

# **Inter-Religious Dialogue through Social Media in Purview of UNESCO's Declaration on Religion**

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## **Religion**

According to Michael E. McCullough and Brian L. B. Willoughby, "Religion is a potent social force. History testifies to religion's ability to focus and coordinate human effort, to create awe and terror, to foster war and peace, to unify social groups, and to galvanize them against each other. In addition to religion's social power, however, religion is a psychological force that can influence the outcomes of individual human lives" (McCullough and Willoughby, 2009). Michael also finds religion to be a "cognition, affect, and behavior that arise from awareness of, or perceived interaction with, supernatural entities that are presumed to play an important role in human affairs" (Ibid). Whereas for American anthropologist, Geertz, religion is "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz, 1973). Whereas Aloyse Raymond Ndiaye finds religion to be a link that "unites the spirit of piety, belief in God, faith in god and community spirit, that is, the social and historical organization of worship. These two features are essential, so that we cannot give the name religion to a belief in God that is not embodied in an institution, a religious community" (Ndiaye, 2009).

## **Religion- Cause of Violent Conflict**

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, social scientists thought that religion would have no role to play in modern society and denied the possibility of conflicts due to religion. Processes like urbanization, economic development, modern social institutions, growing rates of literacy and education, pluralism and advancements in science and technology would lead to decline of religion in politics (Fox, 2004; Healy, 2005). But, according to Jonathan Fox

The acts of Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda, including the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001; the Iranian revolution; the worldwide rise of religious fundamentalism; religious rebel-lions and opposition

movements throughout the Islamic world; religio-political movements like the liberation theology movement in Latin America; and ethno-religious conflicts like those in Chechnya, East Timor, Tibet, Sudan, and Sri Lanka” (Fox, 2004) ruled out the demise of religion and ascertain that still religion is an essential element of modern political and social phenomena.

Famous political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington in his classic “The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order” explains how religion is still very important and could be major cause of conflicts between states. He says that:

In the modern world, religion is a central, perhaps the central, force that motivates and mobilizes people. It is sheer hubris to think that because Soviet communism has collapsed, the West has won the world for all time and that Muslims, Chinese, Indians, and others are going to rush to embrace Western liberalism as the only alternative. The Cold War division of humanity is over. The more fundamental divisions of humanity in terms of ethnicity, religions, and civilizations remain and spawn new conflicts (Huntington, 1996).

The statement of Samuel that is still debated across the academicians of social sciences is “clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world war” (Ibid). By civilizations, he means religion because further defining what he means by civilizations, he says

A civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species. It is defined both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people (Ibid).

Further Samuel clarifies that religion is the epicenter of civilization by saying that “Religion is a central defining characteristic of civilizations’ (Ibid). Agreeing to Samuel, Jonathan Fox quoting Huntington and other scholars argue that religion is strongly linked to violence:

For instance, Huntington argues that historical factors like the end of the Cold War have released the previously muffled potential of religion to cause violence. Some, like Juergensmeyer and Girard, argue that violence is an intrinsic

element of religion. Finally, especially in the wake of 11 September 2001 but also before that date, religion has been identified as one of the major motivations for terrorism (Fox, 2004).

Andreas Hasenclever and Alexander De Juan, cites three reasons for violent religious conflicts, -religious differences, religious polarizations and perceived threats to religious traditions. Describing each one briefly, they state that

Violence through *religious differences* occurs when religious heterogeneous societies with non-disputable religious dogmas exist rather than religious homogenous societies. Violence through *religious polarizations* takes place because of specific religious constellations, like a bipolar structure, while fragmented religious groups are not that dangerous. Violence through *perceived threats to religious traditions* occurs, if the faithful perceive it to be threatened by either another religion or a secular ideology (Hasenclever and Juan, 2007).

Deeply concerned with the rising religious extremism, UNESCO in its declaration on the role of religion in the promotion of a culture of peace (Smock, 2006) had to admit that "Religions have contributed to the peace of the world, but they have also led to division, hatred, and war. Religious people have too often betrayed the high ideals they themselves have preached". Also religion has an "indispensable role to play in this most critical time". Talking about the religious responsibility, the declaration said "We will promote dialogue and harmony between and within religions, recognizing and respecting the search for truth and wisdom that is outside our religion; We will establish dialogue with all, striving for a sincere fellowship on our earthly pilgrimage." Further the declaration appeals that

Grounded in our faith, we will build a culture of peace based on non-violence, tolerance, dialogue, mutual understanding, and justice. We call upon the institutions of our civil society, the United Nations System, governments, governmental and non-governmental organizations, corporations, and the mass media, to strengthen their commitments to peace and to listen to the cries of the victims and the dispossessed. We call upon the different religious and cultural traditions to join hands together in this effort, and to cooperate with us in spreading the message of peace.

Thus we can see that UNECSO stresses the need for dialogue between different religions to build peace.

## **Religion's Peace Building Potential: Conceptual Framework**

From the definition of religion defined earlier in this chapter, it can be deduced that religion is something that has to be intrinsically associated to an institution or a community. And community consists of people making religion a powerful entity.

Religious animosities triggered violent conflicts in many parts of the world, especially in late 90's and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fox, 2004). September 11, 2001 became the trigger point of discussion of religion as peace builder or religion as disseminator of religious violence, religious fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism (Appleby and Sivan, 2012; Smock, 2006). According to Stephan Healy, "the post-9/11 era has altered the moral landscape, and standard ethical and legal replies to moral questions are not sufficient" (Healey, 2005). Scholars and thinkers in consonance with the UNESCO's theme of peace and religion started thinking about finding a process based on non-violence, faith and tolerance that could help in diffusing religious tensions between different religious sects.

According to Thomas Scheffler, Religious Peacebuilding can be broadly defined as "stabilizing the peace after the end of a violent religious conflict" (Scheffler, 2007). Aloyse Raymond Ndiaye talks about friendly coexistence between followers of different faith and religion. According to him:

Friendly coexistence implies sympathy with others, understanding of others, love for others. This is what characterizes toleration. Indeed it requires that we go beyond accepting others' existence to the point of acknowledging what makes them different, that is, what makes them have a different viewpoint, a different belief, a different faith, a different origin from ourselves. It implies the need to go beyond simple coexistence in indifference to the point of acknowledging and welcoming others (Ndiaye, 2009).

Aloyse emphasizes on the need of mutual tolerance between followers of different religions. He defines tolerance as "In concrete terms being tolerant means recognizing the plurality of beliefs. It means accepting that other beliefs are possible and that we are not the only ones possessing a truth conceived as the sole truth" (Ibid).

According to famous peace scholar J.Galtung "peace is the elimination of "structural violence," the eradication of unjust conditions of poverty, exploitation and oppression that impede common security, social equality, economic opportunity and human rights, and bring about violent conflicts and war itself" (Vaillancourt, 1991).

Mohammed Abu-Nimer, an expert on conflict resolution and dialogue for peace, is of the view that religion has the potential to build peace. He says that “Religion can also bring social, moral, and spiritual resources to the peace building process. The spiritual dimension in religious peace building can create a sense of engagement and a commitment both to peace conflict resolution” (Nimer, 2001).

### **Religiocentric to Religiorelative: A Model for Religious Transformation and Inter-Religious Peacebuilding**

To initiate the process of religious peace building, Mohammed Abu-Nimer coined terms like religiorelative and religiocentric in order to bring and build peace between two hostile religious communities that are in constant struggle with each other:

A religiorelative person is firm in his/her belief that other religions have the right to exist and be practiced, even if such norms and beliefs are contradictory to one's own set of religious beliefs. Such a person is prone not to engage in violence or discriminatory actions against the others. In contrast, a religiocentric person is a believer who denies other religions' “truth” and who holds an absolute truth that leaves no room for different religious practices. Such a person becomes more prone to dehumanize, exclude, and discriminate against other religious groups and individuals. Often, as a result of negative and destructive exposure and experience with conflict and war, religiocentric beliefs not only are exacerbated and easily translated into violence against the enemy (that is, the different other), but also actually grow and prohibit human and peaceful contact with the other. However, there are conflict resolution and peace-building activities and forums that can assist peace workers in such settings to transform a religiocentric into a religiorelative believer. To address this type of religious exclusion and religiocentrism, two possible frameworks are the interreligious encounter and interfaith activities ((Nimer, 2004).

### **Inter-Religious Dialogue**

To achieve, the transformation from religiocentric to religiorelative, Naber encourages inter-faith/inter-religious dialogue that create an atmosphere so that “the believer does not pass a negative judgment on the other religious beliefs or practices, but observes (or recognizes) the different religious and spiritual values, norms, rituals, and behaviors; understands their meaning; and accepts them as they are in their religious and cultural context” (Ibid).

Explaining the importance of dialogue to bring peace between religions, Thomas Scheffler quotes Hans Kung “There will be no peace between the civilizations without a peace between the religions! And there will be no peace between the religions without a dialogue between the religions”(Scheffler, 2007). However, he is critical

of interreligious dialogue in name of interreligious initiatives in certain situations like:

In multi-communal settings, religious symbols and doctrines often tend to become part of distinct ethnic identities that cannot easily be exposed to negotiations or to an open-ended dialogue. Under conditions of inter-communal distrust it is far easier to escalate conflicts than to deescalate them. Under these conditions peace-building interreligious initiatives are fighting an uphill battle. A tiny violent minority is sometimes sufficient to undo years of patient peace building and finally once a conflict has reached the stage of massive inter-communal violence, moderate, dialogue-oriented clerics on all sides run a high risk of being sidelined or silenced by more radical members of their own community. For example, in the wake of increasing Hindu-Muslim tensions on the Indian subcontinent, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a radical fellow Hindu in 1948 (Ibid).

However, Stephan Healey, in his paper, "Religion and Terror: A Post-9/11 Analysis", encourages Inter-Religious Dialogue and asks for training of Specialists who can conduct inter-Religious dialogue. He states that:

To engage in fruitful interreligious dialogue, everyday believers will need to learn how to recognize, challenge, and modify malignant tendencies in their own religions, and to engage with others in discussion about this. All religions possess resources to recognize enduring principles, accommodate change, and engage in self-correction, but too few of these resources have been made broadly available. In our time these potencies will need to be fully utilized. In short, rethinking religions in this manner will require theological analysis combined with broad awareness of the social histories of religions. Communities will do well to train specialists and to equip everyday believers in the area of interreligious dialogue (Healey, 2005).

Andreas Hasenclever and Alexander De Juan cite various examples, where dialogue helped in building peace between hostile religious communities.

In Israel, for example, the Israel Interfaith Association has facilitated reciprocal understanding and respect between religions and ethnicities since 1959. In the Philippines, different Muslim and Christian clerics have initiated dialogue and education

programs that aim to increase understanding among Christians of the needs of the Muslim minority in Mindanao. Imam Muhammed Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye have established the Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Interfaith Mediation Center in Nigeria. The Center aims to instill mutual respect for the cultural, religious and historical heritage of both religions (Hasenclever and Juan, 2007).

Similarly, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, focuses on Inter-religious Peacebuilding training. He believes that simple events that occur in day-to-day interactions can be used for peacebuilding. For example, during interreligious peace building training “the act of a Jewish person bringing a chair so that a Muslim person could sit down could be perceived as a gesture of reconciliation from Judaism to Islam” (Nimer, 2001). Sharing the same views, Gloria Rubin in her paper tells, how she was able to ease the atmosphere in context of the catastrophic tragedy of fall of twin towers:

On September 11, 2001 - I was scheduled to speak at a state-wide interfaith conference. When I arrived, I was told that participants knew that the Twin Towers had been attacked, but not that they had fallen. I was asked to make that announcement at the plenary session. An imam was to speak on the panel - a man I had not met. I knew the image of a rabbi and an imam together would be important in the days ahead. He agreed. What to do? I remembered a song Halima and I had taught religious school children in Hebrew and Arabic. After sharing the news, the imam and I sang, *Hayvaynu Shalom Aleichem; Ji'na Bi Salam 'Alaykum - We Brought Peace to You*. The entire conference soon joined us. Over the years that followed, I met or heard from many of the people who were present. They affirmed that our action began the process of healing (Rubin, 2008).

In interreligious peacebuilding, the major objective is to change the participants worldview, particularly attitudes and behaviors towards the ‘other’ (Nimer, 2001).

### **Inter- Religious Dialogue on Social Media**

During the analysis and survey of contemporary literature regarding this chapter, I found the model of religious transformation and peace building coined by Mohammad Abu Naber very germane and interesting. His theory (Nimer, 2004) of transformation of society or people from *relgiocentric* to *religiorelative* has all the necessary ingredients to build mutual trust and goodwill between hostile religious communities. His idea of organizing training workshops (Nimer, 2001) to process his theory into practice is also seems very relevant and useful but it has its limitations. The limitations

could be 1-workshops are costly affair to organize.2- dearth of responsible conflict managers who can run the workshop, 3- difficult to find a venue with conducive atmosphere to bring aggrieved religious groups and most importantly 4- these workshops can cover very small number of people, while the people who get affected by religious conflicts in India are huge in number. This made me inquisitive about the kind of interactive platform or tool that could help in building interreligious peace and trust between Hindus (censusindia.gov.in), (who constitute the largest religious majority of India) and Muslims (Zakaria, 1988; censusindia.gov.in) (who constitute the largest religious minority in India) in context of Assam riots 2012 (For example). The first platform that came to my mind was mass media. Mass media especially Radio and Television have created a kind of 'techno-religious spaces' (Kong, 2001). Through mass communication an issue can be engendered to a large audience. So, at first mainstream media was explored but the callous approach of mainstream media (Globalpost,2012) during Assam riots discouraged me to go for mainstream media. Moreover mainstream media is more of one-to-many communication (Castells, 2007), where there is possibility of one way dialogue only and the system doesn't have the kind of mechanism which could allow many to voice their feelings or opinions immediately. For example, in newspapers if there is a news report related to religious conflict, the only way to respond to the report is through letter to editor which again can come in the newspaper on next day only and that too depends upon the wish of the editor of the newspaper whether he wants to take it or not. The same goes with the electronic media where there is no mechanism for immediate response or feedback, which nullifies the whole purpose of interactivity despite wide reach of mainstream media.

As Castells writes "The diffusion of Internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of tools of social software have prompted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global in chosen time" (Ibid). Therefore my focus turned towards social media which facilitates one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, many-to-many forms of communication (Ibid). Which Castells define as the reflection of the rise of a new form of socialized communication: mass self-communication- self generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many (Ibid). In the spectrum of social media, Twitter having the potential to reach a broader audience at a faster rate (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2012) was given prominence over other social media sites.

## **Conclusion**

The negative role that social media played during mass exodus of people brought social media into question but I thought if negative messages on social media could

result in big chaos, then definitely this medium could serve not only in de-escalation of conflict but also building trust and peace between conflicting parties.

Through, Twitter, one can tweet his or her own opinion in a concise manner and similar views and expressions can have an inducing effect that subsequently can make the conflicting parties to think again with a fresh outlook and (they can look for more options and choices and unattended pathways that can become handy to resolve the communal conflict) also the bunch of similar tweets act as a pressure on them and since the tweets be posted from many parts of the globe, their heterogeneity could make the people more serious about the graveness of the matter. Flurry of tweets on a contentious religious issue will make international mainstream media to take the matter seriously and responsibly which creates a debate to think about it with more people that have a say into it. Twitter can act as a platform where the aggrieved ones due to religious animosities and communal riots can vent out their anger and frustration that is twitter can act as a platform of catharsis.

One important question arise that penetration of twitter or social media is very less among the 1.2 billion populated India (censusIndiagov.in). Most of the people have no access to the new technology and even if it there, maximum doesn't know how to use it....even those that can use computer finds difficult to express them in Hindi. So how could social media turn out to be a medium that can become the voice of the ordinary?

The possible answer could be that, Twitter or social media can act as a lubricant which facilitates the process of peace reconciliation and building. In itself it doesn't have the power to bring about changes. Literate and intellectual Twitter users could become the opinion leaders (Rogers, 1983) who can diffuse message of peace and harmony among the general masses thus making Twitter to be the platform for inter-religious peace building.

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