹² The extreme pro-Hindutva

30-31, describes the conversion movement of Dalits to Buddhism under the leadership of Ambedkar in Maharashtra.

¹¹Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Penguin Book, 1997, 183-310; Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, New York: Bantam Books, 1990, 14-16.

¹²Meera Nanda, "How Modern Are We? Cultural Contradictions of India's Modernity," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41, 6 (February 11-17, 2006), 491-496.

people want their religious superstitions and inhuman practices, like sati and caste discrimination, child marriage and the secondary status of women to continue in the country. They want the *purusas* to be the basis for social, economic, and political policies and educational reform. Secularists and humanists criticize not only the ideologies of Hindutva but also the fundamentalism of all religions and their militancy and violence. Islamic leaders look at Christianity as a western political system and oppose Christianity and the western culture. They have failed to realize that Christianity and the western economic, political, and cultural systems are different. Christianity is criticizing the politics of the west and the culture of materialism and unethical living; so much is not noticed by the leaders of Islam and Hinduism. The crusades of the medieval period and the holocaust of killing millions of Jews by Hitler are stains in the history of Christianity. The clash between Islam and Christianity go on for centuries. The ethnic violence between Hindus and Muslims or Hindus and Christians in different parts of India and the clash between Islam and Christians or Islam and Judaism in other parts of the world remind us that there is a lack of proper understanding of religion among individuals and religious communities.

4. Inter-Faith Relations

Inter-Faith relations can be of different kinds namely Exclusivist, Inclusivist, Pluralist, Exoticist, and Particularist.¹³ Inter-Faith Dialogue is not a comparative study of religion but an interplay of different faith experiences with the aim to foster mutual understanding, criticism, enrichment, and communion.¹⁴ A formal education about religions in educational institutions is another means to enhance inter-faith relations. The need to develop other ways and means to promote relations among

This article discusses the way Vedas, myths, superstitions, and astrology are interpreted as science, counter the Enlightenment.

¹³For an explanation of these terms and models of inter-religious relationships, refer Rudolf van Sinner, "Inter-Religious Dialogue: From 'Anonymous Christian' to the Theologies of Religions," in Joseph George, ed., *The God of All Grace*, Bangalore: ATC/UTC, 2005, 186-201.

¹⁴Michael Amaladoss, "The Challenges and Opportunities of Dialogue with Other Religions," in L. Stanislaus and Alwyn D'Soza, eds., *Prophetic Dialogue: Challenges and Prospects in India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2003, 103-119.

religious communities in villages, towns and cities is a great need of the day for the following reasons.

4.1. Need for Inter-Faith Relations

4.1.1. Understanding Other Religions

We live amidst people of varied faiths and ideologies. We may like or dislike their way of life and practices. Some of us might have developed a negative opinion about the religious and social practices of our neighbours and alienated ourselves from our neighbours. Our bias and unwillingness to understand them have hindered the relationship with other local communities. We need to shed away our negative opinions and overcome the bias through a proper study of other religions if we want to develop and strengthen relationship with others. The more we try to understand their beliefs, worship, festivals, and teachings of their religion and culture, the more we can relate with them. Shallow and superficial understanding of religions of others is always dangerous. Understanding of others is a necessity. This does not mean accepting everything they believe and practice without a critical outlook. The true sense of understanding of the religions of others means willingness to learn about their faiths, teachings, and customs, appreciating the good values, accepting them as friends and continuing in cordial relationship with them. The relationship need not be for arguments and debates on the dogmatic aspects of religions. Quite often the trend of arguments can end up in breaking the relationship. One's willingness to see good aspects in other religious communities coupled with love and concern for humanity can strengthen inter-faith relations.

4.1.2. Reforming One's Own Religion

Learning of the religion of others can challenge one's own faith and practices. The knowledge of other religions can create critical reflection on our own religious faith and practices and lead to reform our religion. When Christianity, for example, came to India, it was challenged by the leaders of Hinduism. Indian languages, culture and music are influencing Christian worship and art even today. Robert de Nobili took several efforts to indigenize Christianity in the Indian soil. But his 'Mission' misunderstood him as if he was compromising with Hinduism. Both his 'Mission' in Europe and the Brahmins in India questioned the genuineness

of his indigenization.¹⁵ Western missionaries such as William Carey, Caldwell, and G. U. Pope were fascinated by the richness of the Indian languages. They studied Sanskrit and Tamil and compiled grammar and dictionary for these languages and contributed to the translation of the Bible in Indian languages.¹⁶ Indian *Bhakti* tradition of *Saivism* or *Vaisnavism* influenced the pietism of Christianity and enhanced the spirituality of Indian Christianity. Islamic Sufism influenced Sikhism and Zoroastrianism. Buddhism challenged Hinduism particularly the *Varna* system and some of its philosophical foundations and practices. Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi were influenced by Christianity so much so that they gave new interpretation to some of the philosophies and practices and brought reforms in Hinduism.¹⁷ S. Radhakrishnan responded to the criticism of Christian scholars against Hinduism, reinterpreted Indian philosophy and defended Hinduism. Interaction of religions, if taken in a positive sense, can challenge and shape each religion. No religious community is perfect and can claim absolute holiness. Each religious community has to learn from the challenges of the changing context and reform their own religion. Reforming does not mean defending and becoming apologetic. It means evaluating the different aspects of one's religion in a critical way and modifying the philosophies, concepts and customs which are hindrances for promoting true humanism. God values human beings and their lives more than the rituals, laws, customs, and traditions which human beings have created in the name of God and made them as legal requirements. We have made many of our rituals and practices burdensome to people. Jesus Christ criticized the Pharisees and Priests for making Judaism a burden on the people. He pointed out that the Sabbath rest is made for human beings to enjoy relaxation and to refresh once a week and that the human beings are not made for the Sabbath. He reiterated that God prefers mercy, love,

¹⁵Joseph Thakkedath, *History of Christianity in India*, Bangalore: CHAI, 1988, 2: 219-230.

¹⁶J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Michigan: Zondervan Publication House, 1978, 192.

¹⁷M. M. Thomas, in his *The Acknowledged Christ of Indian Renaissance*, Madras: CLS, 1976, discusses the response of Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, and Radhakrishnan to Christ. Further, G. A. Oddie discusses the impact of missionary work on Indian leaders in his *Social Protest in India*, New Delhi: Manohar Publication, 1978, 3-5.

and justice than sacrifices and rituals as Hosea and Amos pointed out (Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:25).

4.1.3. Maintaining as well as Risking Identity

Identity is an important social, religious, and political entity for people. Though people are identified by their names, each one of us carries multiple identities in terms of economic, social, religious, cultural, and linguistic groupings. Economically people are identified as rich, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, poor, and very poor, labourer, coolie, and beggar. Socially people are identified in terms of castes, tribes, race, and gender. Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Parsi, etc., are religious identities. Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Malayalee, Tamil, Kannadiga, Kashmeeri, Telugu, and Oriya are linguistic identities. Each of these different identities attached to an Indian plays a dominant role in different situation depending upon the context. The person uses it as he or she likes it. Others too use someone's identity either complimentarily or derogatively to refer to that person as poor or low caste, or primitive or illiterate. Identity, particularly religious identity, is a sensitive issue. The majority religious community in a country takes pride in their religious identity. The minority religious communities too are concerned about their religious identity because they are unique but are afraid to lose their uniqueness by the domination of majority religious community. Deliberately trying to eliminate the identity of a religious community or suppress it or marginalize it by another religious community hurts the victims and can arouse their protest or violent reactions. Each one should give due credit to another community and respect the identity of others. Whenever communities come together for relief work in emergency situations, charitable service, or social action, each community should be prepared not to project its identity and not to take the glory for the services. But they should be willing to tolerate, submit and even to risk the identity for the sake of accomplishing equality, justice, and progress of the people. Peace, harmony, and working together for good are more important than our own religious identities. Risking one's identity for a good cause could result in bringing more recognition to such a community.¹⁸

¹⁸M. M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987, 7.

4.1.4. Identifying the Oppressive and Liberative Forces

Religions teach good values and demand their adherents to practise the teachings. However, in the development of religions over a period, some of the interpretations of the scriptures, traditions, and practices become oppressive. Whoever introduced such oppressive elements and in whatever period in the history, these oppressive elements need attention and careful critique.¹⁹ For example, the Pharisees and the Sadducees promulgated their own legal codes and introduced wrong interpretations during the time of Jesus, and he had to counter them as they went contrary to the revelation of God to Moses and the Prophets. *Sati*, gender discrimination towards women, and caste system are oppressive practices within Hindu traditions. Most of these oppressive elements might have been introduced at some time in the past and were justified as religious requirements. Permission to marry more than one wife to a maximum of four could have been a temporary sanction due to the death of many men in the tribal wars in Arabia during the early Islamic period. Unfortunately, these oppressive elements became normative teachings for the respective religions. In the course of time, however, reformers had emerged to counter such evil elements in different religions, so as to bring back the true spirit of life.

An ongoing identification of the oppressive elements in any given religion is important to challenge it. It is equally important to rediscover the liberative motifs within them in order to develop their liberation theology or philosophy from the scriptural sources and experience of people.²⁰ The interactions, like dialogues, can lead the religious communities to identify and recognize the liberative forces within each religion, and to facilitate using them for the purpose of liberation. They can apply the messages of their religion to liberate people from social, economic, cultural, and political oppressions. The interactions of religious communities could lead them to strengthen their vision for liberation and mobilize them to express their solidarity for the poor and the oppressed.

¹⁹For example, W. R. Vijayakumar discusses the way *Mahabharatha* went into various stages of development and editorial to suppress the counter-revolution of Buddhism to keep the hegemony of Hinduism in different periods of history. Tracing of similar redactional work in the textual development of the scriptures against the counter-revolution is an important area for study and discussion. "A Historical Survey of Buddhism in India," in Thomas , ed., *Ambedkar and the Neo-Buddhist Movement*, 4-14.

²⁰Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions*, 154-156.

4.1.5. Sharing Information and Acting Together

Information is knowledge and power. The more information we collect and analyze on the issues better can be our decisions and actions. Religious communities should meet periodically and share information about recent happenings in their own religious communities with others. They can inform the forthcoming festivals or special meetings or social services. The problems and difficulties related to the social or economic needs of a religious community can be shared with others; they could also seek the guidance and assistance of other religious communities. Political decisions of the Central and State Governments affecting a particular religious community can be discussed and voices of other religious communities in support of the affected community can be raised. Sharing and discussing the contemporary trends in society or in the world can enlighten the minds of communities and prepare them not to be carried away by wrong news or propaganda and restrain them from becoming furious and indulging in violence. Listening to the views of others from their point of view and at the interest of the nation (in terms of the common good) can strengthen relationship among communities.

4.2. Problems and Prospects for Inter-Faith Relations

Inter-faith relations can be promoted at different levels. Three levels of inter-faith relations can be identified. At the first level, inter-faith relations can be fostered by studying one's own religion and of others either in an educational institution or at a religious centre. This exercise introduces the learners and the learning community to relate with religions intellectually and more critically. The second level is to engage in dialogue with other religions. A deeper study of religions – in terms of their doctrines and practices – can help in dialoguing with others meaningfully. The third level is to involve in socio-political action programmes organized by religious groups to transform the society.

History teaches the need for unity and co-operation among religious communities. History stands witness to a multitude of problems resulting from religious antagonism: the conflict in partitioning India and Pakistan, the ongoing struggles between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East, fighting between Protestants and Roman Catholics in the Northern Ireland, Tamils and Singhalese in Sri Lanka, and among the tribes in Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Sudan are a few events to name. It is estimated that more than 6 million people die every year in different parts of the world because

of religious reasons. In spite of several hindrances, it is heartening to note that religious communities in different towns and cities have come together in times of natural calamities, riots, ethnic violence, and other critical periods in the life of the nation. Inter-faith dialogue forums, multi-religious associations, common prayer meetings, etc., have been founded in some places. They conduct peace marches, fund raising programmes for charity, human rights seminars, and involve in fact-finding study of violence against one or other group and send reports to the local government. So much can be achieved and enjoyed if we build better relationships among communities.

There are several problems in promoting and strengthening inter-faith relations. There is a fear and suspicion on the part of religious leaders that the doctrines and uniqueness of their religion and culture would be questioned and marginalized. They could be asked in the process of dialogue to change their interpretation, customs, and rituals. Their power, authority, and lifestyle could come under criticism. They may not be able to lead the religious communities as they like and cater to their vested interests. The superstitions, fake spirituality, meaningless practices, and oppressive elements could be exposed in inter-faith dialogues. Instead of maintaining the status-quo and the conservative tendencies, the leaders of religions could be expected to reform and revitalize their religions to give priority to secularism and humanism, to work for the liberation of the oppressed, and to establish justice and the rights of the marginalized. Many leaders take such a task as too much of an intrusion upon their domains, and feel threatened with regard to their positions and authority. This insecurity feeling tends to instigate such leaders to restrict their members from involving in inter-faith dialogues, attending multi-religious meetings, or co-operating with other religious communities for social and humanitarian causes.

However, the influence of media showcasing the clash of civilizations, terrorism in the name of religion, and bloodshed in many parts of the world make communities to think about the need of inter-faith relations. The technological developments in global communication, the process of globalization, and the international travel are helping religious communities to understand each other; they motivate them to explore possibilities for strengthening relationship among communities and promoting peace and harmony. Building relationship among communities will certainly gain importance in the near future.

5. Transformation

If transformation is mere evangelism and saving the souls or performing *karma* and rituals to attain salvation, then it is limited to souls and not to the materialistic life of human beings. Practising charity and giving of alms limit the transformation to social needs and make the recipient to depend on the giver for ever.²² Socio-political actions limit transformation to changes in social and political structures but need not necessarily result in empowering the powerless. Each of these views of transformation is limited and incomplete. B. L. Myers criticizes various views on transformation, adopts a Christian standpoint on transformation, and argues for transformational development.²³ ‘Transformational development’ is a comprehensive expression to refer to socio-political, economic, and cultural changes of a society focusing on holistic development in the individual as well as the community. Religion can play a vital role in bringing holistic transformation in a society as it is closely connected with various aspects of the society. Religious leaders with their powerful teachings can transform the lives of families. With their critical analysis and the support of their institutions, they can question the political trends, leadership, and violations of justice and human rights. They can criticize the economic policies of the government which favour the rich and oppress the poor. Religions can identify the divisive elements which lead the people astray into communal clashes, and those moves which end up in degenerating the society into caste, gender, and racial discriminations. Religions can challenge the religious fundamentalism promoted through education and media, and call for the transformation of the curriculum of institutions and the media thrusts.

5.1. Basis for Transformation

5.1.1. Context Demands Changes

First, the context of socio-economic, political, religious, and cultural areas of a society demands continuous transformation. Socially, Indian society is caste oriented, particularly the southern regions of India. Practice of

²²J. B. Jeyaraj, “Social Action and Mission Challenges,” in C. V. Mathew ed, *Mission in Context: Missiological Reflection*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2003, 142-163; J. B. Jeyaraj, *Christian Ministry: Models of Ministry and Training*, Bangalore: TBT, 2002, 136-138, 183-186.

²³Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, New York: Orbis, 1999, 91-120.

varnasramadharm has divided the society into several caste groups and further into untouchables (*Pancamas*) or Dalits. Racially Indians are divided into Aryan, Dravidian, Mongolian, and *Adivasis*. The social division of people on the basis of caste, race, tribe, and gender has led to several ideological groupings, ethnic conflicts, discrimination, and oppression. It has endangered the unity of people as one nation and threatened several times peace and harmony in our society resulting in bloodshed and vandalism. Economic context of the class society has widened the gap between rich and poor. Wealth is accumulating in the hands of 5% of the rich people while 45% are in the middle class and 50% are poor. Many of the poor people are living below the poverty line without having access to the basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. The phenomenon of 'the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer' leads to the perpetuation of poverty, unemployment, bonded labour, debt, malnutrition, and deaths and violence against the landlords, business people, and industrialists. Eradication of poverty and establishing justice for the poor and downtrodden are challenges to religious communities. Growth of religious fundamentalism and cultural imperialism sponsored by political powers backed up by religions threatens the secular fabric and peaceful co-existence of people.

5.1.2. Fulfilling the Teachings of Religion

Each religion, whether it has a written scripture or continues on the basis of oral traditions, has a set of teachings and practices that require the devotees to follow them faithfully. The basic tenet of the teachings of all religions is love of God for humanity, justice and equality, and empowerment of the poor and marginalized. Sometimes what happens in reality is that people pick up only those teachings that suit to their convenience and leave out the other teachings because they demand more rigorous ethical practices. It is easy to accept the teachings of giving alms to the poor or feeding the hungry but it is difficult to work for establishing justice and welfare by addressing the causes of injustice and struggling against the forces perpetuating injustice. It is easy to accept the teaching of dharma but difficult to fight against caste, racial, and gender discriminations. On one side, various religions admire nature or even lead people to worship nature through their teachings. On the other side, forgetting the teachings of their religions, people destroy nature and environment causing ecological problems and threatening the very

existence of lives on earth. Trying to show the love of God on the one side and making chemical weapons on the other side reveal our inconsistent stand in fulfilling the teachings of religions. Selective approach to the teachings of one's religions, if not for liberation and empowerment of the powerless, is dangerous because it is usually based on one's convenience. Theology and praxis should identify and uphold the liberative and oppressive elements of the teachings of each religion vis-à-vis the oppressive aspects found in the same teachings. The positive values of religious messages should be passed on to children by their parents at home. Furthermore, the parents and the religious leaders in temples, mosques, churches, and gurudwaras should take effort to teach the liberative and empowering dimensions of their religions. Of course, the mass media can play a vital role in promoting the positive elements of the religious teachings.

5.1.3. Vision for Nation Building

Building the nation with the values of peace, harmony, equality, and economic development demands the co-operation of all religious communities and different political parties. In India, the pre-independent period witnessed the growing spirit of achieving freedom and commitment to the causes of the nation. The recent trends in our political arena, however, show the declining spirit of patriotism and growing fanaticism of regionalism, communalism, and religious fundamentalism. RSS and VHP promote their ideology of Hindutva, by irrationally demanding that the Muslims must go to Pakistan or Arabia and the Christians to Rome. There are, of course, separatist tendencies among one or the other group, though it is not shared by any significant majority. Different religious outfits propagate for different kinds of nationalism such as religious nationalism, cultural nationalism and political nationalism emphasizing their one-sided ideology, which can divide the nation and lead it into disintegration. The main thrust of patriotism for a united, secular and democratic nation of India is under threat due to religionizing politics.

The impact of globalization is another factor that influences our younger generation not to stay in India and build it up.²⁴ Rather, many

²⁴James David and John Desrochers, *Dimensions of Globalization*, Bangalore: CSA, 1998; J. B. Jeyaraj, "Globalization, Justice and Theological Response," *TBT Journal* (2004), 40-66.

scientists, computer engineers, technicians, nurses, etc., are leaving India to serve other nations. Concern and commitment for this nation among the present generation seem to be declining. This is mainly due to the fact that they could not get employment, enough salaries and challenges in their profession in India. An attitude of indifference to the problems of our society is increasingly present in them. Politicians tend to divide people for their own vested interests on the basis of dangerous foundations such as communal politics, ethnic violence, etc., which ultimately destroy unity, peace, and harmony among the people. We need to regain the vision for our nation and work to develop the true spirit of patriotism if we want to counter the evil forces. Inter-faith Dialogue on political ideologies and issues can enlighten the minds of religious leaders as well as their followers. They can instruct their own communities to have proper perspectives on the integration of the nation to prosper socially, economically, and politically.

5.2. Hindrances for Transformation

A number of hindrances for transforming our society can be listed from the social, economic, political, scientific, and technological points of view. From the perspective of inter-faith relations, however, three major hindrances can be listed. First, the biased attitude of religious leaders and their selective interpretation of scriptures and traditions for convenience sake is not only a hindrance for promoting relationship among religious communities but also for transforming the society.²⁵ They are not trained with the skill of critical analysis of the scriptures, traditions, rituals, and contemporary trends in the context. Lack of ignorance and exposure to the views of others has made them preach and teach oppressive doctrines. Second, the fear of entering into confrontation with the oppressive forces in the society such as money lenders, landlords, and political thugs that perpetuate poverty, illiteracy, injustices, and violation of human rights has made the religious communities turn their blind eye to the national problems. They are afraid of being persecuted or prosecuted and imprisoned. They not only suppress their conscience deliberately but also hinder transformation process at micro and macro level. Third, the

²⁵Susheela Bhan, "Inter-Faith Education for a Humane Global Order," in M. Mukhopadhyay, ed., *Education for a Global Society: Inter-faith Dimensions*, Delhi: SHIPRA, 2003, 20.

hesitation of devotees to question the biased attitude, selective interpretation, and deliberate negligence on the part of their religious leaders and unwillingness to reject the wrong values promoted by their leaders is another hindrance. Quite often, the voice of the people have led the leaders to rethink their teachings and, thus, to bring about reformation. Religious reforms for social transformation happened because at least a few lay people took the risk to question and challenge their religious authorities. Some of them faced harsh protests of the public and hatred of their religious leaders; some were excommunicated from their religions and a few others were even persecuted for raising their voices for reforms. Today, such radical thinkers for reforming religion and society either withdraw themselves to their own comfort zones or join hands with the leaders in oppressing the counter-culture. Or else, they are altogether ignored by their religious leaders. This unhealthy trend of withdrawing or co-operating for the oppression of the poor hinders transformation of our religion and society. If the leaders and their communities could join hands and take efforts for transformation, India can enjoy equality, peace, harmony, etc., as the fruit of genuine progress.

5.3. Agents of Transformation: Religious Institutions

In discussing the inter-faith relations for transformation, we should not forget that God is the main agent of transformation. God is the God of creation, orderliness, justice, and progress. God wants the unity of people and peace to be actualized. Religions teach us the way God acted in the history of humanity to transform faith, traditions, rituals and social life of people. God expects the followers to carry out the mission of transformation continuously and extends the power to the people to achieve it.

One of the powerful religious institutions, besides social, economic, and political ones, is the worshipping centres and ministerial training institutions of religions. Temples, churches, mosques, gurudwaras, synagogues, etc., are not merely centres of worship and performing rituals. Their mission is not limited to preaching and teaching of their doctrines and philosophies and charitable services. They are the agents of transforming their own communities. They have tremendous responsibility to build the nation with their doctrinal teachings, human and financial resources, and net-working services. The authorities of these centres should ask themselves the question of using their resources and power to

struggle against injustice, empower the poor and marginalized, protect the environment, and bring peace and harmony among the people. Christians, for example, should not forget the insights of the Bible that the churches are to be dynamic forces to transform the people and the society; the Gospels they accept as normative are holistic and demand social transformation. Why should we go on building temples, churches, mosques, dharga, gurudwaras, etc., either in small or mega size, in a private land or public land, on the roadside or on river banks or mountains? What is the use of such a structure for the socio-economic progress of the nation? Mere multiplication of these centres cannot transform the society magically. Direct involvement of the leaders and their religious communities in day-to-day affairs can only help the transformational process.

Institutions such as schools, colleges, and technical institutes are established and managed by the temples, churches, mosques, etc. Unfortunately, commercial gains dominate the establishment of many an institution. Some of those institutions even promote religious fundamentalism among students through courses, worship, and extra-curricular activities and justify caste discrimination and communalism. Some others want to provide various opportunities through their educational institutions to their own religious communities. They like to preserve their culture, strengthen their religious faith and rituals, and employ exclusively the members of their community. Whatever be their objectives, it is important that these institutions foster relationship among religious communities. They should not function to divide the people, endanger peace and harmony, and promote oppression and discrimination. Instead, they should contribute for the promotion of inter-faith relations, through their educational programs.²⁶

6. Conclusion

Developing inter-faith relations in our society may seem to be a difficult task but it is not impossible if we educate and train the people through

²⁶Bhan, "Inter-Faith Education for a Humane Global Order," 32-38 discusses the goals and learning process of Inter-faith education in institutions and Steven Paul Rudolph, "School Curriculum for Global Peace: JIVA Experience," in Mukhopadhyay, ed., *Education for a Global Society*, 139-143 presents the courses produced by NCERT for inter-faith education.

proper channels and educational institutions. Each institution may introduce, for this purpose, at least the following programs for their students to achieve the three levels of inter-faith relations stated earlier.

1. Offering at least value based courses, if not a degree program on religion and philosophy, to introduce the history and teachings of religions, the importance of secularism and humanism and the value of cultures. Such courses could lead the students, on the one hand, to understand and appreciate other religions and, on the other, reform their own faith, tradition, and spirituality.
2. Organizing inter-faith dialogue meetings and inviting religious leaders to discuss common issues confronting the nation and threatening the peace and progress. Since religion is interlinked with society, politicians and economists, social scientists and activists can be invited along with religious leaders to discuss various vital issues in seminars participated by both staff and students. Karan Singh sees the importance of inter-faith relations and points out that the inter-faith movements should be brought to the centre stage in our society and the educational institutions should provide a sound platform for nurturing inter-faith movements.²⁷
3. Requiring students to involve in the regular on-going social services carried out by other religious groups is the third level in addition to extending co-operation with the people of other faiths during natural calamities and relief operations. Such involvement can be organized by the centres for religions and inter-faith relations, if instituted already, or the National Service Scheme (NSS) or the social welfare department of the educational institutes. Providing opportunities to work with the people of other faiths for a common cause strengthens understanding and unity among religious communities.

²⁷Karan Singh, "Inter-faith Values for Education for a Global Society," in Mukhopadhyay, ed., *Education for a Global Society*, 4.