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Religious Harmony: The Harmony among the Differences

Dr. Phramaha Somphong Khunakaro¹

Abstract

As in many societies, people live their life among differences, such as religions, language, rituals, etc. More significantly, most of people live their life based on religious principles in which each of them belongs to different faiths and applies the religious teaching as they belong to for their daily life. In such this situation, there might be a conflict arisen by misunderstanding religious teachings and misinterpreting a fact of religions. To prevent these causes and bring them happiness, religious or spiritual leaders should come out to respond for these. With this, each spiritual leader should enhance mutual understanding among the leaders and share responsibility for solving the arisen conflict and bringing happiness and justice to the people. In this point, the spiritual leader should encourage the people to understand the fact of religions and intelligently approach the true reality of the things. By these strategies, Buddhadasa Bikkhu has practically given the principle of “No religion” that people should understand the natural phenomenon (dhammas) rather than material phenomenon. Sri Ramakrishana has also given the idea of dharma-samanvaya (harmony of religions) that the absolute truth is only one; but there are various ways to approach the truth.

Keywords: Religion, Harmony, Difference, No religions, Dhammas, Dharma-samanvaya (Harmony of religions)

Introduction

What human being mainly aims in their life is definitely how to live life happily. The point is how to get happiness to life if they are to live with others who are exactly different in terms of religions, languages, rituals, etc. Among the differences, what they are to be concerned is conflict. It might be stirred by different ideas based on different backgrounds of people in society. Whenever it arises, severely, it can considerably destroy friendship among them in their society resulting in living life with suffer and scare; not trust in each other. How to harmonize people so as to live the life together in society amicably and happily is primely aim. In many societies, undeniably, most of people belongs to religions; they apply a religious teaching to their life thereby practicing, participating, or organizing religious functions as their way of routine life. So, Religions play essential roles as a center for encouraging and helping people to live their life amicably and happily. With this, religious leaders in each society should join a hand together to prevent a cause

¹ Asst. Prof, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, International Buddhist Studies College, 79/1 Phhon Yohin Rd., Lam Sai, Wang Noi, Ayutthaya, Thailand

E-mail: somphong.uny@mcu.ac.th

of conflict and solve a conflict arisen. To do so, each religious leader should reasonably realize a context of the society and other religions thereby learning from each other, especially, the religious teachings, disciplines, and rituals in which all could join together. Here is called religious harmony.

2. Significance and Definition of Religious Harmony

As religions are a center point of social life, the spiritual leaders of each religion in the society should understand and realize the fact of religions. If not so, it can become a cause of conflict because of misinterpretation (Michael Pye, et al., 2006, p. 5). In the terms of “Religious harmony”, it literally means that the harmonious and common development within and between individual religions as well as between the religious community and the larger society which is realized through the dialogue-generated enhancement of mutual understanding and empathy and the sharing of the common responsibilities of peace and justice on the precondition of recognizing religious diversity and differences (Wang Zou’an, 2013, p. 210). In this point, the main aim of religious harmony is to deal with conflict, peace and justice among the religious diversity and differences in which all religion has to mutually understand and share the common responsibility on these issues. According to Sri Ramakrishna, harmony of religions is distinguished from ‘indifferentism’ which have the view that there is no difference among religions that means they are all more or less the same. Here is the idea based on ignorance of other religions which cannot be a basis for harmony (Swami Bhajanananda, 2007, p. 4). Anyways, a proper understanding of harmony of religions is to recognize the difference among religion as each religion has unique feature created insuperable barriers among religions. Harmony of religions should be discussed on these barriers (Swami Bhajanananda, 2007, pp. 4-5). Besides, according to him, harmony and toleration are different as toleration is the negative word implying a certain degree of condescension and refraining from doing something worse (Swami Bhajanananda, 2007, p. 5). According to Dalai Lama, he indicates the inter-religious harmony that it is based on recognition of the differences between faith tradition, this then allows us to transcend some of those differences and move beyond them to a higher level of convergence, where they share a common goal of human betterment and a set of keys of ethical teaching (His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 2010, pp. 204-5).

3. The Attitude of Theory of Religion

In terms of “Theory of Religion” it is generally defined in the broad ways. Concisely, it is the theory seeking to reflect the meaning of religions (Jose M. Vigil, 2008, p. 57). Mostly, each religion has unique style of teaching, practice, tradition which makes each of them quite different that caused from the differentiated background of them. Anyway, the difference as such can be concluded in three attitudes of the theory of religions; namely, religious exclusivism, religious inclusivism, and religious pluralism. Of these attitudes, each of them has their own attitude of

faith. Regarding the religious exclusivism, it is the attitude that there are widely many religions with various truths but all are false because they cannot provide salvation. Only one true religion revealed by God is true religion; it is exclusive possessor of truth (Jose M. Vigil, 2008, p. 60). Regradingly, it meaningfully signifies that the religious exclusivism accepts only their religion as true but denies the truth of other religions. With regard to religious inclusivism, it is other religious attitude that opposites to the religious attitude of exclusivism. As of it, it accepts that the truth and salvation can be also found in other religions but with deficient and imperfect form which is different from the truth and salvation of the one particular religion (Jose M. Vigil, 2008, p. 60). This signifies that the truth and the salvation in others are comparatively inferior to truth and salvation belonging to one true religion. It is to accept only one religion as true in which people can participate the truth and the salvation perfectly in this regard.

With the terms of “Religious pluralism”, it has positively a meaning, especially for the society with diversified backgrounds, traditions and faiths, for example. To put it more precisely about this term, Global Centre for Pluralism gave a definition thereof as saying, “Pluralism rejects division as a necessary outcome of diversity, seeking instead to identify the qualities and experiences that unite rather than divide us as people and to forge a shared stake in the public good” (Global Centre for Pluralism, 2012, p. 1).

So, pluralism aims at unification of people rather division of them. Regardingly, pluralism is widely utilized in various attitudes such as political pluralism, legal pluralism etc. What is about religious pluralism? There are four meanings for religious pluralism:

- (a) empirical religious diversity,
- (b) normative ideas about the positive value of religious diversity,
- (c) the frameworks of public policy, law and social practices which, recognize, accommodate, regulate and facilitate religious diversity,
- d) the social relational contexts of everyday interactions between individuals and groups in settings where religious differences are considered relevant (Giordan Giuseppe, 2014, p. 21).

With regard to the meanings above, it obviously indicates the significance of religious pluralism covering aspect of life of people that is the diversity of practice, religious value, morality, and equality. Also, it can harmonize people and bring happiness to their life eventually.

4. Practical Ways of Harmony on Religions

It is extremely believed that all religion, especially the religion included in the kind of religious pluralism, has main aim on how to be good, liberty, live with others happily and peacefully. In addition, the founders of each religion always teach the discipline of peace arisen

by harmony that brings happiness to people in society. The point is how to practically harmonize on religions so as to eliminate their conflict and bring them happiness when there is religious diversity in society in which people in there live their life based on the diversity. First of all, religious leaders should cordially come out to enhance mutual understanding and sharing mutual responsibility of peace and happiness to society including preventing whatever might be a cause of conflict and preserving given harmony.

According to Buddhism, harmony is said to be the main factor of happiness as Buddha's word, "Harmony of people can bring happiness to them (*Sukhā sanghassa samaggi*)" (John Ross Carter, and Mahinda Palihawadana, 2000, 194). Among the different faiths of each religion because of different backgrounds of them, undesirable situation might arise when they confront each other because of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of other religious faiths in some respect. With this, so as to harmonize them, Buddhism turns to use "a patience (*khanti*)" in order to debar conflict purposely which might arise in this regard, for it is practically considered as the best moral practice as saying in *Dhammapada*:

Khanti paramam tapo titikekka

nibbanam paramam vadanti buddha

The best moral practice is patience

and forbearance; "Nibbana is Supreme",

said the Buddhas (John Ross Carter, and Mahinda

Palihawadana, 2000, 184).

The purpose of using the discipline of patient is to get trained to have mindfulness and change a harsh emotion to calmness when violent confrontation is supposed to unfortunately arise. Besides, Buddhism has a strategy to cultivate mind with loving-kindness and pervade it to others, regardless race, religion, tradition, or whatever people in society differently belong to.

Also, conflict might cause from misunderstanding a true reality of the religions. In this point, according to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, one of the well-known Buddhist monks in Thailand, there are two languages used by two kinds of people; one is the conventional languages that the ordinary people speak which is called "People language; (Buddhdāsa Bhikkhu, 2020, p. 2) the other is Dhamma language which is spoken by those who understand a true reality (*dhammā*) ((Buddhdāsa Bhikkhu, 2020, p. 2). Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (2020) clearly indicates the differences of the ordinary people and the people who understand the reality (*dhammā*) that the ordinary people who are blind to the true reality (*dhammā*) can speak only the people language, called as the conventional language in other ways; but people who have genuinely realized a true reality

(*dhamma*) can speak either language, whether conventional or dhamma language (Buddhdāsa Bhikkhu, 2020, p. 2). Conflict might arise because of the ordinary people when they have ignorance about the reality of religion that they might think that there are many religions, each of them is difference and opposed to each other. As a result, they might consider that all these religions, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, are different, separate, and incompatible; then, they turn these religions into enemies (Buddhdāsa Bhikkhu, 2020, p. 3). For those who have genuinely penetrated the nature of religions regarding all religions as same; it is inwardly same (Buddhdāsa Bhikkhu, 2020, p. 3). According to him, when he said “No religion”, the ordinary people might say that it is impossible as there are various kinds of religions such as Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism. With this, the ordinary people take the external appearance as their decision which they can see. But for those who have penetrated the highest level of understanding a true reality might say, “Yes”. According to them, the thing called “religion” doesn’t exist; no Buddhism, no Christianity, no Islam, no Hinduism, no Sikhism, no Taoism, but only a certain nature which we put a name and call it. It might be called “Dhamma”, “Truth”, “God”, “Tao”, but should not put all these as Buddhism, Christianity, etc. (Buddhdāsa Bhikkhu, 2020, p. 5).

According to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the word “no religion” is Dhamma language of the highest level (Buddhdāsa Bhikkhu, 2020, p. 3) in which the ordinary people might not be able to understand its exact meaning; only the those who have already penetrated and understood a true reality can. So, according to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, in the view of those who have penetrated a true reality, all are only the natural phenomenon (*dhammas*). When the true reality has been approached, no more the thing called “religion” or “individual person”, only the natural phenomenon (*dhammas*); then, conflict will not come, here is only happiness as it comes to complete cessation of suffering as he said:

Please try to understand this correctly. When the final level is reached, when the ultimate is known, not even man exists. There is only nature, only Dhamma. This reality can’t be considered to be any particular thing; it can’t be anything other than Dhamma. It can’t be Thai, Chinese, Indian, Arab, or European. It can’t be black, brown, yellow, red, or white. It can’t be eastern or western, southern or northern. Nor can it be Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, or anything else. So please try to reach this Dhamma, for then you will have reached the heart of all religions and of all things, and finally come to the complete cessation of suffering (Buddhdāsa Bhikkhu, 2020, p. 6).

According to Sri Ramakrishna (2009) in the point of religious harmony, he comes out with the idea *dharmā-samānvaya* or harmony of religions (Swami Bhajananda, 2008, p. 28). It is said that he talked about the principle of *dharmā-samānvaya* (religious harmony) not only the concept, but from his direct experience as he used to practice with various traditions. According to him, in the

terms of spiritual experiences, he accepts the way other religions practice as it is also the way to realize the absolute truth. If people follow his religious practice with faith, sincerity, and purity of mind, surely, he can attain direct spiritual experience (Swami Bhajananda, 2008, p. 29). So, each religion has different traditions and practical ways, but same main purpose in different names as he said:

“Truth is one; only it is called by different names. All people are seeking the same Truth; the variance is due to climate, temperament, and name. A lake has many ghats.

From one *Ghat* the Hindus take water in jars and call it ‘jal’. From another Ghat the Mussalmans take water in leather bags and call it ‘pani’. From a third the Christians take the same thing and call it ‘water’. (All laugh.) Suppose someone says that the thing is not ‘jal’ but ‘pani’, or that it is not ‘pani’ but ‘water’, or that it is not ‘water’ but ‘jal’. It would indeed be ridiculous. But this very thing is at the root of the friction among sects, their misunderstandings and quarrels. This is why people injure and kill one another, and shed blood, in the name of religion. But this is not good. Everyone is going toward God. They will all realize Him if they have sincerity and longing of heart” (Mahendranath Gupta, 1942, pp. 1208-9).

So, to exactly understand each other in term of religion, we should do through the eyes of the followers of those religions, but not to judge other religions based on the standard of one’s own religion and criticize any of them (Swami Bhajananda, 2008), pp. 29-30). All of these are background of Sri Ramakrishna’s doctrine of *dharma-samanvaya* (harmony of religions) which has five main tenets as stated:

1. The ultimate reality is only one but is known by different names in different religions; it is personal as well as impersonal (Swami Bhajananda, 2008), pp. 30-31).

In this point, according to Sri Ramakrishna, ultimate reality is both personal and impersonal and it is known by different names in different religions; it is the one and the same. But it is different only in name and form. It likes the name of water in different traditional call; the Hindu call *jal*, Mussalmans call it *pāni*, Christians call it *water*. All denote the same thing, but different in name only (Swami Bhajananda, 2008, pp. 32-34).

2. Realization of the ultimate Reality is the true goal and purpose of human life. It is also the central purpose of all religions. It is this direct transcendent experience that gives validity to religions, and not books (Swami Bhajananda, 2008, p. 31).

In this point, according to him, all religions have a main purpose that is how to realize the ultimate truth. But, the way to realize this might be different; some might realize even in the present birth; some might be after death. Exactly, he states that to realize the ultimate reality is a primary

purpose of all religions, not rituals, mythology, customs, etc. (Swami Bhajananda, 2008, p. 33). Sri Ramakrishna compares this with people wanting to eat mangoes. The people should go to the mango garden and find the mangoes to eat directly, not to count the mango trees, branches, or leaves as all these are not main purpose; it wastes time as he said:

“I say, O Podo (my foolish boy), eat these mangoes! What is the use of counting how many mango-trees there are in the garden, how many thousands of branches, how many millions of leaves, and so on? You are here to eat the mangoes. Eat them and go away” (Swāmi Abhedānanda, Joseph A. Fitzgerald (ed.), 2011, p. 435).

3. There are several paths to the realization of the ultimate reality. Each

religion is such a path. *Yata mat tata path*, ‘As many faiths, so many paths’. As paths lead to the same ultimate goal, all world religions are valid and true (Swami Bhajananda, 2008, p. 31).

In this point, Sri Ramakrishna (1952) indicates that although there are many ways to practice for realizing the ultimate truth, God or whatever is so called, any way can lead to realize the truth if they practice with sincere heart as he states, “As many faiths, so many paths and you will realize the divine Lord through any spiritual practice performed with a sincere heart” (Swami Saradananda, 1952, p. 149).

4. Each person should remain steadfast in his own path in a spirit of

istanisthā, without thinking that his path alone is true and perfect (Swami Bhajananda, 2008, p. 3).

In this point, Sri Ramakrishna needs (1942) everyone to follow their own path to realize the ultimate truth, not try on several path. To follow several paths might not be able to succeed. By this, he compares with people who need water and try to dig the wall in various places as saying:

“Worldly people have no grit. If they succeed in an undertaking, it is all right, but if they don’t succeed, it scarcely bothers them at all. When they need water, they begin to dig a well. But as soon as they strike a stone, they give up digging there and begin at another place. Perhaps they come to a bed of sand. Finding nothing but sand, they give that place up too. How can they succeed in getting water unless they continue to dig persistently where they started?” ((Mahendranath Gupta, 1942, p. 603).

5. One should show respect to the founders of all religions as special manifestations of God and, knowing that God dwells in all people, one should serve all without any distinctions of caste, creed, race, etc. (Swami Bhajananda, 2008, p. 31).

Sri Ramakrishna (2011) believes that everyone is same and equal as God available in them all; without God no beings; so, we should love each other, not discriminate them, as he said, “No,

my friend, do not go so far as that. You should love everyone; no one is a stranger; God dwells in all beings; without Him nothing can exist” (Swāmi Abhedānanda, Joseph A. Fitzgerald (ed.), 2011, p. 82).

Conclusion

Among the society with religious diversity and differences, people live their life carefully the purpose of which is to get peace and happiness to their life. Religion is one of main factors of social structure in which people in the society live their life based on the given religion thereby applying the religious principle to their life. So as to live the life peacefully and happily among the diversity and differences of religions, religious leaders play essential roles to encourage and guild the people to understand their religious principles and practices in this regard in the right way. The religious leaders themselves should understand the facts of religions and follow them practically. The facts of each religion are to cultivate peace and bring happiness to society. In this, among the religious diversity and differences in which people in the society belong to, it is only way to live the life therein peacefully and happily that is harmony, especially the harmony of religions. The starting point of harmonizing people in term of religions as they live the life based on the principles is to understand the religious principles rightly so as to prevent a conflict caused by different faiths. With this, it is duty of the religious leaders to suggest them. In this point, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu gives the principle of “no religion”. According to him, if people have intelligently approached the true reality of things (*dhammas*), then, they can realize that no more the thing called “religion” or “individual person”, only the natural phenomenon (*dhammas*); then, conflict will not come, here is only happiness. Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna has reasonably given the principle of *dharma-samanvaya* or harmony of religions. According to him, each religious principle and people are equal; each religion has different traditions and practical ways, but same main purpose, for example, the ultimate reality is only one but is known by different names in different religions. In this point, he gives the practical idea, “As many faiths, so many paths, *Yata mat tata path*”.

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