

Empowering the Church for Multicultural Ministry and Solidarity: A Survey and Analysis of Asian Realities

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Asia

Asia is the great land of ancient civilization, multifaceted cultures, the birth place of all the main religions of the world, and myriads of languages and ethnicity. All these have shaped a people, generally known for their emphasis on industriousness and frugal habits as well as their perseverance and resilience.

The religious and cultural values e.g., love for philosophical inquiry, contemplation, simplicity, detachment, silence, non-violence, etc. are the powerful assets of Asian people. A profound sense of religion, love for the family, respect for life, compassion for all beings, love for and closeness to nature, respect for parents, elders and ancestors and a sense of community are other sources of strength for the people of Asia.

Religious plurality has been a constant part of the history in Asia that there has been a dialogue of life among religions, a sense of accommodation and a desire for mutual enrichment.

However, the colonial period and the years after the independence of many of the nations in Asia saw violence and wars amongst its people. We have also seen a new wave of violence after the end of the Cold War. This is aggravated by the fact that the only superpower in the world subscribes to an ideology that legitimizes violence and wars as means to achieve its end. This especially becomes a great threat to peace when this ideology is supposed to be divinely sanctioned.

Asia today also suffers because of the negative impact of globalization. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening. There are corrupt governments that continually oppress their people. The democratic process is often not very smooth and transparent. Political power is often vested in the elite and used for their economic gains. There is no equitable distribution of wealth and we see lopsided development. Abuse of power by those in authority has re-emphasized gender, ethnic, religious and cultural discrimination.

Migration and displacement of people have made them prey to human trafficking. Once outside their traditional societies and national boundaries people become mere commodities in the international economic system.

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The Need for Inclusive World View

All through the ages and across the spectrum of cultures, humans have been in an ongoing quest to develop an effective technology of life, by which individuals and communities may flourish. The great philosophical, spiritual and religious traditions have made magnificent advances in this common quest. Moreover, there is a remarkable convergence and even significant consensus among these global traditions.

Nevertheless, the evolution of cultures had made clear that human relations continue to break down when different perspectives, worldviews and ideologies come into confrontation. Contemporary life had made it abundantly clear that the key to our very survival now turns to learning how to cope creatively with the powerful forces that arise when diverse worldviews collide.

A worldview refers to the framework through which an individual interprets the world and interacts in it. It is apparent now that the most urgent priority facing religions and cultures today is finding creative practical solution to the immense problems of human relations generated when different worldviews meet.

The factors that are responsible for the creation of our worldviews include the following: our history, sociological and environmental factors, economic factors, political orientation, national ideologies, religious persuasion, psychological and personal struggles and experiences. Thus, every dimension of our personhood has to be sensitized if we need to engage with others. It is also true that while we have our own personal worldviews there can also be a collective worldview of a community or society. This was very evident in traditional village societies. Whenever there was intrusion or the imposition of other worldviews by persons from the outside there was conflict.

In the recent past while going through the process of inter-religious dialogue, I got convinced that it is becoming more and more necessary to understand and reexamine the purpose and aim of religion. Why does one embrace a religion? What does a faithful follower or adherent hope to achieve through his or her faith? At a particular time in the history of Western Christianity there was an emphasis on *salvation* as the sole purpose of religion. This seems to fit in well with the mission enterprise of the church to the "nations". This unfortunately made the Christianity of the missionaries to Asia a religion that was exclusive. "Salvation" became a good packaging to market this form of Christianity. Unfortunately as a reaction to this, some quarters in the other Asian religions also began to emphasize "salvation" as the goal of religion. This altogether has put religion on the wrong track sidelining the other important virtues and values that are embodied in it. If salvation becomes the means and the end in religion, it can be misused and manipulated. A suicide bomber may have a political conviction to destroy the "enemy" but his/her belief that he/she attains salvation for doing it confirms the fact that overemphasis of this one doctrine can be dangerous.

There is need to rediscover the finer and more profound virtues and values of our religions to construct a worldview that is inclusive for multicultural ministry and engagement.

The Need for Dialogue and Engagement

It is apparent that mere tolerance of other faiths and the other will not be sufficient. Dialogue is a way of encountering and understanding oneself and the world at the deepest levels, opening up possibilities of grasping the fundamental meanings of life, individually and corporately, and its various dimensions. This in turn transforms the way we deal with others, the world and ourselves.

Dialogue and engagement have emerged out of a wide range of Inter-World Encounters. When we live through the encounters of religious worlds, as we gain inter-cultural experiences, as we struggle with historic patterns of collisions of diverse philosophical worldviews, as we creatively engage the powerful forces of civic life where ideologies and life-worlds battle, this inter-world experience enables us to rise to a higher global perspective. As we attain this higher perspective, we begin to see deeper patterns and pervasive dynamics evident in cultural and religious evolution over the centuries.

One great lesson in global evolution is that our cultural realities are directly affected by our thought patterns. One great insight gained from the vast resources of the religious, philosophical, spiritual and moral traditions of the ages is that the more we humans are locked in egocentric, monological thought patterns, the more we suffer, the more there is failure in our personal and corporate lives, the more there is violence and breakdown of human relations between perspectives and worldviews.

Celebrating Religious and Cultural Diversity

Diversity is the creation of God. Diversity adds beauty and colour to the whole creation. Just as the different plants, trees, birds, animals and all living creatures in the sea make up the whole habitat, the different races, cultures, languages and religions in all its diversity make up the whole of humanity. This diversity with different array of colours is the whole creation of God. The beauty of this diversity is its harmony and integrity. Respecting diversity is to develop an understanding of the other, their history, traditions and spiritual values. The existence of other religions and cultures is extremely important for the survival of one's own religion and culture.

The existence of other religions and cultures reminds us of our own uniqueness and shortcomings. Another religion or culture is a mirror for humankind that enables him/her to see what he/she looks like. This knowledge offers alternative visions of life as well as alternative solutions to the problems of existence. Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios, in his inaugural address during the centennial celebrations of the Parliament of World Religions in 1989, said, "Our purpose shall be to provide a multi-faceted foundation on which, in mutual respect, the cultures of the world can come together and live in a global concourse of religions".

What is required is a rich, deep, penetrating, respectful understanding of each other's religion. It is not about a common religion, which puts everything into one pot but a global concourse of all religions. Here all religions flow together as a distinct dynamic stream;

they diverge, cross one another, meet and continue to flow into the future.

Weaving a Culture of Peace

With the advent of globalization, there is a decline in the importance of nation states. For the last 200 years, the nation has often been our identity, and our loyalties have been to one's own nation's interest against the interest of other nations. History is pushing us to move out of national parochialism into a universal humanism. However, one of the negative impacts of globalization resulting from the negation of state identities is the assertion of identities through religion, ethnicity and race.

Hence, it is of vital importance to weave a culture of peace as an antidote to religious intolerance. The emphasis will be to strive for a movement away from the culture of war and violence to a culture of peace and non-violence characterized by values, attitudes and behavior showing respect for inter cultural understanding, tolerance and solidarity. Declarations and legal measures are not enough; a culture of peace must grow out of the beliefs and traditions of people themselves.

Our goal should not just merely be a dialogue with each other but the future of humanity as a whole. Multi-cultural ministry for peace must be set within this framework for it to be successful. Three foci for religions to flow together are justice, peace and the environment.

A Culture of Peace is forged only if religions take seriously the following issues in their journey together:

- ***Injustice in the world.***

The majority of humanity is suffering because of economic and social marginalization, notably the vulnerable groups (e.g. women, children and indigenous people). There is growing inequality between and within societies. Former Iranian president Rafsanjani once said: "I have a firm conviction that the beauty of religion stems from justice. Any understanding of religion that, in one way or another, justifies injustice stands against the true sense of religion."

- ***Overcoming wars and other forms of direct violence.***

All faith institutions should emphasize the core values of peace and nonviolent resolution of conflicts found within their teachings and traditions.

- ***Enhancing sustainable futures.***

There is a need to recognize that the ecological crisis in the world is due to the worldviews and actions of individuals, institutions and systems that accelerate environmental destruction and humanity's unsustainable use of planetary resources.

- ***Nurturing inner peace and spirituality.***

There is a need to nurture the core values and principles of diverse faiths and spirituality

traditions, which provide guidance and inspiration for developing a sense of inner peace essential to the promotion of social peace.

- ***Role of media.***

As the media, including newer information and communication technologies today, play a powerful role in shaping values and attitudes. Transmitting information and (knowledge) education for cultivating peace needs to include the development of critical media literacy so that all citizens can detect any biases, distortions and manipulation that help fuel conflicts, divisions, discrimination and even violence. The mass media have become powerful medium for the construction of the worldview of young people. This is important when the demographic patterns show that 60% of Asia consists of young people.

The various problems encountered by humanity are a result of the “fallen nature” in creation. Through the incarnate presence of God in creation, the creation is being redeemed. Created in the image and likeness of God, humanity is called to be the proximate presence of the divine in order to transform creation. Only true and authentic spirituality, minus the religious trappings, can usher forth a culture of peace and unity. Unity and Oneness is the destiny of creation. Humankind can truly be united when the spiritual moorings of their faiths enable them to love God and enjoy the love of God.

This will in turn make us love our fellow human beings. Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with your entire mind. This is the great and first commandment. And, a second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself ” (St. Luke 22:37-39). Moreover, he teaches that, “The greatest of all love is when a man (or woman) lays down his (her) life for his (her) friends”. The epitome of spirituality is to enjoy the love of God and to love humanity unconditionally. Wherever there are expressions of these virtues, God begins to act.