

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN BANGLADESH

Simon Hacha*

I. Background Information

The present Bangladesh was called East Bengal culturally united with West Bengal in the undivided India. In 1947 when Pakistan was created on the basis of religion, the majority of the people of East Bengal being Muslims, belonged to Pakistan and was known as East Pakistan. Bangladesh as an independent country came into existence after the war of liberation against Pakistan in 1971 in spite of the fact that in both West and East Pakistan the majority were Muslims.

The size of Bangladesh is 143,999 sq. km. It is a riverine country surrounded by the Bay of Bengal on the South, by India on the West, North and north-east, by Myanmar on the East.

Bangladesh has a population of 122 millions. Ethnically the great majority of the populations are Bangalees whose mother tongue is Bangala, the official language of the country, spoken by 98% of the people. There is also a significant number of indigenous people and tribal groups, e.g., Garo, Hajong, Khasi, Santal, Oraon, Munda, Chakma, Marm, Tripura, Baum, and other minor groups.

II. Religions in Bangladesh

Out of the total population of 122 millions 86% are Muslims, 12.1% are Hindus, 0.8% are Buddhist and 0.3% are Christians and other 0.2%.

Bangladesh is the second biggest Muslim country of the world. Islam is the State Religion of the country. The rights of the minority religions are guaranteed in the Constitutions of the country. However protection of their rights is increasingly threatened by the fundamentalist groups. Christians in Bangladesh are sometime victims of the international events that affect Muslims in the world.

In Bangladesh there are mainly two groups of Islam. "Shariati" who follows strictly the Shariat Laws and the "Marfati" who are mostly influenced by popular religiosity built in the culture and influenced by Sufism. The number of the Marfatis

*Fr. Simon Hacha is Secretary of the Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue of the Bishop's Conference of Bangladesh.

are greater than the Shariatis but the Shariatis are increasingly getting dominance creating serious concern for many in the country including the Muslims themselves.

Christian Community is a small minority numbering about 300,000 people out of which 230,000 are Catholics and the rest belong to different Protestant and Evangelical Denominations. The Catholics are distributed in six Dioceses. More than half of the Catholics belongs to Tribal populations who are ethnically the least minority in the country.

The division among the Christian is seen as scandal both the Christians as well as by the people of other faiths. Ecumenical spirit is visible and efforts are being made for Christian unity, focusing on the common national issues that concern the Christians, social development works, common prayer meetings and religious services, and recently in common Christian initiatives in view of celebration of the Great Jubilee 2000.

III. Efforts of Church for Inter-religious Dialogue

The Catholic Bishop's Conference of Bangladesh has a Commission on Ecumenism and Inter-religious Dialogue. For the last twenty years or so the Commission has been motivating mainly the Christians about the importance of Dialogue for the Church. It has also tried to motivate some people of other faiths who have more close contact with the Church. Some dioceses have similar Diocesan Commissions and others have some persons responsible for Dialogue. With the exception of about 5-10 out of 70 parishes in Bangladesh there is no systematic and organized efforts for dialogue although some programmes are organized once in while.

The Dialogue Commission also promotes formation and training for the leaders of the Christian community, organizes inter-religious Dialogue collaborate with the FABC Office for Ecumenism and the Inter-Religious affairs.

Being a minority, Bangladesh Church tries to be salt and leaven in the society. Most of the institutions and organizations of the Church which cater services to Christians as well as to the people of other faiths, have dialogue and religious harmony as their main spirit and approach. They are Educational, Social and Charitable Institutions of the Church and various Christian Non-Government

Organizations (NGOs for examples: CARITAS, YMCA, YWCA, BICPAJ, Shampriti, Deep Shikha, and other NGOs). Warm Heart Association, an organization of some intellectuals, has inter-religious Dialogue as the main objective.

Recently an initiative is taken by some leaders of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists to give a formal name and structure to the informal gatherings being organized since few years. The main objective of the organization will be religious harmony among all peoples. Some leaders of the Catholic Church is actively involved in this effort.

Quite regularly teaching of the Catholic Church on Inter-religious Dialogue is given to those who are in initial formation for priesthood and religious life; to the youths, lay leaders and catechists in their formation programmes, and to the priests, religious and lay people for their continuing formation.

Inter-religious gathering and seminars are held at the national, diocesan and parish levels mainly based on common issues and concerns, on moral and religious values which are at stake, on the promotion of justice and peace, human dignity and social development, and on communion and harmony in the society, etc.

IV. Approaches for Dialogue and Achievements

Reflecting on the Church's experiences of inter-religious dialogue we can identify the following objectives; to communicate Gospel values; to promote together dignity and rights of the human person and community; to promote spirit of respect for people with other faiths; to promote communion and community by living in harmony, justice and love.

1. Dialogue of life:

Christians live and work together with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and the people of traditional religions in their Bangladesh. Here living together, visiting each other, celebrating together, sharing joys and sorrows of each other, expressing concerns for each other take place with neighborhood feelings and friendships. Hence dialogue of life is a given situation and common experience of peoples of all faith. Here Christians need to know more about their own faith, live their faith with commitment and have faith-reflection on their experiences of dialogue of life.

2. Dialogue of Action:

Although a small minority yet the Church is wide spread in the country. Thanks to the educational and charitable institutions and the many Christian organizations for social and human developments. The people of other faiths are taken as partners in planning, decision-making and implementing and also as common beneficiaries. The Christian vision and values are commonly reflected and often shared together. The influence of the Christian values in the country have been so much that even some of the biggest non-Christians non-government organization (NGOs) have been termed as Christians by the fundamentalist groups.

3. Dialogue of Discourse:

Formal dialogue among the religious leaders or intellectuals are few and far between in Bangladesh. However, what we commonly have is, whenever we organize any inter-religious gathering or seminars we bring the speakers from other religions who share their opinions on the topics from the perspective of their own faith. The presentations are followed by questions, clarification and discussions where everyone participates.

Another approach of inter-religious dialogue in our recent experiences has been the inter-religious meetings on the occasion of death or death anniversary or other anniversaries of some outstanding personalities or even close friends, co-operators and co-workers. [Examples Mother Teresa, late Bp. Joachim Rozario (former Chairman of the Dialogue Commission), or death of a teacher, social worker, anniversaries of Poet Rabindranath Tagor or Poet Nazul Islam, and so on). These occasions are excellent for dialogue with other faiths because they are very often done with faith reflection of values universally accepted. Religious festivals and celebrations are also special moments taken for inter-religious dialogue.

4. Dialogue of Spirituality:

The cultural and popular religiosity in Bangladesh is a fertile ground for spiritual dialogue. Spirituality goes beyond the dictates and confines of religions. In Bangladesh reading of the Word of God and even prayer in public gatherings are commonly done. Some dioceses and non-government Christian organizations spiritual renewal programmes of one to three days (a type of annual retreat) for the

workers and their beneficiaries are held regularly. Caritas Bangladesh had organized many such spiritual gatherings from the grassroots levels to the top level of Caritas planners and workers.

V. Difficulties Encountered

In the efforts for inter-religious dialogue the following are some of the difficulties faced:

1. The Christians are a very small minority in the vast majority of Muslims. Any initiative of dialogue by the Church is viewed with suspicion and often interpreted wrongly.
2. Prejudices born out of bitter and negative experiences with the Muslims deter many Christians and their leaders to be open to dialogue.
3. Education in general and faith formation of the Christians in particular are minimum. Hence for them it is hard to see the value of dialogue and to know how to do it.
4. Triumphalistic and defensive attitudes of the people of all religions make dialogue difficult.
5. Christians are considered foreigners in the country. Therefore they are not always accepted in the main stream of the nation.

VI. Impact of the Church's Call to Dialogue

Since Vatican II the Church's call to Dialogue has changed the attitudes of the priests and religious and lay people toward other religion. Many see positively the work of the Spirit in other religions and see the need to having good relations with them. May be sometimes more for social reasons than religious ones.

Through the formation of priests, religions, Catechists and the lay people particularly the youth and some leaders about 30% to 40% of the Christian population have been exposed, one way or the other, to message of the Church regarding dialogue. The impact on the rest is hard to say.

VII. General mood of Other Religious and the Attitude of the Media

The need for religious tolerance and harmony is felt by most of the people in the country. This is due to the cultural and spiritual heritage the people of Bangladesh. But at times this heritage is disrupted by the activities of the fundamentalist groups. The Church's call to dialogue already finds a culturally and religiously prepared ground. The Church tries to attune her message and activities with what exists, and promotes them further. The impact of Church's witness of inter-religious dialogue is very much limited to a few who live in close touch with Church.

The secular media in Bangladesh positively promotes inter-religious harmony and tolerance with the exception of few Dailies and Weeklies owned and run by the fundamentalist groups.

Religious events and writings of the Christians are widely covered with due importance in the media-national TV, radio, printing press, etc.

VIII. Teaching of Religions in the Seminaries/Houses of Formation

We have one Major Seminary in Bangladesh where Islam and Hinduism are taught regularly. But in the other houses of formation no formal classes are give on any specific religion, only few talks are given on inter-religions dialogue.

IX. Vision and Perspective for Future

1. A greater emphasis should be place on person to person dialogue. Personal relationship and friendship between members of different faiths promote mutual acceptance and harmony.
2. The leaders of the people of other faiths should be taken more and more as equal partners in our educational institutions, charitable organizations and social development programmes. This kind of institutional dialogue has already produced much fruits.
3. Spirituality of dialogue is to be promoted more and more with programmes of Dialogue of Spirituality, through spiritual renewal programmes for the people in educational, social and development works.

4. Inter-religious dialogue should be promoted in the through the integral pastoral approach of the Church in view of "New Way of Being Church". The Basic Communities should be the focus and locus for promoting inter-religious dialogue with the common people.
5. Efforts can be made to persuade the government to establish a National Institute with equal opportunities for all. This institute could act as center for dialogue, study of culture and religions. Such center would be symbolic as well as functional. This way the Government will able to project an image of communal harmony among all its citizens.

Conclusion

Dialogue is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is at work in Bangladesh Society: in all religions, popular religiosity, in Inter-religious Dialogue, in Social transformation, in solidarity among the peoples, in Christian spirituality. Christians as participants in dialogue are to discern the movements of the Spirit and to second His actions.