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Plural Traditions in Plural Societies: Inclusivity in Inter-Religious Dialogue

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SYNOPSIS

In December, Singapore hosted ASEAN's inaugural interfaith exchange programme. It was a platform for sharing best practices among the region's neighbours, especially inter-religious dialogue. While an important tool for cultivating inter-religious harmony, there is a need to ensure that the practice of dialogue itself is inclusive.

COMMENTARY

THE RELIGIOUS landscape in our modern world today is complex and highly diverse. Age-old religious traditions are brushing shoulders with new religious movements (NRMs), while the relationship between religion and the secular is constantly being re-evaluated and negotiated. This diversity begs a moral question: how can people who have different, and at times even conflicting, visions of reality live together harmoniously and respectfully?

The recently concluded Faithfully ASEAN programme was aimed at addressing this concern. It highlighted the need for communities to constantly and creatively seek ways to bring people together on common ground. One way to do this is through inter-religious dialogue.

Diversity Within Traditions

Inter-religious dialogue can bridge gaps in understanding between religions, and correct existing misconceptions that often arise out of ignorance or fear. Especially for plural societies, dialogue is an important effort in promoting a spirit of inclusiveness which contributes to building peace and maintaining religious harmony. However, for dialogue to be effective in promoting inclusiveness, the practice of dialogue itself needs to be inclusive.

As we accept that religious diversity exists, it is equally important for us to realise and appreciate the diversity within each religious tradition. This diversity can be doctrinal, legal, political, cultural, or all these factors at once. This, in turn, influences how a believer interprets and practises his or her religion. This realisation needs to be translated into how we carry out inter-religious dialogue in order to enhance inter-religious understanding.

Addressing internal divisions, either prior to inter-religious dialogue, or as part of the process, can significantly contribute to its success by means of minimising misconceptions about the different faith traditions, as well as the practice of dialogue itself.

Thus in inter-religious dialogue, we need to ask the following questions: who are the people invited to the table?; is the practice of dialogue restricted to only religious leaders and elites?; do we only give the platform to representatives from the orthodox or the mainstream group of each religion?; what about minority groups, and women?; what can, or cannot, be talked about?

Representing Minority Voices

A crucial point to note when engaging in inter-religious dialogue is the issue of representation. There is a risk of homogenising a religious tradition when we refer to, for instance, an “Islamic perspective” or a “Hindu perspective” on a certain issue. This implies there is only one standard, and therefore accurate, view, which is not the case in relation to lived religious practices. Such representations can lead to a shallow or simplistic understanding of a particular religious tradition.

Moreover, excluding minority voices can lead to a case of marginality on two levels: where the minority group is silenced, unintentionally or otherwise, by its own community as well as the larger society. Inter-religious dialogue practitioners have noted that groups who feel excluded may eventually withdraw completely from the common space as they do not feel any sense of belonging to, or ownership of, the space.

Practically speaking, it is not possible to include every sect, faction or splinter group of each religious tradition. Notwithstanding these issues, there has to be a genuine effort and willingness to include different voices within a religious tradition to ensure that the common good we are striving for is good for as many as possible, if not all.

Addressing Ambivalence and Differences

The second issue is the subject of discussion in inter-religious dialogue. Often, dialogue efforts are aimed at highlighting commonalities across religions. However, equally important to be discussed are the differences that exist among the different traditions. This is because learning about different perspectives, even those which exist within the same community, is the first step to accepting and respecting differences.

Additionally, the focus of dialogue should be expanded beyond the narrative that each

religion promotes peace and advocates its adherents to be respectful of others, to include discussions on the “ugly” side of religion. Professor Scott Appleby has argued for the ambivalent nature of religion, that is to say that each religion has resources within it that both promote peace and call for violence.

There is a need for honest and open discussions on such teachings so that one can understand the interpretations and contexts behind them. By doing so, the practice of dialogue moves deeper beyond what sociologists call “surface cultures”, such as talk about festivals, sartorial choices, or food.

When we ignore minority voices and avoid difficult topics, inter-religious dialogue loses its appeal as a tool that can develop understanding about those who are different from “us”, thereby dissolving the “us” versus “them” mentality that can at times escalate into conflict.

While it is true that the root causes of conflict today are complex and attributed to an interplay of factors such as politics, economics and/or class divisions, it is also true that they often come to the fore along religious or ethnic lines. To resolve such conflicts, or prevent them in the first place, constructive interactions with those who are different from “us” is integral for communities to cultivate a common space where people can live peacefully alongside one another.

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