

PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF INTERRELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND THEIR RESOLUTION

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1. POSSIBILITIES OF INTERRELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

1.1. Historico-Existential Reasons for Conflicts

From the historico-existential point of view the basis of any human conflict is the difference between human beings.

The persons with whom we have to deal have not merely a different way of thinking and feeling, a different conviction and attitude, but also a different perception of the world, a different recognition and order of meaning, a different touch from the regions of existence, a different faith, a different soil. To affirm all this in the midst of the hard situations of conflict without relaxing their real seriousness is the way by which we may be permitted to touch on the other's truth or untruth, justice or injustice.¹

The affirmation of differences between men is most conspicuous in the case of politics and religion to which human beings confess their allegiance and loyalty. This may be the reason why most conflicts in the history of mankind are either political or religious. The primary reason for the former is human desire to dominate; when this desire is coupled with power, authority and material

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means, there invariably occurs a conflict followed by violence. But we focus on the latter, because religion by its very nature should strive towards peace, harmony and liberation of men. Paul Knitter bemoans that the religions have failed to do their job. "I would suggest that one of the major reasons why there is so much disunity and lack of peace in today's world is because the religions of the world have not done their job."² The religions must have brought about concord and harmony among the peoples as every religion upholds the ideals of love, peace compassion and forgiveness.

Why they have failed in this? Why do religious conflicts occur?

Because within every religion there exist, according to Elise Boulding, two contrasting cultures; that of holy war and that of peaceable garden. According to Karl Marx, religion becomes an instrument in the hands of the ruling classes to maintain and safeguard their power structures. According to Teilhard de Chardin, the religions of the world follow a "universal evolutionary pattern by which each religion must first go through a 'microphase' of consolidation through self-interest before it can enter a 'macrophase' of relationship and cooperation with others.

Be that as it may, the dynamic of any conflict is such that it entails a process which moves the partners of the conflict towards its resolution. Conflict by its very nature is a transitory phenomenon. It is only an intermediary antithesis leading to a synthesis. The demand for synthesis is due to the fact that a conflict brings about an undesired state of affairs. This is the reason why despite all wars, battles, violence and fights men have lived together, have forgotten all their hatred and reconciled with one another and begun new life once again. Humanity's

survival instinct and propensity for peace are powerful enough to overcome conflicts of any magnanimity. But the ground reality of human selfishness and desire for power and domination is also co-exists along with the propensity for peace and the former constituents assert themselves when a crisis erupts. Hence we cannot create a situation where conflicts become outdated.

1.2 Philosophical Reasons for Interreligious conflicts

A philosophical explanation for interreligious conflicts - for that matter conflicts of any sort - is to be found in the human capacity to disagree. Why men disagree? Because human reason conforms itself to the principle of bi-valence: something is either true or false. The categorical rationality is committed itself to this principle which is dual and dualistic in every way. This is the logical ground for all disagreements and consequent conflicts. The formal structure of categorical reason is such that it functions on contrary principles such as thought and object of thought, consciousness (thinker) and the object of consciousness (what is thought). There is once again differentiation between the objects of consciousness themselves. What makes a thing what it is, is its difference from other things. This differentiation gives the object its identity.

Secondly, this categorical thought manifests itself in the logical form of predication. Predication too is grounded on differentiation. To be a particular predicate P, it has to be differentiated from 'non-P. Similarly to be a unique subject S, it has to be differentiated from non-S. This is the logic of *sic et non*, either/or. "A given Subject S cannot be both P and non-P (at the same time and in the same respect); or A given subject S must be either P or not-P."³

This formal logical feature of polar opposites has ontological analogues. It limits the rational understanding and puts constraints on the formation of meanings, i.e., the meanings should be categorically correct and true. Intelligibility will be determined by category relations. Thus the statements such as 'stones can eat and drink' or 'numbers can run' become unintelligible. The meaningful predication is conditioned by categorical structure. A term gets a definite identity and a specific place in the whole language structure building up a coherent whole in which all predicative possibilities of polar terms are linked together.

Categorical structures constitute world-views constituted of coherent system of truth propositions. The categorical rationality is such that when you are committed to one world-view you are bound by it and there is no neutral stand from which you can judge another world view. You can judge it only from the world view into which you are bound with. This predicament plunges us into a dilemma where interreligious interaction becomes enigmatic proposition. Each judges other religion from the point of view of his own religion. The predicament faces crises in the case of belief structures. Within a particular world view the different truth propositions and sets of beliefs stand in relation to one another and constitute a coherent rational system of logically interrelated truths and beliefs. When this world view confronts another world view with contradictory truth propositions and structure of beliefs, there should certainly be a conflict because same person at the same time cannot acquiesce in contrary beliefs. The very nature of a belief is such that it demands radical commitment, and a person may be ready to die in order to defend his belief rather than give it up. Added to that, the principle of bi-valence proposes that if I am true

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you should be wrong, if I am right you should be wrong; and if one believes that falsity has no right to exist, he can also demand that one who professes falsity too has no right to exist; then the conflict could be acute and the mighty can annihilate the weaker one's to defend the truth and the beliefs they hold to be absolute.

We need therefore a hermeneutic in which the categorical reason could be transcended giving rise to agreements on conflicting issues on a higher level of logic. Take for example the terms such as self, God and the like. Taking into account each ontology has a specific use of these terms - thus the use of the term self is not the same in Thomistic, Cartesian, Hegelian, Hindu and Buddhist ontologies - should there not be a common ground where these ontologies meet each other and consider the nuances of meanings and settle the semantic scores? In such a trans-categorical rationality the hermeneutic of the category of opposition, duality, differentiation and polarity should be replaced with the hermeneutic of the categories of non-difference, non-identity (unity), non-duality and bipolarity.

2. THE POSSIBILITIES OF RESOLUTION OF CONFLICTS FROM INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

We said, that all conflicts have in themselves an innate dynamism which moves towards its own resolution. After all, conflicts are also human encounters where negative ethical values, such as misunderstanding, hatred, discord, disharmony and the like prevail. But humans as we are, we do not sincerely desire to live amidst these negative values for long. Having given expression to our aggressive passions, humans cool down (at least at the face of defeat and humiliations) and take initiatives to create situations where again positive moral values will be cultivated and practised. As we have invented tools of aggression,

violence and conflicts, so also institutions of reconciliation both at micro and macro level which can play the role of mediation between the parties involved in conflicts surround us.

But still we need to ask, why conflicts arise and how they could be resolved? In India Buddhism gives an answer to this question. The Buddha as a fruit of his meditation and enlightenment proposed the doctrine of Causal Concatenation (*pratitya samutpada*) in which he reduces the ultimate cause of all sorrow, suffering and conflicts (*duhkha*) to ignorance (*a-vidya*). Ultimate reason for all conflicts is ignorance: i.e., the lack of knowledge of other parties point of views, lack of understanding regarding the issues involved in the conflicts.

The remedy to overcome such a situation is very clear. We need to take up steps to understand the other and to know his point of view. To understand the other, one has to open oneself to the other. This openness is possible only through encounter and through dialogue. How such a dialogue is to be had, is again explicated in Buddhist tradition: the oft quoted example of the conversation between Ngasena and king Milinda or the Greek King Menandros in 150 B.C. provides an insight into an effective dialogue. King Milinda went to Ngasena and said:

"Venerable Sir, will you discuss with me again?"

"If your majesty will discuss as a scholar, yes; but if you will discuss as a king, no."

"How is it then that scholars discuss?"

"When scholars discuss there is summing up, unravelling; one or other is shown to be in error and he admits his mistake and yet is not thereby angered."

"And how is it that kings discuss?"

"When a king discusses a matter and advances a point of view, if any one differs from him on that point, he is apt to punish him."

"Very well then, it is as a scholar that I will discuss. Let your reverence talk without fear."⁴

Nagasena is demanding from the King the detachment from (or bracketing of) the political principle, which is a principle of domination and coercion. On the other hand we have the principle of scholars viz., social principle which is a principle of fellowship; the former is vertical and the latter is horizontal. In other words for a speedy resolution of the conflicts through effective dialogue the participants should approach the issues with a detached intellect. The *atman* should be detached from 'I' and the 'thou' in order to concentrate on the content of the dialogue itself, i.e., what is being said. The postulates emerging from what is being said can result in summing up and unravelling. Daya Krishna⁵ would call this collective creation. All the partners participate on this creative activity with a feeling of equality and with attention to 'what is said, rather than who said what'. Indians would insist on the element of silence for this purpose, which is an act of listening that respects the uniqueness and inwardness of the other. Dialogue may demand the detachment of self-centered views but not one's own uniqueness and inwardness; nay, it can deepen and purify one's own inwardness and uniqueness through listening to the inwardness and uniqueness of the other.

Finally, many things may happen in a dialogue: conflicts might be resolved, discords might give place to concord, misunderstanding to understanding, hatred to love and respect; but all these need to be sustained. Situations may change and new conflicts may emerge again. Hence

most important aspect of the Dialogue is that it should not stop; the parties should keep dialogue going and it should remain as an endless process.

3. THE LOCUS OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN INDIA: THE CONCEPT OF AN ASRAM

It is not enough to describe what makes a genuine dialogue and how it 'should be' carried out. All that we said will remain only in the air unless an atmosphere is created where parties willing to meet can gather together to commence the dialogue. We need mediators to function as catalysts of authentic dialogue. We need appropriate places where the partners encounter mutually in an atmosphere of cordiality and openness, parties in conflict can settle their disputes and a confluence of religions can take place.

In the Indian context such a need has been fulfilled from time immemorial through *asrams*. We delineate the concept of *asram*⁶ in order to present a viable locus for interreligious interaction in our own times. *Asrams* historically represented open communities marked by hospitality permeated by peaceful and cordial atmosphere and silence surrounded by natural beauty. On the one hand they were centres of formation of personalities of all hues, and on the other, they were dwelling places of spiritual men (gurus) who relentlessly sought after 'knowledge' (*vidya*) and yearned for enlightenment.

From the very beginning the *asrams* were open places invariably situated in ecologically attractive places: river bank, forest or hill-side. One of the important characteristics of an *asram* is hospitality. All members of the human species, rich and poor, high caste and casteless, kings and slaves, men and women could find shelter in the open space that surrounded the *asram*. Though primarily

they were centres for spiritual excellence, nevertheless, they rejected no one who came there from any ulterior motive. The atmosphere itself made the inmate to change his attitude.

Secondly, *asrams* were the formation centres where great personalities were molded and educated; in this sense they were also academic and cultural centres.

Asrams were not introvert communities; they played a formative role in socio-political life. In them princes were initiated to marital arts, kings were given political counsel, householders received instruction on their family duties, farmers got training in agricultural skills, students learned the scriptures and methods of meditations, and young artists were initiated to music and dramatics. Above all *asrams* were power-houses of spiritual renewal in society: spirituality meant harmony between the divine, the human and the cosmic dimensions of life.⁷

Asrams brought out what is highest in man because there one could meet the cream of the society. They were in this sense the centres of dialogue where different world-views could resolve their differences in mutual encounters.

Finally, the *asrams* were the centres of meditation. In such a suave atmosphere one could transcend from the naive to scientific consciousness and then from scientific to meditative consciousness. At the level of naive consciousness one encounters the world naively, i.e., the 'object' of consciousness here is taken for granted from common sense point of view. But when man wishes to gain the knowledge of the world and its sciences, he reflects upon the object, subjects it to the categories of understanding and through scientific methods transforms it to suit his purpose. At this level the categorical (dual) reason is at its best, the form of which is one of opposition,

polarity, and differentiation being governed by the laws of identity and difference. At this level man develops definite world views and the fixity of forms of thinking takes place leading to a definite system of thought patterns and beliefs founded on specific interconnected truth propositions.

We have already underscored the need to transcend this level of consciousness in which men meet with only contradictions when they encounter a world-view other than their own. *Asram* is a place where this need is met with, where one can transcend rational categories by attaining a trans-categorical (non-dual) rationality through meditation. The meditative consciousness is the deepest level of consciousness where a dynamic self transformation of the categorial reason can take place. When a person concentrates on the object of meditation for a long time in an attitude of surrender, the distinction between the subject and object disappears i.e., the logical space between the subject and the object of consciousness vanishes and as a result there takes place a fusion between the two. This fusion is a unity of experience, an experience of non-identity and non-difference.

What are the features of meditative reason? First of all there takes place the transcendence of the fixity of categorial time in meditation. The either/or logic of differentiation has validity only in categorial time. Within this time the unity or the non-duality between the subject and the object of consciousness appears as a mere contradiction. This is because there is a constituent of time in the formal principle of dual reason: "A given subject P cannot be both P and not-P **at the same time.**" Due to the expansion of time consciousness in meditation the principle of dual reason is transcended in it.

Secondly, the logical space of differentiation between mind and object, object and meaning etc. is also eliminated in meditative reason. The predication becomes non-dual i.e., there results non-difference or identity between the subject and the predicate; "the polar opposition and differentiation evaporates into a bipolarity and the fixity of essentialist univocal meaning flows into the multi-vocal unity of metaphor. This logical space turns upon itself in a virtuous circle in which the infinite distance is the point at which one begins: "here" is "everywhere," "now" is "everywhen," and "I" specifies everything and nothing. Process of development (becoming) moves in the stillness of non-dual "becoming." In short, the categorial particular shines forth with the cosmic significance of the transcategorial universal."⁸

To elaborate phenomenologically, in the passivity of meditation the functions of the active categorial reason are brought to rest. The object of consciousness is no more something that stands opposite to me but it is just part of me. Meditative reason then becomes intuitive, and the intuitive consciousness perceives the reality in its wholeness; this in turn reveals also the relativity of particular objects and the particular world-views. It means that within the unity of the whole each religion obtains an unique place and they no more stand in conflict and in contradiction to one another but in the uniqueness of their own relative position. There results a widening of the horizon - and not the fusion of horizons as Gadamer would say⁹. In this widened horizon no religion, no world-view is either annihilated or made to merge with another but each religion and its world-view is confirmed and a correlation between them is perceived at the background of the experience of unity.

Moreover, in the meditative consciousness one realizes the uniqueness of one's own religion and its value system in inwardness without creating an attitude of contempt to another religion. On the other hand there emerges an attitude of reverential respect to other religions and their value systems. This attitude leads to a cordial co-existence of different religions in mutual respect and reverence. Nevertheless, no conflictless ideal situation is presupposed; i.e., when conflicts arise, the personalities enlightened through meditative reasoning can take active initiatives towards effective dialogue which can resolve the conflicts amicably and resume living in authentic I-thou relationship constantly attempting to create a true fraternity of human beings.

What is the correlation between an *asram*, dialogue and transcending of rational categories? The context of an *asram* proposes the physical possibility for a Dialogue where persons with different ontologically confirmed world-views can assemble together. *Asram* is a place centred round gurus or enlightened personalities (who have already transcended categorial, dual rationality) who can play the host, function like mediators between partners in conflict and propose a hermeneutics such as analogical (Mall) or diatopical (Panikkar)¹⁰ for a fruitful dialogue between different religions, and thus start the ball rolling. There are basic common concepts in all religions such as 'world', 'self', 'God' and the like, but there is no unity regarding the meaning of these concepts. Thus for example the meaning of the concept 'self' is not the same either in Hinduism or in Buddhism in the East nor in the western ontologies such as Thomistic, Cartesian, or Hegelian. What hinders to mutual understanding is the judgements arrived at under the guidance of categorial reason. If the participants of the dialogue can bracket the categorial

reason with the assumption that there are plurality of possible and actual world-views and if they can admit that the natural reason can inhabit multiplicity of world views, then the door is opened to ontological relativity and pluralism. The next step could be to negotiate the logical space between dual (finite) and nondual (infinite) discourse. This is actually a process of descending from the intellect to the heart level of perception. The former differentiates and particularises and the latter unites and universalises. For this the participants should be open to enter into deeper levels of consciousness through meditation where the unity at the level of heart could be experienced for oneself. This experience is also an experience of nonduality and non-differentiation and hence it is a step towards the transcendence of categorical dual rationality.

4. CONCLUSION: THE CONCEPT OF NON-VIOLENCE (AHIMSA)

No one can posit any culture, nation or ethnic group that could be considered as bereft of all conflicts. Being an integral dimension of intersubjectivity, the conflicts cannot be eradicated totally as long as men interrelate among themselves. But the greatness of a culture/nation/religion depends on its philosophy that has developed ideals which have gone a long way to impregnate the lives of its people with values that create harmony and cordiality in the society and in the world. Indian culture (and religions) can be really proud of possessing such an ideal in the concept of ahimsa which has influenced the people of India throughout the centuries in creating an atmosphere of freedom and peace.

The French Indologist Alfred Foucher, has bequeathed following spiritual testament to his posterity

All that I would like to state is that I have a vision deeply engraved in my memory, which has even been present with me, and which accords with the inmost convictions of my heart. If it is the destiny of the earth to be saved, it will owe its salvation to India, and, in India, to that virtue whose Sanskrit name you should agree to learn and retain, since it has no equivalent in other languages, viz., *ahimsa*!¹¹

The greatest contributors in Indian History towards this doctrine were Jainas who held the doctrine of animism (*jiva*) as the most important principle of their religion according to which everything on the face of this earth is a living being and hence one should take care not to injure any living being. This doctrine took the normative principle of *ahimsa*: 'non-killing, absence of the desire of killing.' We read in Jaina scripture:

(1) Earth, water, fire and wind; (2) grass, trees, and corn; (3) oviparous animals, the two kind of viviparous animals; (4) beings engendered in fluids and (5) in dirt and (6) plants. These six classes of living beings a wise man should know and treat tenderly, in thought, words, and acts; he should neither do actions, nor desire property, whereby he might do them any harm.¹²

The Jaina ascetics propagated the doctrine and the practice of *ahimsa* with zeal and zest for centuries which influenced Indian society and Hinduism so much that many of the Hindus became pure vegetarians.

If the practice of *ahimsa* spread beyond the boundaries of Indian continent to other countries of Asia, it is through Buddhism, specially through Mahayana. Chinese Buddhists both monks and the laity gave up meat eating and the ethical considerations that made them to practice *ahimsa*

were two great positive virtues taught by the Buddha: compassion (*karuna*) and friendliness (*maitri*) and also the belief in transmigration. There is also a metaphysical reason why Buddhists propagated the virtue of non-violence viz., the theory called 'the womb of *tathagata*': which says that the nature of the Buddha is identical with Ultimate Reality. All beings participate in this Reality and possess the possibility of becoming the Buddha. This means all beings are essentially one, by inflicting pain on any being one harms oneself and hence *ahimsa* is to be strictly followed.¹³

We see here how the doctrine of *ahimsa* has been handed down for centuries in India and China. It has been deeply rooted in the psyche of these peoples. In India Mahatma Gandhi made it a weapon to fight against the British rule and succeeded to win freedom to his country.

One may ask what way the doctrine has helped to resolve interreligious conflicts in India. Violence and conflicts are two sides of the same coin. If conflicts beget violence we can see how an ethical theory of non-violence or compassion can assuage causes which give rise to conflicts. If the causes of interreligious conflicts are to be nipped in the bud one should practice and propagate the virtue of *ahimsa*.

Moreover, the virtue of *ahimsa* has a cosmic and ecological dimension: it propagates non-injury to all beings and even to nature. When so much destruction of nature is undertaken around us, the religious world-views cannot afford to exclude environmental issues from their perspectives. Contemporary wars - with non-conventional weapons - have effected annihilation of cosmic dimensions. To protect our planet from all conflicts we need cosmic ethics and Indian ethics is essentially cosmic in nature: *Ahimsa* is an example of it.

Ahimsa is part of *dharma* (cosmic law) which is cosmo ethical... What the Indian cosmo-ethics has for its world is something indefinitely larger than our planet, but that is so in principle. For in fact the planet with all forms of life in it, is its immediate world. And man, while he has to take his place in a democracy of an indefinite number of living species, is nonetheless not only their crown in an evolutionary-hierarchical sense but also their priest, first-fruit and spiritual guardian. In this cosmo-ethical scheme man's place, his destiny and his significance are only heightened and in no way lessened.¹⁴

Our world is being reduced to a global village in which the responsibility of each and every religio-cultural group to create peace and to preserve the cosmos is all the more heightened. For this the perspectives of cosmo-ethics are most conducive. India has contributed its lion's share to maintain cosmic order, promote human welfare and unity among peoples. This should be the goal of all interreligious enterprise.

Finally, we can say that *ahimsa* is an attitude which recognises the sanctity of life both human and non-human and propagates respect to all living beings. It is also an attitude of tolerance, both towards tolerant and the intolerant. This is because it is a prophetic virtue which condemns the intolerant in a prophetic manner, i.e., by refusing to be intolerant. The contemporary times demand prophets of *ahimsa* who will promote interreligious harmony and understanding so that as we step into the third millennium we find a world more open to resolve their conflicts through dialogue keeping in view the welfare of all beings.

NOTES

¹. Maurice Friedman, *Intercultural Dialogue and the Human Image* (New Delhi: 1995), 102.

². Paul Knitter, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Unity of Humanity:", *Journal of Dharma*, vo. 17, 1992, 283ff.

³. Ashok K. Gangadean, "The Hermeneutics of Comparative Ontology", in *Religious Pluralism and Truth*, ed. by Thomas Dean, Delhi: 1997, 234ff.

⁴. *The Debate of King Milinda*, Ed. by Bhikku Pesala, Delhi: 1991, 4f.

⁵. Friedman, 180f.

⁶. The word *Ashram* literally means to strive after, to exert oneself. Historically there developed four stages of striving after in life which were named as ashramas. A boy as he grows should strive hard to learn the Vedas and other religious customs and duties (*brahmacarya*). Then he must strive strenuously to build up a good family, inculcating sound religious and moral values (*grahastha*). Once he brings up his children he should renounce his family and strive after higher religious values of penance (*tapas*) and prayer by resorting to lonely places like forest (*vanaprastha*) and finally he should accept the ideal of an ascetic life of a hermit (*sannyasa*).

⁷. Sebastian Painadath, "Ashrams a Movement of Spiritual Integration" *Concilium*, (August 1994), 36-46

⁸. Gangadean, *Religious Pluralism*, 240.

⁹. Cf. Mary Ann Stenger, "Gadamer's Hermeneutics as a Model for Cross-Cultural Understanding and Truth in Religion" *Religious Pluralism*, 151-170.

¹⁰. Anthony Savari, "The Diatopical Hermeneutics: R. Panikkar's Response to the Scientific Study of Religions," *Journal of Dharma*, vol. XXI, 1996, 198-203.

¹¹. Cited by K.Luke, "Ahimsa" in Indian Capuchin Research Forum, vol. I, ed. by Johnson J., Bangalore: 1991, 139.

¹². *Sutrakrtanga*, 1, 9, 8-9.

¹³. *Prajñāparamita and Related Systems: Studies in Honor of Edward Conze, Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series I*, Berkeley 1977, 283-312.

¹⁴. John G. Arapura, "Ahimsa in Basic Hindu Scriptures, with Reference to Cosmo-Ethics (Ecology)", *Journal of Dharma*, XVI, 1991, 198.