INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

On

Inter-Religious Understanding: Its implications for Human Rights

On October 14-15, 2019, at Chandigarh, India

CONCEPT NOTE

Although we are living in a secular environment, secularism in South Asia refers not just to the separation of religion and state, but also to the Constitutionally-mandated public embrace of a plural religious culture. This entails, according to the Indian Constitution, the guarantee of rights of groups to organise, educate, observe customs, and propagate their faith. All this implies that we need to stand for equal respect to all religions and should oppose cynical manipulation of faith in the pursuit of power. Both minority and majority communalism are a curse for communal harmony.

How to maintain peace in our society despite divergent denominational identities is a question in the present chaotic times. Therefore, we need various kinds of dialogical engagements for the purpose. The dialogue that promotes "engaged pluralism" is one that seeks understanding and accepts difference. Dianna Eck says: "The encounter in a pluralistic society is not premised on achieving agreement, but achieving relationship."

We have to understand this point that difference is a part of nature and the art of difference management is only possible through meaningful and positive interfaith dialogue, and thus seek peaceful solutions to controversial matters in spite of differences. By giving people respect and honour these differences can become blessings. The result will be dialogue, sharing of views – that will result in intellectual development, which is a boon for everyone concerned. The task of the spiritually-enlightened is not to promote one particular religion: much less to pit one religion against another, but identifying the good and common factors that exist within all religions.

We need to create a world where religions interact in an integrative model as against the present conflictual and competitive model.

We sometimes lose sight of the many positive forms of dialogue between communities, especially Hindus and Muslims, because of the high-profile and well-publicised conflicts of the past and present. Though the term "inter-religious dialogue" denotes a modern convention, earlier records show that different communities in India have encountered enormous curiosity and lively exchange between religions in matters of technology, arts, and sciences as well as spirituality. From the investigations of al-Biruni to the translation projects in the Mughal period, to the Bhakti and Sufi devotional movements, to the daily pious practices at countless shared sites, to the social and political activism of human rights

advocates, inter-religious dialogue between different communities has been our rich and complex legacy, which is still going strong in different known and unknown forms.

Inter-religious dialogue in contemporary society is conducted to create better relationships between people belonging to different religions by bringing them together in dialogue: it thus aims to establish peace and harmony in a society which has been devastated by conflicts between religions. There are several important aspects in dialogue in this regard.

The uncritical reception and interpretation of "religious conflicts" or "conflicts in the name of religions", and the failure to appreciate that religious conflicts are often more than "religious" conflicts and, often, not even "religious" conflicts at all, "religion" having become a mere useful peg on which to hang the violence. Thus, in the contemporary period, inter-religious dialogue is not simply any conversation between people with different religious identities. Rather, it is presented as an important step in understanding one's own religion and one's neighbours' religions, and thus a step towards better understanding and relationships between people of different religions.

The presupposition is that dialogue helps to eliminate religious conflicts and tensions because religions have the potential to further the cause of world peace, if the process is explicated through dialogue. Dialogue is an approach in which positive attitudes and openness to other religions are implied, the view being that such positive attitudes between members of different religions are necessary to create better relationships among humans in society. This positive attitude varies from showing mutual openness and mutual sharing among the participants while keeping the distinctive features of their respective religions, or affirming and acknowledging the differences between religions while emphasising the unity of aim or intention of all religions, even though the latter is sometimes criticised in dialogue circles. Such dialogue is not just a practical activity, but it has become a sort of ideal stance, which is different from the actualities of dialogue. In this approach, the dialogue promoters write about it or articulate it purely in terms of theory and principle. In formal dialogue, it is more than an ordinary two-way conversation, for it refers to particular types of conversation, or conversation with particular attitudes. Thus the term dialogue has been conceptualised, esentialised and imbued with ideas which refer to meanings beyond conversation, such as positive attitudes and tolerant approaches.

The assumption that religion, or religions contribute to violence, and the uncritical acceptance of this notion in dialogue has, in fact, set many limitations for dialogue. It is often overlooked that what is claimed as religious violence often stems from socio-economic and personal struggles of people, and from the political intervention which plays with the religious identities of people in order to receive votes and to achieve political power. For instance, in India, what is termed religious conflicts has been, at the root, mostly a social issue involving caste domination and oppression, or economic struggles between people or people's groups, or political manipulations for power or even personal problems between people.

Questions such as how they evolve into religious conflicts and how and why they are projected as such, and how these economic, political and social realities are overlooked in dialogue need attention.

An eclectic philosophical approach can be developed to solve religious conflicts between various traditions because finally it is religion which holds before man's imagination the

vision and hope transcending all limitations imposed by temporal life. Because there are two dimensions of religion: it has produced great saints and sages of highest calibre, and second is the role of organised religious communities which have fallen short of the ideal. Because religions have fought and quarrelled, really for economic and political gains, but religion has been exploited for this purpose. Some political groups have used these conflicts to stress not only irrelevance of religion but even to denounce religious values. But how religion can win the battle against scepticism is possible only if thoughtful people belonging to various religions put up a united front.

Can religions be put into single unified systems and differentiated from each other? Why are conflicts between religions often spoken about, and uncritically accepted in the dialogue circles? If there are many causes for conflicts why is religion claimed as the prime cause? What are the different ways people at the grassroots understand and perceive relationships between religions and how do they live their everyday life in such contexts, and how are these different from elite conceptions of religion and dialogue? These are some of the questions which can be asked summarily while talking about inter-religious understanding in a philosophical parlance? Theoretically, the discussion of the limitations of dialogue in the present context may be started with observing the ambiguities in dialogue.

We need to inform public about religious intolerance, violence, human rights violations, caste, and woman rights. Thus interfaith dialogue can be coupled with justice.

For achieving a holistic treatment to communal problems permanently, first of all, we need to know how we can identify the content about inter-religious understanding in our major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism and Islam at a philosophical level. Then we need to take stock of the fact that there might have been attempts made by our earlier generations of scholars and ulama to promote such understanding and what were the perimeters of religious phenomenon in general and what insights we can get from luminaries like Buddha, Nanak, Ibn Hazm, Sharistani, Mullah Muhsin Fani al-Biruni from earlier times and Nehru, Gandhi Ambedkar and Azad etc. in present times. Moreover, what can be contours of inter-religious understanding in the wake of unfortunate happenings taking place in our society in the form of communalism and human rights violations of the ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities also should form the crucial agenda of any undertaking of dialogue. Furthermore, for the legal and constitutional safeguards against this intolerance what can be the constitutional remedies and legal provisions for the protection of the rights of these minorities, and how can their freedom of conscience be safeguarded needs to be deliberated upon. In the same way the very prospective injunctions found in our Constitution should be highlighted to make this understanding commensurate with action on ground when it comes to right to equality, social justice and safeguards from communal cruelty.

These are some questions which keep on agitating the minds of conscientious Indians who are aware of the glorious past of the country and know the age old culture known as Ganga Jamuni tehzib. It is in this backdrop that we intend to take into consideration pragmatic aspects of the Constitution like equality, justice, peace, fraternity, liberty; and also to identify the obstacles in achieving peace and justice for human beings. This two-day conference will search for ways and means for developing understanding and support for safeguarding constitutional rights as the communities living together in a democratic system. Respect of rule of law and honouring religious sensibilities are the two uppermost concerns of any

civilised citizen of India belonging to any denomination, religious or cultural setting, having equal respect and opportunity in free India. Because in some recent cases, communalism has assumed a form of extreme religious chauvinism and antagonism towards the religious other, often accompanied by exclusivist political mobilisation. In a trouble-torn world, where religious nationalism and communal politics reigns supreme, inter-religious dialogue has become a matter of paramount concern to all people who are interested in human dignity and rights. In such a situation sensitisation for strengthening democratic institutions and developing societal responses for non-violent conflict resolution initiatives has become imperative.

With these objectives in view the IOS Forum for Inter-Religious Dialogue, is going to organise a two-day international conference on "**Inter-Religious Understanding: Its implications for Human Rights**", October 14-15, 2019 at Chandigarh, India. The conference will deal with theoretical and philosophical dimensions of the subject and will also highlight the historical contours of *samvad* in Indian and Islamic context, and finally will assess the Constitutional safeguards which can provide the pragmatic framework for social justice and eradication of age-old injustices and conflicts involving ethnic and religious issues.

Suggested themes for writing papers are:

1. Inter-religious understanding and Indian religions

2. a. Theoretical perspective of religious co-existence
   b. Right to religion and conscience as envisaged by the UN through its covenant and laws

3. Religion and its protection according to the Constitution of India:
   a. Religious and personal laws
   b. Marriage and related matters and the Constitution
   c. Minority rights and their protection

4. Dialogue in action for justice for marginalised sections of Indian society

5. Prospects of Inter-religious understanding and the Indian Constitution:
   a. Debate on tolerance and the Constitution
   b. Equal opportunities before law and religious nationalism
   c. Freedom of expression and conscience

6. Inter-religious understanding and dialogue for promoting humanity
   a. Right to equality
   b. Social justice
   c. Safeguards from communal cruelty
   d. Joint action for eradicating injustices

Papers can be written on any other relevant theme also.

Please send your abstracts not exceeding 300 words latest by September 20, 2019. The full papers may be sent latest by September 30, 2019. The length of the paper should not exceed 12 pages or 6000 words.