

Religion, Culture, and Conflict Resolution: An Eastern View

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1. Introduction

The idea for free-conflict world seems to be impossible as religious sentiments or prejudice has been increasingly involved in conflict. Sometimes, there is a gap even tension prevalent amongst communities of different faiths or religions or cultures in a country where different religious communities have to live together for a long time. Everyone holds that his/her belief is the true one and incomparable with the others. In such view, looking at all religions as equal and true is difficult. In one way, world community expects peace can be reached through mutual understanding, dialogues to establish respect and tolerance; in another way, factor that elicits or triggers for tension even war is still an open choice in conflict resolution. It is a pity, there have been violence even wars committed under the name of creed or religion. Actually, any conflict or war can be avoided through right approach for which leaders have to use strategic role to play.

It is believed that the management and conflict resolution can use various approaches. Anu Singh Lather, *et.al* (2010) has successfully summarized her research on cross cultural conflict resolution styles. She presents literature review of conflict resolution in different cultures like American culture, Asian cultures, and Australian culture¹. However, this study is basically empirical study, so the analysis of human behaviours amongst groups of society became her main concern. She was able to show conflict resolutions offered by different cultures within a bigger culture and across cultures. As far as religious sentiment is sometimes suspected to be a factor which can elicit conflict both internal culture and across cultures, we should look at it from religious and culture perspectives, especially from inner side of human being, since they are both closely connected. Eastern world is rich on that matter, but how to bring it into the concrete action which is very complex empirically is a matter of conflict management and conflict resolution.

This paper is a humble attempt to bring about religion and culture in conflict resolution from Eastern perspectives, especially from Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions. The discussion will be focusing on internal perspective of human being in solving conflict.

2. Conflict and Life

No one can be free from conflict even within oneself. Religious communities are not guaranteed to be free from conflict even serious conflict like killing people of the same faith. Even though religious scriptures do not teach to kill other fellow, the fact is that there was violence or killings or massacre done under the name of religious teachings. It is sad history of our humanity.

In the last thirty years terrors stipulated by religious sentiments either directly or indirectly seemed to be increasing across the world. Since Asian continent is the birth place and home of different religions, beliefs or creeds, the problem of harmony, tolerance, and peace requires a serious effort to maintain it by its leaders. Viewing from this side, Asian continent should be ideal communities in leading pluralistic society. However, the reality in the field is quite different. It is often each party claims each own religion is the true and best one. And, unfortunately, the other religious communities are considered as enemies that should be eliminated from society. We do not know in persistent whether it is due to the way of understanding the message of the scripture is wrong or of human greed and ignorance, which make him blind-folding. Following it are approaches or strategies were attempted to spread its own teaching through various means and funding. Nonetheless, we expect religions still play their role as spiritual force for dignity of human beings.

In a community where different religious communities like in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, etc. should live together for a long time, conflict is hardly avoided. Conflict colours our life despite of its degrees and intensity. By nature conflict has become inseparable part and parcel of our lives, we experience conflict as we experience joy and sorrow in our day to day life. It has become a natural phenomenon of our personal and professional existence. It is an unavoidable component of human activity (Brahnam, *et.al*, 2005, 204)². Be it is so, it does not mean conflict cannot be avoided or solved; we do not need to be helpless in facing it.

In modern world when science and technology have played their roles in creating and as well as settling conflicts, the intensity and degrees of conflict have become serious threats for our existence. World has become close in distance due to the role of technology, but it does mean that it is altogether free from tension even conflict involving different parties, communities, culture, countries, etc. Unfortunately, so many innocent people were killed in wars and other violent actions not yet counting the damage of environment caused by wars.

People around the world are similar as well as different in many respects; they are similar since they share commonalities, and at the same time, they are different since each one of them have been born and brought up in different cultures having different set of values³. Accordingly, there have been so many different definitions of conflict given by different people of different backgrounds. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005: 319), e.g. defines conflicts the term of “(1) a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument, (2) a violent situation or period of fighting between two countries, (3) a situation in which there are opposing ideas, opinion, feeling or wishes; a situation in which it is difficult to choose”. Similarly the manner of addressing conflict is various. In this regards, understanding the nature of conflict and elements involved in it are essential.

Conflict has been mostly seen or analysed from external perspectives and accordingly the manner to settle it is also from external point of view. The well-known resolution of conflict like ‘win-win solution’ is mainly seen from human-to-human relationship either as an individual, group of people, or country. Inter- and intra-religious faith dialogues which have been promoted do not see it from internal side of individual rather maintaining tolerance and respecting people or community of different faith from external relationship for maintaining peace. However, it is actually a pseudo-harmony since the very root of tension cannot be addressed by such empirical, social or political approaches. It analyses problem happened due to misunderstanding or miscommunication amongst parties; there was a failure in communicating ideas of different background. In this view, conflict is only addressed with reference to human interactions with external worlds, viz. other human beings in their heterogeneities and natural environments. In some extent, this manner can be useful but for ever lasting resolution looking it from internal side is required despite the fact this way is difficult. This is so since human being is not only seen as an

organism having interaction with other external entities, but also internal. We should view that external interaction or relationship – which finally can create a particular culture – is due to the motive, drive or urge happen within oneself. There is a desire that urges mind to work, senses to operate and body to act. We should also look at it that external action of oneself is an extension of his internal urge. In other words, no external action is possible when no urge or drive happens internally. This is to find out the root that creates tension even conflict.

Even though leaders have attempted to solve the conflict spending so many time and energies, this world seems to be coloured with conflict in the future. Without disrespecting to economic assistance, military deployment/operation, diplomatic efforts, cultural exchanges programmes, and the role of United Nation that have been attempted in various parts of the world, conflict, violence or war may still happen in the future.

3. Root of Conflict

When we look in each of us inwardly, we agree that mind (*manas*)⁴ plays an important role both in creating tension or conflict as well as settling it. This is so since mind (*manas*) has five characteristic, viz. positive thoughts, negative thoughts, oblivion, inertia, and cogitation⁵. It is the knowing aspect of consciousness. Patanjali in Indian tradition looks it as concrete instead of an abstract term. He means rising of *cittavrttis*⁶. As an *antah karana*, mind has double roles. As an *indriya*, *manas* converts sensations into perception of a concrete object and vague impulses into those for performing this or that definite action. As *sankalpa*, it entertains wishes and desires even when none of the ten senses (*indriyas*) is working⁷. Thus, mind is viewed as the seat, the organ, an aggregate of intellective (cognitive), volitative, and emotional activities, functions, and processes of the individual⁸. Each of us sees the world as mind reflects on it. As long as happiness of life is our main concern, no doubt, each religion addressed the problem of mind. Religion acknowledges the existence and role of mind. Mind is the key in leading our life. Mind has important role in culture. As said by Swami Chinmayananda that “man’s control of nature external is called civilization. His control of nature internal is called culture”⁹. Thus, mind plays a fundamental role in culturing mind and life. But due to some reasons mind can be uncultured, which is bad for personality development and human interactions.

With reference to Indian traditions each of them discusses mind (*manas*) in each own metaphysics and religion. *Samkhya-Yoga Darsana*, one of ancient philosophical and religious tradition addressed mind (*manas*) with reference to the *tattva* (evolute) in the world creation, sustenance, and destruction. Mind (*manas*) is the subtlest material principle (*Pradhana/Prkrti*) which is constituted by *Tri Guna*, viz. *Sattwam*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. The questions of dualisms of mind and body, mind and consciousness, mind and self, etc. are interesting topics in this field of study. What is certain that when mind does not create images, wish desires, etc. no external action can be done. Of this fact, mind (*manas*) is viewed as the king of senses (*rajendriya*) since only after mind gives orders to senses; a human performs interaction with external objects. When interaction should be taken place we should know how each mind works interacting within and externally. We never imagine our big society or even the universe is very much determined by the quality of the work of mind. When we are proud of massive advancements in the fields of science and technology we witness in this modern world, all of these are the credits of mind. However, most people are not aware that his thought can create tension; one may be happy with his thought but not always otherwise. What is thinking is the true one and he reflects himself as what he is thinking about. In fact what is thinking about is his imagination, fantasies which are not the reality. Mind is the bridge for a human to connect internally and externally. When mind is used in thinking, desiring, etc. it contracts and this causes tension, which will be reflected on one's face, word, and even gestures. On the other hand, when mind is used to look inward, like for meditation, praying, contemplation, the mind is expanding which finally can create comfortable, ease, and relax. The more expanding the mind is, the happier one experiences. On the contrary, the more is used for thinking, the mind becomes in tension. Thus, as said by Ravi Skankar that mind has two abilities, one is to focus, the other is to expand and relax. This ability to focus and expand should come simultaneously in the consciousness – all the confusion is between this focus and expansion¹⁰.

4. Inner Management

Life of a religious individual or society gives a special attention to inner side of humanity because they believe that peace; happiness can be experienced through practising religion. For an atheist he/she will not take shelter under the name of God

for leading happy life. What is obvious is that peace world starts from peace within. When inner peace is not yet reached, peace outside is likely difficult to be reached. Inner peace is due to the stable state of mind. One accomplishes personal communication with divinities or God to satisfy urges, desires, or requests. For him, God is everything, and nothing is out of His reach. He feels safe, comfortable, and happy after communication with God. In such state, one maintains peace of mind, words, and action (*tri kaya*).

When we look inwardly, there should be a system of management to control inner faculties, i.e. mind (*manas*). As acknowledged that by nature mind is light, quick moving, wandering and difficult to be held on even a second. We can view religious practices like performing *puja* or *yajna* is a way to maintain peaceful mind. Any external management system whatsoever cannot be used to address the problems of mind. It requires knowledge of mind: form, nature, kinds, and function in life and the most important thing is controlling it. Since mind has a very fundamental role in thinking, conation and emotion, effort in settling tension or conflict should also consider this internal faculty. A tension mind cannot be pacified by consuming medicine, drug, food, providing wealth, social status, and the likes. Mind should help itself to escape itself from fluctuating condition. They may be effective for a short period of time but the root of conflicting mind has not been touched upon. *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali looks at mind having *vr̥ttis*, that is, fluctuations or modifications causing it in unstable state. When the fluctuation is getting bigger such negative aspects will occur like confusion, jealousy, etc. affecting body and further environments. *Yoga* aims at reaching a stable, equipoise, calm mind through a method of controlling mind through breathing control (*pranayama*). Controlling here does not mean pressing it to limit its capacity and function. It is controlled for reaching a state of mind for the possibility reflecting the *Purusa* (consciousness principle). Since it contains negative thoughts, mind can be destructive for itself, body, and external world. Destruction of external world is due to negative thoughts dominating the mind.

For controlling mind and body, *Yoga sutra* advocates well-known eight steps of *yoga* (*Astanga Yoga*), viz. *Yama* (abstinence), *Niyama* (observance), *Asana* (pose, seat), *Pranayama* (the practice of controlling the vital force, usually through control of breath), *Prathyahara* (sense control, withdrawal of the senses from their objects), *Dharana* (concentration), *Dhyana* (meditation), and *Samadhi* (contemplation, super

consciousness state, absorption)¹¹. This is a step-by-step effort from *Yama* till reaching *Samadhi*, the last stage.. By *yoga* it means controlling modifications of mind, so that it becomes a stable, peaceful and calm, a prerequisite condition for *Samadhi*. Other Indian traditions ranging from Bramanical to Sramanic, from classic to modern ones will certainly offer ways, methods, or technique controlling mind based on metaphysics. But, of being universal concept and practices, *yoga* can be accepted by different Indian traditions and modern world.

5. Clashes of Religion and Culture

Conflict stipulated by religious sentiments in a pluralistic society cannot be avoided when the true spirit of religion is absent from people and the leader's mind. Subtle or culture mind can be able to see it as such provided that he/she always seeks for fundamental uniting principles of all. When a true spirit of religion is gained one becomes a humble person viewing all peoples of different faith, culture, language, etc. are equal since in each of us resides divinity. It can be reached when consciousness of mind expanded across borders of ideas, principles religions, cultures, politics, etc. We are in the same world in the same big family and humanity bounded by divine nature of us. By a human being we may be different due to some backgrounds, but as humanity we all are one and the same. The task of religion practices to dig up this inner potential, realizing the presence of God in each and every existence. Taking *Samkhya Darsana* as a model of thought, both realms of macrocosm and microcosm constituted essentially by the same elemental principles (*bhutas*), i.e. five gross elements/principles (*panca maha bhuta*), viz. earth (*prthvi*), water/liquid (*apah*), light/heat (*teja*), wind (*vayu*), and ether (*akasha*). We are all essentially the same, and hence the question of conflict should be able to be managed using cultured mind.

The case is that most religious people take religion as external expressions taking the religion as formal modes of practice. Many of them try to bring it to become a model of public life even an ideology of an institution or a state. When this view is adopted, external attributes become a distinguished feature or performance for a devotee or follower. In a pluralistic society, such view can create tension even conflict since it brings something personal/private to public life not yet entering formal system of society. In some instances, their life is different from the others even isolated and exclusive. In this juncture, faith practice enters the realm of culture.

However, religion and culture should be differentiated since the starting point of their existence is different, but there are many cultures spirited by religion. When a religion spread across nations, continents, it is not necessarily the culture of its original birth place to be carried out along with the religion. Religion as an idea/concept/thought does not have any form of external expression. It is just an abstract concept created by human being. It is shaped by culture.

When such way of thinking happens it can cause clash between cultures; one culture tries to dominate other weaker culture, even eliminating local culture. There has been a serious loss of indigenous/local culture due to the arrival of new culture or religion from foreign country along with its original culture. In fact each indigenous culture has its own right to live in its soil. Indigenous culture has wisdom and science that needs to be protected from external influences. Religion has a very strong power for the emergence and development of culture. When a faith is practised in life it becomes a culture. Religion should culture human mind and further action in his interaction with others.

Non-violence, non-stealing, purity, loves, compassions, brotherhood, recognizing that we all big family are universal values that can be promoted to minimize conflict. Every policy for settling conflict should be ideally inspired by these universal values. In different from material culture, religious culture contains and developed through these values. Rather speaking about religion of one's own; it is useful to speak about universal cultural values which are presumed accepted by all.

6. Conclusion

When clashes of religion and/culture happened, it is due the true spirit of religion is absent from the people's heart especially the leaders. Leaders cannot control the situation since they act only based on narrow view, not comprehensive or holistic view. Of this problem, the role of mind as the site of thinking and feeling becomes very important, this has been acknowledged in religion. Since all of them works out with mind, mind should be understood its nature, function, and relationship with other inner faculty and external world according to each tradition.

Indian tradition as part of Eastern world looks at mind as a central faculty for thinking and feeling, as reflected in many *darsanas* discussing mind derived from the

metaphysical principles. *Samkhya-Yoga Darsana* gives a high respect and appreciation of mind in human life. Mind is the key for happy or unhappy life. Therefore, it analysis and offer a system of *yoga* for controlling, breath, mind, and body. With this view, mind should be understood in a proper way in religious life and in maintaining or developing culture. When a culture is spirited by a religious belief again *satvic* mind is supposed to be dominating to avoid tension, conflict even war. With this view, controlling mind can be useful for both preventing conflict and conflict resolution.

Notes and References

¹ Anu Singh Lather, *et.al*, “Cross Cultural Conflict Resolution Styles: An Extensive Literature Review” in *Asian Journal of Management Reserach*, pp. 135-139.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Sometimes *manas* is equal with *citta*.

⁵ *Yoga Kosa* (Kaivalyadhama S.M.Y.M. Samiti, 2009), p. 249.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 250.

⁸ Fernando Tola and C. Dragonetti , *The Yogasutras of Patanjali on Concentration of Mind* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), p. 3.

⁹ See, Swami Tejomayananda, *Hindu Culture: An Introduction* (Mumbai, Central Cinmaya Mission Trust, 1994), p. 5.

¹⁰ See, *Mind Matters: Talks by H.H. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar* (Bangalore, 2007), p. 9.

¹¹ See “Glossary: in *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, translated and commentary by Sri Swami Satchidananda (Virginia: Integral Yoga, 1990), pp. 237-248.

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