

Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Religious exclusivism is the biggest threat for multi-religious society at the same time, ambivalent thoughts among religion in religious pluralism due to religious diversity, often yields religious violence. In both of the extreme, (religious exclusivism and religious pluralism) there is the possibility of religious violence, i.e., religious riots, terrorism, mob lynching, and communalism. The objective of this paper is to discover the problems confronting interfaith dialogue (IFD) and the way forward on addressing the problems of Inter-faith dialogue in Northern Nigeria. If there is any biggest challenge for religion in the 21st century, is this one that how religion can deal with these problems and become a good tool for establishing peace and prosperity in Northern region.

Keywords: Religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue and Religious exclusivism

I. INTRODUCTION

The word religion is derived from the Latin word "Religare," which means "bind together." It denotes harmony between different religions for a common goal. It also refers to peace and reconciliation of different thoughts, a cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions/humanistic beliefs at both individual and institutional level.

In the 21st century, there are lots of human-made problems prevailing in society, the role of religion in present-day society is to bring peace; every religion has to play a vital role to restore peace and prosperity and fight against all kinds of evil or impurities from society. Interfaith dialogue has become very essential to serve these purposes and to protect the core values of humanity. IFD works for the objectives of exchanging ideas and mutual understanding among religions and their teachings or core values for facing the problems of humanity. The dialogue among religions is very much crucial for avoiding religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, which leads to the problem of communalism and other religious violence. It is very important to know each other's religious tradition and work together to deal with the current problem of humanity. This objective can be attained through interfaith dialogue, which gives a platform for understanding each other's traditions and their core values to address the problem like terrorism, communalism, other religious violence, environmental and social issues.

Concept of Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism generally refers to the belief in two or more religious worldviews as being equally valid or acceptable. More than mere tolerance, religious pluralism accepts multiple paths to God or gods as a possibility and is usually contrasted with "exclusivism," the idea that there is only one true religion or way to know God. (A. Plantinga 1985, p-92).

Religious pluralism has been in existence since at least the seventeenth century; the concept has become more popular since the latter half of the twentieth century in Western Europe and North America. Specifically, the idea of religious ecumenism (religions working together as one) and the recently popularized interfaith movement have led to the increased acceptance of religious pluralism in popular culture. (J. hick 1997).

Pluralism is more than the sharing of certain values or agreement on some social issues. Buddhists and Christians both agree that helping the poor is important, but such limited concord is not pluralism. Pluralism has to do with lending credence to competing truth claims and accepting diverse beliefs regarding God and salvation.

In addition, two or more religions can share some doctrinal beliefs yet remain fundamentally different as belief systems. For example, Muslims and Christians agree that there is only one God—yet both religions define God differently and hold many other irreconcilable beliefs.

What does the Bible teach about religious pluralism? First, the Bible acknowledges only one God (Deuteronomy 6:5). Therefore, religious pluralism is incompatible with biblical teaching since pluralism accepts multiple views of God or even multiple gods.

Second, the Bible teaches exclusivism in that there is only one way to know God—through Jesus Christ. John 14:6 notes that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through Him. The apostles taught the same message in Acts 4:12: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

Third, the Bible frequently condemns other religions as following gods that are not really gods. For example, Joshua 23:16 says, “If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD’s anger will burn against you.”

Religious liberty guarantees that multiple religions can worship peaceably, and Christians appreciate such liberty, as it allows for open worship of God. In contrast, religious pluralism teaches that multiple religions are true or equally valid, something the Bible clearly refutes. We encourage religious liberty, but at the same time we communicate the Bible’s

teaching of “one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

Concept of interfaith dialogue

Interfaith dialogue, is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. “faiths”) at both the individual and institutional level. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice their faith freely. (Hege,Ann Grunge, 2011).

Interfaith dialogue is not just words or talk. It includes human interaction and relationships. It can take place between individuals and communities and on many levels. For example, between neighbours, in schools and in our places of work – it can take place in both formal and informal settings. Normal life means that we come into daily contact with each other. Dialogue therefore, is not just something that takes place on an off

It is part of daily life during which different cultural and religious groups interact with each other directly, and where tensions between them are the most tangible.

Concept of Religious exclusivism

Religious exclusivism is the doctrine that the adherents of a particular faith, or group of faiths, will attain salvation while groups that do not share this faith will not attain the blessings associated with such a state. In its more extreme form, religious exclusivism teaches that only the members of one religion or sect will reach Heaven, while others will be doomed to eternal damnation. The opposite of religious exclusivism is universalism, the teaching that all will eventually share in the eternal blessings of God or the heavenly realm. (Hick J, 1997).

Exclusivism is most prevalent in Abrahamic religions. In Jewish tradition, it manifests in certain interpretations of the concepts of the Chosen people, in which anyone who does not accept the teachings of Jewish monotheism is excluded from the messianic "world to come." In Christianity, religious exclusivism is seen in the former teachings of the Catholic Church and the current teachings of several denominations that only those who adhere to the true faith will reach Heaven, while those outside of the true church will go to Hell. Exclusivism is seen in Islam in the acceptance of sincere Jews and Christians as people "of the Book" along with Muslims, but the rejection of other religious traditions—as well as impious Jews and Christians—as "infidels" who have no part in Allah or paradise. (C .L. G Eaton, 1985)

Major problems of Inter-faith dialogue in Northern Nigeria

There are several problems of Inter-faith dialogue (IFD) in Northern Nigeria that need to be address. I will be confined myself within some of the major problems like exclusivism or absolutism, religious diversity, and contradictory thought among religion. Religious dogma, superstition, and terrorism which has to be sorted out through IFD. Let us take them one by one.

Exclusivism

In a multi-religious society, religious unity and integrity are always threatened by religious exclusivity. Religious exclusivism is a threat to the harmony of a multi-religious society in Northern Nigeria. Exclusivism proclaimed that the ideology of one religion is superior to other religions, and the description of the reality of a particular religion is the only truth or closer to the truth than other religion. Every religious tradition has the conviction that their explanation of Reality is the best expiation. They uphold the view that my truth is the only truth and other religious tradition must follow it. All most all religious violence in Northern Nigeria occurred due to

exclusive tendencies of major religions. Exclusivism promotes religious expansionism.² Exclusivism in the strong sense does not allow to coexistence of other religions. A believer of Christianity may think "John 14:6 :(in the King James Version is translated as :) "Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (Fennell, 201) Personal salvation and haven are only possible for them those who believe that Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In Islam it is found that "Whosoever follows any other religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him, and in the hereafter, he will be among the losers" (Eaton, 1985: p-36)³ Exclusivism is a threat for multi-religious society because it has become a source of violence for humanity. Strong exclusivism neither allowed religious pluralism nor go for interreligious dialogue with other religions for dealing with both the ontological problem and current problem of humanity. Swami Vivekananda explains exclusivism with the help of the story of two different frogs. The frog which is living in the well always thinks that there is nothing outside of well. Like that, all the religions of the world think that their religion is better than other religions, so there is no need for any dialogue. As Vivekananda pointed out, "That has been the difficulty all the while. I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Muslim sits in his little well and thinks that it is the whole world." (Vivekananda, 1892).

Weak Exclusivism allows other religions to coexist because of the acceptance of religious tolerance. Major Religion has begun to adopt this idea, but the problem of religious exclusivity cannot be resolved through religious tolerance entirely. Because though it somehow gives place for the coexistence of other religions, however, cannot accept the religious equality in the real sense and there is the possibility to treat other religions as an inferior religion

A biased mind can't evaluate the religious doctrine/beliefs with impartiality. Hence it leads to the biased judgment of other

religions. It is very much essential to the practitioner of religion as well as religionists that they will investigate religious ideology unbiasedly, which is not possible in exclusivism.

Vivekananda rightly pointed out that religion is about mutual acceptance but not tolerance. Religious tolerance implied that one religion is being superior to other religions and allowing other inferior religions to exist. The idea of the dominance of one religion over religions still exists though there is religious tolerance. In mutual acceptance of religions, there is no superiority and inferiority; some truth inherently exists in every religion. All religions are true or closer to the truth in some way. There should be universal love and compassion to each other's religious tradition.

Religious diversity and contradictory thought

Religious diversity has in most cases serves as a threat to Inter-faith dialogue in Northern Nigeria. The people of different religious traditions have different religious belief and opinion. Every religionist should acknowledge the fact that there are certain beliefs exist in religion which are contradictory to each other (for example in Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism wine is forbidden in religious place but in Christianity wine is necessary for the church). Each religion has a different set of beliefs, different ritual, mythology, and philosophy. In Hindu religious tradition, Cow is worshiped as the sacred mother whereas, for other religious traditions (i.e., Islam and Christianity) Beef-eating is part of their religion. Human cannibalism of Christianity is a dogma for Hinduism, and phallic worship of Hinduism is horrible for Christianity. Major religions have not only differ in their culture, tradition but also have a contradictory ontological claim. The Bible says that human beings are the offshoot of sin (according to Adam and Eve story) on the other hand, Upanishad defines human beings as "Amritasya Putra"(holy child of God). For Buddhism, nothing is permanent in the earth; there is no soul, no god, whereas other religions have quite opposite world view. These are the

beliefs not only different from each other but contradictory as well. Some of the ideas are due to dogma and some of them due to their different view of their ontology. All most all religions rely on one kind of source, namely testimony of their religion (a major source of contradictory beliefs). If we look at the history of religions, then we can find that all the religious riots happened in the past because of the contradictory beliefs of different religions and the tendency to showing the superiority on others (exclusivity) or attempt for religious conversion. It is often found that they fight with each other for upholding their own beliefs and take the life of others without any hesitation (i.e., Religious riots, mob lynching, and terrorism). (V. chaturvedi, 2016).

As we have seen that there are inconclusive thoughts in religion, then the inevitable question may emerge that how inter-religious dialogue can be then possible at all? Which belief is true, and which one is false? Moreover, how can we decide that someone's religious convictions are based on a reasonable justification but not religious dogma? What is the reality behind these beliefs and how far these beliefs are justifiable? Another inevitable question may raise here that if there are religious diversity and indecisive ideology of different religion, then how interreligious dialogue can be possible? Two contradictory thought or ideology („A' and „-A') will always oppose to each other, then how can it be possible that they will work together? One can argue that all the religious dogma and superstition exist in the religion because of the failure of rationalization of religious faith. The religious practitioners were not applying their reason and cannot differentiate between Good faith and Bad faith. However, this approach might not help us to resolve all the problems, every religious faith (including bad faith or dogma) is supported by reason, and the practitioner gives justification for their belief. All of these problems are a by-product of religion, for dealing with the above problem, we need a different approach.

Belief, Faith, and Reason

If we look at the history of religion, then we can find that religionists in Northern Nigeria preach a religious faith, latter the believers of that particular religion follow that religious ideology either blindly or applied the reason selectively or biasedly. People stock to their religious faith so badly that they cannot enforce their reason for distinguishing, which is against humanity. When a humanist oppose that religious faith, the practitioner takes it as an attack to their religion without questioning their religion, whether it goes against humanity or not. The Worshipers of religion believes first to a religious idea then apply their reason biasedly (belief guided reason) which leads to them into the position that they cannot differentiate that what they believe is whether grounded in dogma or superstition and start arguing in support of that particular faith/ideas. Sometimes it seems plausible to others due to blind faith, and people believe it without analyzing its pros and cons. as a result, the religion became a victim of spreading religious communalism and mob lynching.

This approach is not going to help us to address the problem completely, because different people may have a different religious opinion and have justification for their belief. Indeed, it will help the people to think in divergent ways and come out from their dogmatic slumber, the question remains unanswered that how to deal with two contradictory religious ideas. What is the maxim for resolving the issue?

One possible response to the above questions may be the idea of religious pluralism which holds the view that all religions are equally true. If religions are the way for knowing the truth, then all religions are equally closer to the truth. There is no superiority and inferiority among religion. All religions are equally important. (Chaturvedi, 2016 hick, 1989) Every religion has the same destination though they adopt different paths. All the followers of the religion are co-passenger but not a competitor. "All Religions have partial truth, and there is no

such religion which can claim for absolute truth.”(Anonymous source) It holds the view that despite religious diversity, interreligious dialogue can be possible. Let us see how it can be possible with the help of an example. In a family, different members have a different belief, thought, opinion, but they all live together, acknowledge diversity by understanding each other. They are not allowing or tolerating each other instead; they accept each other with intense love like that all religion can exist within the society despite their religious differences. Though Religious pluralism put enough effort to address the above problem, it becomes partially successful in giving a satisfactory account to these problems. Religious pluralism seems implausible to address the problem of diversity. Because it has failed to answer the question of how it can be possible that two contradictory theology or doctrine can be true at the same time. As we know that both A and $\neg A$ cannot be true together, otherwise it will be a violation of the law of contradiction. The major contradictory claim of religion came from one source that is ontological problems of religion. Every religion has its own way of perception of reality. Therefore they opposed to each other. It seems there is no objective solution to this problem. Though there are various arguments proposed by religionists but none of them are quite convincing. (Vivekananda, 1992). The religious doctrines are constructed in such a way that it will be challenging to have a collective agreement between major religions and give an objective solution to the problem of diversity.

Religious Dogma, Superstition, and Terrorism

If someone looks critically towards religion, then one can easily find that the major religions of the world are still suffering in some religious dogma and superstition. There are certain religious diversities grounded on dogma and superstition itself. Every religion has to make perfect their religion as much as possible. Major religions might not agree that their religion is indulged in any religious dogma and superstition. However, the reality is that it is always there in every religion.

Vivekananda always criticized the religious dogma and superstition, and that is reflected in his writings. I quote "To believe blindly is to degenerate the human soul. Be an atheist if you want, but do not believe in anything unquestionable ... stand up and reason out, having no blind faith, religion is the question of being and becoming..."(Vivekananda, 1882).

If we look at history, then we can easily find that religion has imported violence activities in Northern Nigeria (for example, riots, terrorism, and mass killing, so and so forth), these problems have been occurring due to religious dogma and superstition. Vivekananda was recognized that religion has both positive and negative outcome, as he pointed out in his ideal of a universal religion that "The intensest love that humanity has ever known has come from religion, and the most diabolical hatred that humanity has known has also come from religion. The noblest words of peace that the world has ever heard have come from men on the religious plane, and the bitterest denunciation that the world has ever known has been uttered by religious men. The higher the object of any religion and the finer its organization, the more remarkable are its activities...."(Vivekananda, 1980).

Way forward for Inter-faith Dialogue

Certain basic principles must be followed for fulfilling the objective of interfaith dialogue. Generally, there are four basic principles for the fruitfulness of interfaith dialogue. These principles are named as 4 E's principle of Inter-faith dialogue. These are

Eagerness/Enthusiasm: - interfaith dialogue cannot be possible without the eagerness for understanding each other's traditions, customs, and values. It often happens that due to lack of enthusiasm, people failed to understand each other's religion completely and misinterpret other religion. In every religion, there is a common factor – to address the practical

problems of humanity. The problem need not be equal; it may depend on their culture, belief, geographical diversity. The problem faced in Islamic country may not be found in the non-Islamic country. However, it cannot be denied that the nature of the problem may be equal despite facing a different problem. Therefore, every religion needs to learn from each other, how they are addressing the problems and being able to solve the problem, whether it is a medieval problem or practical problem of the 21st century.

Epoch: - It is very much essential for the religionists that their minds should be free from any biases about the other religious tradition, it is often found that people came up with some preconceived ideas about the particular religious' tradition which later became a big hindrance for the productivity of IRD. It also restricts them to know the religious tradition completely. Therefore for the fulfillment of the objective of interreligious dialogue, „Epoche' or bracketing is a crucial tool. By putting the preconceived notion about other religion within a bracket in the initial stage of the study of a particular religion, one can reveal some new fact about that religious tradition. Bracketing does not mean that the preconceived ideas which are gained by the study of the particular religious tradition are entirely redundant but for the particular time being that has to be bracketed. It is a significant tool to avoid religious biases and understand other religions completely.

Empathy: - Every religion has to be empathetic to other religion. Just acknowledging the weakness of a particular religion is not going to help for sustaining the common goals of religion. For attaining the common goal, every religion has to respect the cultural values of others and be empathetic to the underdeveloped idea of other religions. Be empathetic means not just acknowledging but taking the problem as if it is a problem of their religion, unlike sympathy, it upholds intense love and cares to other religion and actively seek a solution to the problem by recognizing the core teachings of that particular religion.

Enhancement: - The interfaith dialogue will be fruitful when the core teaching of a particular religion spreads among other religious tradition through communication. It is the duty of the religionists for bringing the issues to the broader community that what they learn from each other's religious tradition through inter-religious dialogue and how it can be helpful to restore the human values and enhancement of religious faith. Activities...."(Vivekananda, 1980).

CONCLUSION

Everyone has the freedom to believe what they believe, but it is equally essential to think that what is the justification behind their belief and what is the relevance for holding that belief? Religion is not a matter of mere belief, but it also provides justification, and one should be counter-intuitive before accepting any religious claim. The objective of every religion should be overcome the religious dogma and address the real issue of humanity instead of supporting a dogmatic belief through interpretation because of their religious prejudice conviction. The religionists must have concerned that the problems to which they are dealing with, is a real problem or a pseudo-problem and if it is a real problem then what is its relevance? Which one is the more worth asking, the medieval questions, or the current issue of humanity? I am optimistic that the contemporary problem can be sort-out through religion itself only. Because of the deviation from core values of religion, the above problem arises; therefore, every religion has the duty to protect their core teaching of religion and remove the obstacle through Inter-faith -dialogue.

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