

INTERFAITH AND INTRAFaITH TOLERANCE – A RELIGIOUS ETHIC IN A SECULAR WORLD

Introduction

Faiths have grown out of a residual ‘truth’, which has sprung up from time to time in human history, which has faced redaction and has undergone an adoption and adaptation by humanity who came into contact with these phenomena. The student of religion will be much perplexed that much of what is practiced as religion today, has variations from the ‘purist’ seed that was planted by the founders of same and the early adherents, who believed that this indeed was the path that had eluded many for centuries and which must be held dear for posterity. Social context contains the capacity and the inborn potentiality of transforming any innovation may it be social, political, legal, ethical or even religious. This itself could be called the social toleration of faith, which include the debates; the social entity had with understanding themselves with faith and within the faith.

In today’s world, which thirsts for a religiosity which is not religious and which rebels in the ideology of disowning religious truth, in the hope that humanity has ‘passed’ the era of reconciling historical phenomena, the wandering mind does indeed speculate whether religion will hold against such bombardment. And the conflicts with and within religions, have born witness to treacherous and terrible end results. Yet the same religious student, may also ponder upon the social history of religions which indeed were monumental in the fact, that these truths were carried in time and space across boundaries with gratitude due to the same societies who tolerated the religions to landscape human history.

In this paper we carve out a ‘holistic’ ethical framework, which encompasses the phenomenology of religions in tolerating the secular world (which casts a shadow of doubt upon it) and this will be the collaboration in the interfaith sphere. This attempt will also focus on the pressure points which jeopardize religious survival, with a religious toleration on intrafaith conflicts which is none other, but a sign of the times which promotes either a fundamentalism or a neo-traditionalism.

In Context

When the office of the ‘Charlie Hebdo’ satirical French magazine was stormed and twelve of the cartoonists who have been depicting the most heinous of aspects as the Islamists would put it were murdered, the first cry that was heard was that self radicalized extremists had once again taken the bloody path as ordained by the radical wings of their faith. It is not an unfamiliar cry in today’s modern world, when this extremity can be found in either the controversial remarks of the Indian Bharathiya Janatha Party member of parliament Sakshi Maharaj’s comments insisting that Hindu women should have more children in order to preserve their faith or in the blooming of the right winged Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka who make it there primal

objective to conjure up controversies which divide the social sphere or the toying of the western powers in the affairs of the world based on an archaic Christian understanding which promotes a superior complex. Religions have come to a point in history where extremism, is viewed as part and parcel of the faith it encapsulates and in some cases, the most successful way of holding onto one's interpretation in a world which is called to eradicate any form of spiritual thinking. If the religious atmosphere, whether it be from an ultra evangelical community in South Korea or whether it is in the ancestral or animistic religions in Sudan or even in the sophisticated first world Europe, is prone on the idea of fundamentalism as something that needs to be nurtured in the hope of survival and the tensions between such groups will escalate beyond mere arguments. And the same phenomena, will affect the struggle of the moderate or traditional faith adherent who may sit on the fence of uneasiness with tendency to, either fall into one of the two extremes in following faith. With these introductory remarks let us embark on this journey of finding an ethic that enables toleration in both these spheres.

Faiths at Crossroads

The greatest enemy for spiritual faiths is none other but the secularizing world; it makes its presence felt by slowly but surely eradicating all marks that attract humans into 'believing'. For a simple example Christians make it the first point at least in theory, to pray when afflicted by illness. As we know many 'illnesses' that have devastated humanity over the years have now all being conquered, by the rise in medical science. Research undertaken in non-conquered illnesses are reaping harvests in leaps and bounds, which makes us realize that what is impossible now will be possible as time progresses and this is a spiral which brings a realistic fact into the table of consideration. This will of course drastically change the need to rely on any other unseen power, but on the visible power that is in charge of making or breaking life. For another example in Buddhism we see 'suffering' as constituting a major part in its subsequent philosophy and the escape from suffering as the key goal. When the world develops at such a rapid pace, the world itself has become its own saviour in the fact that suffering is alleviated through development. The ideology of 'non attachment' is blown away when it is with attachment that this consequence is established. And this phenomenon is tantamount to the immigration of people from developing nations, to developed nations or through the bloody conflicts that are revolutionized in order to eradicate suffering in nations where the present order spells chaos. If the world can lead one from suffering to freedom the eightfold path becomes obsolete as exactly opposite tenets also yield the same freedom. To explain this, arms dealing is not a 'right livelihood' but its benefits can be on par with an accepted 'right livelihood', if the world around endorses equal benefits from having whichever livelihood. Therefore it is not only the concept of 'God' that is being jeopardized by the secularizing world, but rather the holistic aspect of 'hope'. According to well bred secularists 'hope' is to be found here and now and much of what religions speak of before and after death becomes more and more inadequate. The scientific utopia would of course be the bright side of this whole aspect, but the phenomenon of religion will not find space in same. Since this secular world directs the

thoughts and aspiration of humanity to non religious sources, the extremism that needs to counter it is also of equal magnitude. In such light at least in theory fundamentalism only proposes a departure, from the orthodox faith seeking and alternates to a more acceptable yet risky mode. If secularism is the deterrent per se, for religions such will be a blanket cover for all acceptable religions and for this, the sociological interpretation that 'nothing unites more than the common foe' will stand as true ideologically as well as practically. It may also be possible to complement religions as companions in this battle and which must in fact be tolerated because all share a common objective in the backdrop of a common dark cloud. Returning to the same point from a different angle, we may even state that religions should not only collaborate to survive against a somewhat imperious looking opponent in secularism, but religions should also treat each other as partners in the process of enrichment of each other's faith. A major shift which has taken place in many plural communities is the faith/religious dialogue, which has promised an ethic of cooperation and a learning together experience which has also become a factor of reconciliation. Such moves have also met tremendous opposition from the more extremist groups within religions and this toleration we will turn to in the next section.

Tensioned Religious Dynamics

Religious faiths have always had something to say in the time of distress and this is also an accusation that has been thrown in its path, as religions promise an unearthly hope for earthly problems. However as we become modern day by day, religions look to be cast away as something which is only historical and to the die-hard adherents such dilemma, has made them take a more drastic stance in their omission of secular ethics as well as 'other' religious ethics. And more often than not this hardened stance bears repercussions in violent ways. For a few examples the struggle of Pakistan a conservative Islamic country, with the Taliban uprising or the dragging of political stances in India by the Shiv Sena towards a rightist Hindu wing, indicate to us that stressing on extremes is not a new innovation at all. It was probably in the day and age of the emperor Constantine in early century Europe that Christianity was heralded as the official religion and any that professed anything beyond was branded as heretical signifying official fundamentalism. While this phenomenon is not new, the complications it brings into an already tensed religious atmosphere can be catastrophic. Some moderate viewed religious may find themselves trapped, either dragged into an extremism or as was mentioned at the outset a neo-traditionalism which tries to elevate one's uniqueness through holding fast to a religious faith without being open to other truths. In such contexts the mere ostracizing of tensions within, can be detrimental to one's own affiliation, while ostracizing tensions outside may single one out, of the collaborative enterprise. But turning to the uprising in the intrafaith sphere which is popularly called as 'fundamentalism' we once again philosophize whether this matter can be resolved in the same manner as we could, when we were talking of faiths. Even though we are not talking of different faiths, but deviations of the same faith where dialogue can indeed resolve these tensions through the path of listening to each other. In the modern scenario such attempt is almost unheard of, but the main body of faith

adherents look on these specific groups as not belonging to the original teaching which can also be justified in some aspects, but yet the reason for their departure is also rooted in the same tradition. While this disowning of extremists, from main line religions has had an adverse effect on them and this hard experience does not seem to deter them from engaging in their self proclaimed mission either. Therefore while we seem to know the reasons for the dissension we are still in search of a remedy. A control over such enterprises, as been virtually harmful to society, has also failed upto a greater extent. For this we may even present the case of Christian extremism in Sri Lanka where such control has at sometimes, spurred on remarkable insidious responses from relative parties and the same may be said of the Kashmiri or Boko Haram separatists or the Irish Republican army. Therefore it is doubtful whether control of these erupting mechanisms is the answer, if at all eradication maybe the most goal oriented objective, but which will probably lie in the wrong on religious, ethical and social grounds. Whilst these remedies seem to be in the hands of personnel beyond the religion, staying true to the topic at hand we need to first of all realize that intrafaith conflict is a reality and secondly it is a measure of what can be called as experiential negativity. And thirdly the religion itself, possesses the capacity at least first hand to dialogue with the groups proposing deviation and build the bridge of moderateness. In the next section of this paper we are going to turn to the aspect of how the social aspect can be instrumental in directing religion towards a positively empowering path.

Societal Tolerance of Faiths

Every social phenomenon that happens, does ultimately happen to humans and in this regard the human as an intellectual being has the prime aptitude to 'acclimatize to' or 'get acclimatized' by these same phenomena. In this regard when we look at the history of religions, we see that religions have blossomed and declined among humans through their own actions. Therefore it is only correct to assume that there in something that can be called as a societal toleration of faiths. While this same society could contain elements from non religious, other religious or from the same religion it is imperative that such toleration will indeed be necessary to overcome a harmful escalation of religious uprising. With this basic understanding in mind the following intentions are given below which is to carve out the ethical framework as was expressed elsewhere to counter the dialectic of interfaith and intrafaith conflict.

The first point that needs to be elaborated is the concept of awareness. Awareness when we talk about interfaith and intrafaith conflict is primarily rooted in the understanding of the phenomenon of religion. While religion may have several hundred definitions each definition is concentrated on basically two factors; one being the relationship with a hope beyond our imagination but within our grasp and a relationship with the world beyond our grasp and within our imagination. Therefore any religious phenomenon which does not deal wholly in living in the now and here cannot be a religious phenomenon, but a human construct. Therefore the awareness that each religious tradition does in fact bear an ethic of 'being' is the foundational aspect of our proposed elucidation. Closely following this foundational block, would be its variations that

the same awareness should be extended towards even the intrafaith branches. In the modern Sri Lankan syllabuses, especially in Civic education this vital aspect has been enumerated satisfactorily. Education is of course the principal feature that needs to be utilized to overcome a bias society. And its target group should not only be the generation that can be educated on benches, but the generation that is in charge of the affairs of the world. This does not however mean that through awareness building alone in education that this toleration can be brought about.

Secondly we need to focus on the practical element of actually living together or coexisting. While the earlier aspect can be brought about speedily this aspect is one that cannot be regulated as easily as that. In some instances we meet people who having lived together with people of varied faiths, who easily grasp the interfaith relation. In more instances we find people who have not been exposed to this rainbow characteristic and moreover fail to understand even the intrafaith differences and tensions that might be present. However as we detailed above the society itself can be its motivator for this purpose. Society in and through religions could be able to assist in this task of bringing the living experience to the forefront. One of the most recent examples would be the Jewish, Arab and Christian dialogue that takes place in the war stricken areas of Israel. At least in part the participants would leave the dialogue transformed than they would have entered it.

Thirdly it is also to be collaborative in social action with a religious backing which, is to tackle secularization of which much was said earlier, which as this paper was developed became the sole delinquent for interfaith and intrafaith conflict. One global concern in which religions have collaboratively voiced up is eco-justice and such measures would be essential in carving a suitable religious ethic in a secular world. Highlighting more on intrafaith social action, would create the possibility of a united stance irrespective of divergent views and it would be a strong foundation to go for interfaith social action.

Fourthly it is necessary that continual reflection is done so that proactive attention will be made before a crisis is given birth to and a societal check will enable that religions are active in the form that was mentioned earlier of giving hope and instructions for living. However, the inevitable trap here would be that secular control of religion will probably make religions be ruled by secular forces which in turn will be a 'back to square one' with regard to secularism. And many of the secular countries in the world would erroneously be actionizing such an idea. Therefore it needs to be collaborative in the fact that religious truth maybe more beneficial than a secular rule, however rationalism should pervade in any case to maintain harmonious 'being'.

Conclusion

This reflection was indeed done on a philosophical basis with a tinge of sociological analysis. The world at large, with various religious groups, variant members and even more stress points is a much wider scope on which this reflection might fall short of. Yet it is important to understand that faiths have come to that point of cross roads where being religious itself is not only a choice but a choice which entails a greater challenge.

A challenge which seems to enlarge each day in a world which either promotes a need to break away with emotion or an emotion to hold fast to what one believes. If one does take the latter road he/she will still face a choice; of whether being a moderate who is called a diluted secularist or an extreme activist. It is in such tension we spotlight the need for cooperation within faiths and with faiths. Religions itself do not divide yet our interpretations may play a greater role in divisive exploitation. And the same societies which adopted religion and tolerated same may get defeated and decimated with the interpretations they may label on same. Yet are we to eliminate religious 'being' just for cause that these do not agree with reason? Or are we to use these tools as historical landmarks which may hold some truth? Or are we to continually be seekers of truth working out as in any number of faiths as possible to understand life, being and hope? The former is probably the easiest and as far as this paper is concerned the most deceiving. The latter is perhaps the most challenging and which still does not constitute a final set framework. The leaning towards this latter is also made in the light that other social constructs evolving over time have also faced the same dilemma for an instance the concept of democracy. Even with an ultimate longing to accept it as a marvelous secular construct its finality is not a panacea to cure all ills, and doubts are thrown all over with regard to its operation in any setting. That itself could be our truth in using interfaith and intrafaith conflict in a positive manner. When in time maybe we do embark on the final say with regard to religious truth, then may we decide upon it with a more confident manner than we are at the present. Till that glorious moment we remain as pro-religious yet eager existentialists!

