# When Self Meets Other: Religions, Cultures, and Dialogue

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## Abstract

Religion and culture are two inseparable entities, and religion is an integral part of culture. It can be said that cultural values mostly originated from religion. When we talk about one's cultural value we need to jog our mind with respect for other cultures and faith in order to avoid misunderstanding and conflict and delve to find solutions for the problem that is affecting every sentient being. When we say solutions it does not mean discarding one's value or religion but it just means that we need to channelize our values clearly and practically by cultivating the attitude of commitment and compassion to our fellow human being. When we say inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, one should be clear that it is a process of renewing ones culture or faith through dialogue and that one should not have an ulterior motive for dialogue.

## Introduction

"Culture" is something we naturally find ourselves – sometimes by birth, sometimes by choice – in and it is a unique set of features that has its own vocabulary and grammar. One culture is surely different from another. However, approaches for living together in a world of multiple ideologies and cultures are often, unfortunately, in competition. This has brought about a conflict in cultures. Such competition and conflict can occur both between countries and also within countries. In light of this challenge, the quest for a dialogue among cultures has become an important aspect in today's world with the aim of promoting peace among all humankind. This paper will follow the following structure: First, we will briefly look at how the challenge of inter-cultural dialogue is made urgent by the onslaught of globalization. Second, we will note how inter-cultural dialogue, in order to be tolerant and sympathetic, needs to be more than an "intellectual" approach. Third, we will analyse the role of religion in facilitating inter-cultural dialogue. Finally, we will conclude with a few exploratory remarks that can further inter-cultural dialogue.

## Globalization and the Emergence of New Challenges

With the onslaught of globalization, new challenges present themselves for cultures across the globes that are so diverse. Mutual understanding has become urgent because we are constantly facing diversity wherever we go. Thus, inter-cultural dialogue focuses on conversation with an explicit desire to engage intentionally with the goal of increasing understanding and addressing questions and problems. Such conversations and engagement involves both heart and mind as stated by Patricia Romney in *The Art of Dialogue*.[1] So, one can say that engaging in dialogue means being ready to accept the process of creative and positive transformation in an increasingly globalized world.

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Peace and justice become important themes in such a context and are in many ways the edifice for a common humanity.

Though there might be numerous inter-cultural conflicts, inter-cultural dialogue among different cultures aims for mutual recognition. It attempts to identify the social problem through critical discussion and hence create new ideas or approaches that might be shared by individual cultures in a universal way. Universal values are sought today. In this sense, globalization has made it necessary to view culture as it relates to values and humanistic ideals. This argument is made by Ferdinand Tonnies.[2]

### Inter-Cultural Dialogue: More than "Intellectual" Approaches

Amidst much diversity, it becomes difficult to maintain one's own unique identity of culture as something that is intellectually distinct. Inter-cultural dialogue thus cannot be just an "intellectual or overly-rational understanding of culture. For intercultural dialogue is not only intellectual (cognitive knowledge) but on the contrary, such dialogue needs to develop a feeling of sympathy and appreciation of the other culture.[3] And when I say beyond intellectual approaches it means that when one enters into dialogue one should be ready to accept the process of creative and positive transformation engaged by interactive truth and common humanity. [4] The process of dialogue should not just be listening and exchanging ideas but one should be able to put into practice by deep looking and deep understanding which will make us free from the preconceived notions about the other and help us to see the beauty and values of our own and other's tradition.[5] Thus dialogue should not merely be associated with intellectual but must be experiential. How can one put into practice or experience the dialogue? Ludwig Wittgenstein clearly stated that "concerning that which cannot be talked about one should not say

anything"[6] when we abandon the habit of perceiving everything through concepts and representations, then only can we experience it in our own being a genuine and fruitful dialogue.

It is now clear that Dialogue is possible only in the context of an I- though relationship and that dialogue can bring into being only when the idea of non-self is established. In other words, the true essence of genuine dialogue contains in the idea that when one enters in dialogue one should be able to acknowledge the others in there being as Martin Heidegger would probably say in one's particular being (Dasein)[7] and put it into practice to experience it in our own being.[8]The White paper on inter-cultural dialogue has defined "Intercultural dialogue" as "an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception."[9] This "deeper" understanding needs to transcend merely intellectual approaches in which one's culture is defined as a set of unchanging rules for conduct and worldview. Inter-cultural dialogue, in order to be universally humanistic needs to foster an attitude of sympathy. Accepting the diversity of cultures enables us to

In order to understand the diversity of cultures, we need to understand the constructive and adverse aspects of one's own tradition. Notions of "superiority" do not help in this area. There is no doubt that even within one's own community there are lots of differences but instead of pondering on the differences if we respect and apprehend this diversity, it not only supplement each other but also foster an attitude of recognizing one's own limitations that lead to openness in one's thoughts and ideas. Notably, in this respect, inter-cultural dialogue may bring about a leeway to transform within one's own being and in the social purview as well. Because of such change in both oneself and society, inter-cultural dialogue moves beyond "intellectual" approaches. Charles Taylor states that

one should value ones cultural value which is required not only for dialogue but also for one's own life.[10]Engaging in dialogue thus not only help people in changing their otherwise fixed mind-sets but it also helps to enrich one's personal life and transforms the socio-political scenario by preventing or reducing tension among people and promoting a peaceful and just society for the good of the humanity.[11]

## The Role of Religion

If one looks at our roots, traditions, cultures, beliefs then it is diverse but if we look at it with love, understanding, and acceptance then these differences no longer exist. Therefore love conquers these diversities and makes us one, a complete whole. Religion plays a role here in so far as it informs those qualities and gives them character. Humans are intrinsically religious and any inter-cultural dialogue to be productive must pay attention to such religiosity. The role of religion in engendering peace and harmony cannot be underestimated. Religion and culture are two inseparable entities, and religion is an integral part of culture. Religion has a deep impact on the formation of cultural values and it acts as a unifying force in the creation of cultural fusion and a revolutionary harnessing force in times of social change.

When we talk about one's cultural value, we need to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts and delve to find solutions for problems that affect every sentient being, irrespective of religion. However, when we say "solutions," it does not mean discarding one's value or religion. It just means that we need to channelize our values clearly and practically by cultivating the attitude of commitment and compassion to our fellow human being. When we say inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, one should be clear that it is a process of renewing one's culture or faith through dialogue and that one should not have an ulterior motive for dialogue.

Religions are more and more seen in opposition to one another rather than in relation to one another. This has made communities of faith exclusivistic and has ghettoized them into mutually non-interacting groups both philosophically and socially. Thus, it becomes important to consider common themes in religions that will bring people more closer so as to enable them to interact between one another. Often we find that actions are based on worldviews and philosophical ideas that have strong implications for human action. Religion and culture thus have a major impact in the life of humans, and since we are not living in isolation, inter-cultural dialogue, when it takes up religion in its conversation, can be a binding force to establish peace and harmony in a diverse society.

## Some Concluding Remarks

- As we close, it is important to ask a very basic question: what is the need for inter-cultural dialogue? Since we are living in a world of different cultures and religions, one can say that the main aim of inter-cultural dialogue is to create social attitudes which can help the people to understand, appreciate and respect other cultures.

- As we encounter each other's' cultures, we also need to analyse social evils which are creating turmoil in this present society like cultural clashes, racism, casteism, exploitation, imperialism, and corruption. By facing such evils collectively, inter-cultural dialogue can become contextual wherever it occurs. In other words, inter-cultural dialogue deeply grounded in its internal logic of freedom, justice, and respect for human persons provides the canvas for resolution of such issues. To repeat a point already made in the paper, inter-cultural dialogue is not just about intellectual understanding of other cultures but look at the broader perspective by embracing the

diversity of culture and by pushing oneself into critical dialogue which will enhance the boundaries of our humanness.

- Another theme that is important in inter-cultural dialogue is the diversity vs. commonality debate. One should be aware that our social well-being is found in our commonalities *and* in our diversities. However, despite the diversity of cultures in society, there is an indication of one nature among every sentient being and that is humanity. This understanding of a common humanity facilitates understanding. And when there is

understanding, compassion is born. Thus, one can be assured that inter-cultural dialogue is a sure method for the transformation of humankind by developing love and compassion towards our fellow human being. In other words, although every tradition or religion has its own sets of values and norms, all of them share the common qualities of love, understanding and acceptance. Hence, I would like to conclude my paper stating that one should not only try to understand the dialogue between different cultures but should cultivate or imbibe inter-cultural dialogue as a way of life among all cultures of the world.

## End Notes

1   Patricia Romney, *The Art of Dialogue*, www.AmericanForTheArts.org., 2.

2   Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Society: Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft,* trans. Charles P. Loomis (New York, Dover Publications, INC, 2002), 251.

3   Ursula Oswald Spring, Ada Aharoni, Ralph V. Summy, and Robert Charles Elliot eds., "Towards a Definition of Intercultural Dialogue," in *Peace Studies, Public Policy and Global Security*, Electronic, vol. 4 (UNESCO-EOLSS, 2010), 88.

4   Paul Ingram, *The Process of Buddhist- Christian Dialogue* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009), ix.

5   Thich Nhat Hanh*, Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York, Riverhead Books, 2007), 7.

6   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico –Philosophicus*, trans D. F. Pears and B.F McGuinness, (London, Routledge, 2001), tractatus 7.

7   Diane Collinson, *Fifty Major Philosophers: A Reference Guide* (London, Routledge, 1987), 151.

8   Thich Nhat Hanh*, Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York, Riverhead Books, 2007), 14.

9   White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "*Living Together as Equals in Dignity*" *https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white*.

10  Charles Taylor*, Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition,* Ed. Amy Gutmann, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 35.

11  Abraham Velez De Cea, "A New Direction for Comparative Studies of Buddhist- Christians: Evidence from Nâgâjuna and the John of the Cross," *Buddhist- Christian Studies* 26 (2006): 139-155.

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13. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Tractatus *Logico –Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears and B.F McGuinness, London, Routledge, (2001).

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2. White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “*Living Together as Equals in Dignity*”https:// www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white *paper_final_revised_en.pdf* (Accessed: 10ᵗʰ October, 2017)