Religion in the Development of Peace and Harmony in India with special reference to Islam

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ABSTRACT

The religion has often been 'portrayed in dual terms' either in the state of conflict or its resolution. In the case of violence or of reconciliation, it is considered as source. The infamous intricacy of the subject reveals that there is no common and general understanding of the central theme of religion. It is observed that the religious motivations and factors vary in each case in their apparent ways and extent to implicate different aspect of religion in the violence and vice versa. Context becomes crucial to understand its role in the situations of conflict. The religion is always a complex and interwoven system of variables, which is based upon many different contextual and historical factors.

This paper attempts to find a general understanding and application of 'religion', that is often applied to different situations, ideologies, actors and institutions. Efforts have been made to get it understand and experience by doctrines rather than by individual's actions. To understand the potential role of religion in both conflict and peace building measures, it is necessary to review it operations and interactions with different aspects of human experience. This paper does not aim to provide a definite solution to such violence that has infested our society. Instead, it reflects on our way of scrutiny that we use to deal with the matters of conflict. It is also a humble attempt at presenting some intellectual understanding of the concept of 'religion' in context of conflict and its resolution.

This exercise contains a literature review, which aims to capitalise the works and experiences of scholar in different academic disciplines, including social philosophies and other literatures.

Key Words: Religion, Violence, Peace, Harmony and Islam.

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Introduction

India is a country, unique in its geo-political history, socio-economic characteristics and institutional capacities as it provides a multitude of religions and their interplay. "Religion is understood to be a system of beliefs and values that practically reflects in rituals, practices, and institutions. However, such an understanding leaves ample rooms to imbibe those traditions that do not revolve around a single God and tend to function as philosophies of life. It is difficult to produce a definition broad enough without incorporating phenomena that are not normally thought of as religion" (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013, p-431).

In such context, religion is best understood as "a conceptual and moral framework for understanding and ordering lives and communities" (Skidmore 2007, p-4). "When beliefs and values are held in common and rituals are performed in congregation it gives rise to a sense of commonality and a religious community comes into existence" (Engineer, 2003).

It is more clear in the argument forwarded by Ernest Gellner (1992, p-3) that "what really matters is not doctrine but ritual, loyalty to procedural rules and celebrations of community". It reflects that shared values and commitment cannot be negated and is equally worthy of intellectual and cognitive dimensions of faith. This is because "the 'substantive' approach to religion needs to be complemented by 'functional' approach". The 'substantive' approach deals with the scriptures, theologies, doctrines, and values and beliefs attached with the religion. Whereas "the 'functional' approach, highlights that religion provides the people with the sources of identity, morality, law and order, or links them together into communities" (Silvestri S & Mayall J, 2015, p-5).

It is so to observe how faith is interlocked with practice, resulting into the visible effects on individual or group's behaviour. It is also necessary to include "the role of 'invisible' presence of religion" in everyday life (Luckmann, 1967).

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the concept of religion.
2. To study and compare the potentialities and influences of religion in India.
3. To analyse the role of religion in the development of Peace and harmony

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Design/ Method of the Study

Due to the intricacy of the subject matter the study is qualitative and interpretive in nature. This exercise contains a literature review, which aims to capitalise the works and experiences of scholar in different academic disciplines, including social philosophies and other literatures. The researcher also examines the roles of civil society in conflict and its resolution. For practical purposes the literature review has been organised to focus into three aspects. The first aspect covers the overview of religion and its relationship with the conflict. The second analyses the potentialities and influences of religion in a delimited space as India and the third looks it as a potential harbinger of peace and harmony with special reference of Islam.

The delimited space is unique in geo-political history, socio-economic characteristics and institutional capacities as it provides a multitude of religions and their interplay. It is significant in the respect that it offers examples of a large number of conflicts involving religion. It is presumed that many of the conflicts are due to political maneuverings yet religion is branded as central to the conflict.

The aim is to identify those salient attributes of the religion that has been exaggerated as cause of violence. It is to unravel the myth of religion induced violence to understand different conditions, ideologies and practices due to which violent conflicts emerge and spread.

Analysis and Interpretation

Conflict

Conflict "is an expression of the heterogeneity of interests, values and beliefs that arise as new formations generated by social change which is intrinsic and inevitable" (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2005, p-13). Manifestation of conflict as directly harming or killing is not the only way but it is hidden in those ideas that shape people's attitude and socio-economic and juridical system (Galtung, 1969). Attitude, intertwined with perception, is considered as one of "the factors that can trigger religious conflict" (Wolff 2006). Galtung asserts that "it is not surprising that perceptions of prejudice, victimhood, and discrimination are central in the dynamics of structural, physical and cultural violence", whether religion is involved or not. For the matter he categorises between 'positive peace'- "the absence of indirect and structural

violence, and 'negative' peace- the absence of direct violence to analyse situations of peace and conflict" (Galtung1964).

Religion induced conflict

Religion is often branded as a main instigator of conflict. The basis of the link between faith and conflict is justified by those religious identities that create potent boundaries and provoke confrontation to claim that they are protecting some truth. They use the "religion as a cause of violence through discrimination and exclusion".

Indian religions are distinct in their belief system, rituals and cultural practices. "Aggressive assertion of these distinctions or differences often results in socio-political confrontation because religion provides a strong sense of belongingness and a sense of identity to its followers" (Chandra, 1984: 13–15; Engineer, 1989: 93–6). Such differences are easily converted into conflicts by political elites for their own vested interest. Pramod Kumar (1992: p-57) argues, "communal stereotypes claim that all Sikhs are martial and distinctive; all Muslims are uncouth and brutal; all Hindus are expansionists and money minded. In other words, communalism highlights only those aspects of religions that are antagonistic toward each other rather than those aspects that endorse humanistic and universal principles". Hence, political elites distort and manipulate religion to project a perceived threat to their identity and articulate their own interests. In case of crisis of loyalty, political elites easily manage communal card on spiritually loaded issues to capture power.

Pre and post-independence India witnessed a variety of incidents whose foundation rests on religion. During "pre-independence period many Hindu organizations surfaced to consolidate Hindu identity to counter Islam and Christianity" (Mujahid, 1970: 41–60; Prasad, 1999: 197–254; Hansen, 1999:71–81). On the other hand, Muslim organizations focused primarily to access national resources under British control to compete with Hindus as they were in a dominating position (Prasad, 2000: 49–90). Identity consolidation efforts of Hindu communalists faced doubled edged road block. "Due to their inability to penetrate across caste boundaries they could not achieve their objective while caste reform movements limited their ability to organise Hindus under one umbrella of religion" (Desai, 1966: 243–72).

"The British took advantage of all these tensions to sustain their power in India and played off Muslim feudal elites against the Hindu elites. The partition of Bengal in 1905 and the creation of

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a Muslim Province were part of colonial strategy. The Morley-Minto Reforms Act of 1909, separate electorate for Muslims in1926, the Simon Commission Report of 1930, the Reform Act of 1933 and so on further intensified the communal predicament. The British started characterising political identities on a religious basis and transposed them into the constitutional arena" (Chandra, 1984: 237–89, Quoted in Communalist and Separatism in India an Analysis by Pandey A, *Journal of Asian and African Studies,* Vol. 42(6): 533–549, ND, India).

In the course of nationalist movement two nations theory emerged when "congress refused to accept Jinnah as sole spokesman of Muslims. Jinnah felt ignored and humiliated by congress" (Qureshi, 1988: 71–113; Zakaria, 1995: 64–78). Thus it paved way for him to criticise congress as party of Hindus and to use religion as his main instrument to mobilise Muslim masses. The Muslim community was successfully tempted on economic interest and Islamic brotherhood. "The projection of Islamic brotherhood was further strengthened by the concept of one God, one religious book (the Quran) and the Prophet Mohammad, on the one hand, and the role of the mosque, Hajj and Congregation, on the other. This collective sense of belonging was further reinforced by Jinnah when he proclaimed the slogan that Islam is in Danger" (Hasan, 1979: 19–27). The ideologically and politically loaded historical context of the entire course of freedom movement reflects that religion was most strategically employed to promote the clashing interests of the political elites including Britishers who felt safe to divide and rule tactics.

Galtung (1969) argues "that religion often becomes the source of 'cultural violence' to legitimise other forms of violence". He further states that religion, ideology, language and ethnicity usually make a web of think pattern that fosters conditions of discrimination and exclusion. It usually resulted into attacks on religious minorities and their sacred places. Besides, Sundhir Kakar (1996) substantiates it with the changing context of the society like multiculturalism, and pressures of modernity that provides moral and religious sanction to violence. It was further strengthened by Stewart F (2008) "that in multicultural societies usually violent conflicts take place if there exist major horizontal inequalities among the culturally defined groups. Because such inequalities coincide with economic and political differences that give rise to resentment and violent struggles".

In such multiplicity of factors, religion becomes easy tool to influence the interplay of the conflicts and increases its magnitude. However different religions have different potentials to be used for violence.

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Religion's potentials for peace and harmony

Cavanaugh (2009) asserts that religion as force of violent conflict is a myth constructed by Western Societies and constantly being reconfigured to legitimise their intervention. According to Oxford historian Diarmaid MacCulloch (2004), "religion as a concept imposed on human behaviour by Christianity and especially its Protestant variant. He highlights that the Protestant concept of religion became an instrument of intellectual hegemony because of the spectacular reach and power of the British Empire and the United States (US). The religious appellative 'Hinduism', for example, is an invention of the British Protestants administering India in the early nineteenth century as they were coming to terms with the rich variety of cultures, philosophies, spiritual practices and observances of the sub-continent".

Galtung argues that, in general, "Hinduism rejects both forms of violence and thus has a large potential for peace. However, Hinduism is less than explicit about rejecting direct (physical) violence, and it also tolerates and promotes structural (cultural) violence through its caste system. Islam rejects a societal caste system (structural violence), but is prone to promote direct violence through its doctrine obliging all its followers to defend the faith". However he agrees on possibilities of counter examples and potentials of different religions to promote peace.

Chappell (1999) "enlarged the understanding of Buddhist peacemaking traditions. Starting from and underlining the central role of achieving inner peace, he emphasises that Buddhism has a strong track record of providing peaceful answers to social and political violence, However, others critique Buddhism for being too much of an individualistic tradition that does not really stress the importance of being at peace with the others".

Peace is always the main concern of human beings and which is the essence of all religions. In the absence of peace, man's transformation into noble personality remains bleak. All the good things that a religion wants to instill in human life can be introduced only in peaceful climate. Spiritual and character development, educational activities, social upliftment, worship and prayer can be performed only in peaceful conditions.

To achieve this, religious values, institutions and practices need a deep and thorough understanding of traditional and historical approaches employed especially on the issues of war and peace and its interpretations of different religions.

Islam, the harbinger of Peace and harmony

The harmonious character of faith and peace in Islam can easily be understood when we start with the life Hereafter. It is only the belief in the Hereafter, the continuity of life even beyond man's bodily death and the Law of just Requital that can discipline the human ego to a responsible behaviour. "This belief is directly correlated with the other ' four beliefs, e.i. the belief in the Unity of Allah (with all its extended implications); the belief in Cosmic powers as Allah's Agents at work; the belief in the truth of Revelation, (perfected and finalised in the Holy Qur'an), and the belief in the veracity of the Holy Messengers of Allah whose long line ended with Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)". All these beliefs are so closely inter-related and fused into 'one whole' that a disbelief in any one part thereof tantamount to disbelief in all the others. Technically this 'one whole' is called faith, by all standards of judgment.

The starting verse of the Qur'an reads as *In the name of Allah (the God), the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate* and in the whole Qur'an it has been repeated 114 times. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan explains this verse as "the God of Islam is the God of mercy and compassion and the book of Islam too is book of mercy. Hence the people of Islam must also possess the quality of mercy and compassion", otherwise they will fall short of true believers. The Holy Qur'an reflects either directly or indirectly the spirit of peace. Qur'an says, "*and God calls to the home of peace" (Q, 10:25)*. It reveals that all its teachings are oriented to towards the goal of peace.

Many verses of the Qur'an reveals about "the objects and events of the universe as signs of nature. The universe appears as a model of peace and harmony. In the space, there are countless astronomical bodies in motion coursing their defined orbit without the slightest deviation. Qur'an asks human beings to follow this phenomenon which reflects the course of peace. To move in one's defined orbit and not trespass" (Q, 3:83). Violent acts of any radical group by resorting to Islamic sources does not justify their acts as good or prove that Islamic principles are inherently violent.

Allah Commands the human beings through the Holy Qur'an as:

"Do not by your oaths make Allah a hindrance to your being righteous and observing your duty to Him and making peace among mankind". (Q, 2:224)

"Disturb not the peace of the earth after the fair ordering thereof by God". (Q, 7:56)

"Do not mischief on earth". (Q, 7:50)

"Killing one human being is akin to killing all of mankind". (Q, 5:32)

The prophet Mohammad (PBUH) was an ardent promoter of peace and reconciliation that's why he always wanted to maintain it even at the cost of unilateral adjustment. Prophet was whole heartedly involved in the communication of divine message to the people, which required an environment of peace and good will to communicate effectively. He is reported to have said that:

"God grants to peace what He doesn't grant to violence". (Muslim, 2593)

"A Muslim is one from whose tongue and hands people are safe". (Tirmidhi)

"Do good to those who harm you", (Tirmidhi)

"One, who betrays, harms, or deceives a Muslim, is not of us". (Muslim, 101,102)

He gives description of an ideal Muslim as:

"A Muslim is one from whose hand and tongue people are safe. A believer is one from whom people know that their wealth and lives are safe". (Bukhari, Iman: 3, 5 & Muslim, Iman: 64, 65)

Thus it becomes clear that Islam is strongly a religion of peace and denounces every attempt that either promote or support violence. The act of violence or fissiparous tendencies widespread in the contemporary world has neither been justified from the Quran nor from the prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Abu-Nimer (2003), a Muslim scholar, argues "that Islam is based on fundamental human values encoded in the Holy Qur'an, Hadith (Islamic traditions) and related religious writings. Based on those values, Muslim societies have developed a considerable set of non-violent tools for conflict resolution and peace building". Third party mediation and arbitration form strong mechanisms for dispute resolution among the traditional Arab-Muslims. Traditional reconciliation methods also come under such mechanism to strengthen the value of forgiveness and public repentance.

"The concept of social justice is a fundamental tool in Islam to mobilise the Muslim brotherhood. According to Islam, a nation cannot survive without making fair and adequate arrangements for the sustenance and welfare of all the poor, underprivileged, and destitute members of every community. The ultimate goal would be the elimination of their suffering and poverty. It can

thus be argued that Islam is well suited to fighting against structural violence. Islamic values are based on universal dignity of humanity, the equality of all races, ethnic groups, and the sacredness of human life and forgiveness are values that underpin any form of positive conflict resolution and help to build peaceful societies" (Abu-Nimer 2003).

The Qur'an says "*Fight in the way of God those who are fighting against you; and do not exceed (the limits). Verily Allah does not love those who exceed (the limits)"* (Q, 2:190). Abu-Nimer (2003) "explains how Islam developed a theory of de facto just war principles, War is permissible in self-defense, and under well-defined limits. When undertaken, it must be pushed with vigour (but not relentlessly), but only to restore peace and freedom of worship of Allah. In any case, strict limits must not be transgressed: women, children, old and infirm men should not be molested, nor trees and crops cut down, nor peace withheld when the enemy comes to terms".

The portrayal of Islam as a religion of violence by citing the word *Jihad* is based on ignorance or sinister designs. In Islam, there is no concept of holy war; instead the meaning of jihad is *struggle*, more specifically a peaceful struggle. The word jihad has been derived from the "Arabic word 'Juhd' which actually means to struggle, to strive, to exert oneself to the utmost to achieve one's goal. Therefore, in the Islamic sense, Jihad means to struggle or to strive in the way of God". (khanam F: 2014) Qur'an says "*and make jihad on them, with the help of the Qur'an"* (Q, 25:52). Nowhere it mentions 'with the help of the sword'. Such proclamation may be understood as a peaceful activism along Islamic lines.

Al-Farabi (874-950), a renowned Muslim philosopher, maintains the distinction between *war* and *jihad* in his writings. "War is only one form of jihad, which refers to military action. The true essence of jihad for al-Farabi is the internal struggle within one's soul between the forces of reason, on the one hand, and one's desires on the other, with the aim of the first to control or moderate the second so that virtue may prevail" (Parens J: 2006). This clearly indicates that the jihad for justice is based on moral concept of responsibility to Allah

Conclusions

The religion has often been 'portrayed in dual terms' either in the state of conflict or its resolution. In the case of violence or of reconciliation, it is considered as source. The infamous intricacy of the subject reveals that there is no common and general understanding of the central theme of religion. It is to note that religious aspects and motivations differ, in its apparent ways

and extent, in each case, where religion has been implicated in any violence or vice versa. To acknowledge its role in conflict situation, context always appears crucial. The religion is a system of variables, complex and dependent on varying contextual and historical factors.

It is one of the difficult tasks to make an analysis of the relationships between faith and conflict. Even after an exhaustive review of available literature to understand the nature of violence and its connection with belief system, the features of religion and interpretive trends stand questionable. The study of available literature reflects that religion plays a significant role in the situations of conflict, whether it is prevention or resolution or triggering peace building process. But it requires time to understand intricate interplay of religious aspects in each context. Apart from context dependence, it is also loaded with attributes of culture projected through rituals, communal identity, holy scriptures, institutional norms or one's inner self.

There is no tangible evidence on any parameter that declares about any religion as prone to conflicts or high in the peace making than others. But it is a matter of serious concern for an individual or community members to attend to the enabling factors of conflict to initiate a religious discourse. At the same time, it is imperative to be intellectually aware and ready to embrace the fact that in all cases, religion is not relevant in the conflict or peace dynamics.

It is difficult to ascertain about the relationship between religion and conflict or peace. It is neither uni-dimensional nor static. Hence, it is imperative for the policy managers to be sensible in the selection of parameters for the purpose of evaluating a situation of potential or actual conflict. "Contextual variables (historical, socio-economic, and cultural) affect outcomes recognising the role of religion and other interlocking issues (e.g. state failure, dynamics of dependency, etc.) related to conflict and peace". There are conflicts where religion seems a causal factor but not by the virtue of its doctrines rather political maneuver works most. It is the power capturing ambitions of the opportunistic leaders who trigger the emotional card so that they can achieve their aims.

Religion acts as a means to obtain orientation and guidance for the members of a society. It provides to the members of the society to create meaning and understand the conflict drivers. Gopin (2000) argued that "the policymakers need to develop and actively promote the potential of religions to cope with violence and overcome conflict, that religions can help societies to develop a shared vision of joint responsibility and commitment, and that the in-depth study of religious value systems can help us to better understand conflict drivers within religions, and

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eventually turn them into peace building factors". Principles, norms and rules within a society can easily be decoded and deciphered through religion and thus it can be an effective tool to understand the perceptions and values of the conflict actors (Galtung 2012). "He believes that different religions can be a catalyst to resolve different forms of violence. Buddhism, for example, provides tools to combat direct violence; Islam can be used to contain structural violence. However, more research needs to be done to fully reflect the lessons from different religions". Stückelberger (2012) also warns that "excluding religion may be a technique to postpone problems without a solution. Integrating religion at the appropriate time can pre-empt the emergence of violent tendencies before it is too late".

Abu-Nimer (2003), seems right in his argument about the ignorance of many of the Muslims to tackle the conflicting issues. Islamic tenets are based fundamentally on humane concepts and has devised a good range of non-violent tools to combat conflict. Due to lack of appropriate and sufficient knowledge about the Islamic traditions and experiences, as a tool to capitalize it, their advances in the of peace building are fragile.

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