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Interfaith dialogue

By Peter Jacob

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Interfaith harmony, interfaith relations and interfaith dialogue are terms used synonymously in Pakistan – with a measure of ambiguity, even by well intentioned and learned people. The ambiguity is largely about placing the theory in the right perspective and bringing it into practice.

We also know that a Federal Ministry for National Harmony was set up for two years (2011-2013) as a substitute for the Ministry of Minorities which was devolved to the provinces in 2010. Eventually, the function of the Ministry of National Harmony was again merged into the Ministry for Religious Affairs in 2013, suggesting that the government perceived national harmony to be a religious affair.

The Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) organised a discussion on April 27 on why efforts around interfaith dialogue have not been successful in tackling religious intolerance. The discussants, including this scribe, questioned several aspects – the capacity of the implementers, the sincerity of the stakeholders and institutional support, etc. These concerns require a comment. As far as the genesis of the term goes, the World Parliament of Religions initiated in Chicago (1893) was a starter but the idea received a boost after the Vatican Council II (1965) pronounced in its document *Nostra Aetate* that salvation beyond Christianity was possible. The elements of truth in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism particularly became acceptable to Christian doctrine.

While this mainly Catholic initiative marked the beginning of their openness towards other faiths it received a matching response by

various quarters subsequently, including from the Buddhist Dalai Lama, Jewish rabbis and the Jordan-based A Common Word platform representing Muslim scholars the world over.

The hypothesis that shared goal and content among different religions can translate into peaceful dialogue should be appreciated because at least consociational arrangements worked well in Lebanon, Bosnia and Netherlands. Moreover, the models of religious peace-building in Northern Ireland, Mozambique, Uganda and Philippines also suggest that religious dispute resolution is an important option or entry point for peace-building. One can argue, however, that those disputes in the area of religious identity were settled in the political arena and therefore it was not precisely interfaith dialogue. Dialogue was perhaps a small component. The inference here would be that interreligious dialogue and dispute resolution can be about other areas of life such as the political, economic and cultural wellbeing of faith communities.

Some incidents show that religious peace-building or dialogue has not worked so well in Pakistan. Yet it is also true that social hostility here has been whipped up by extremism that camouflaged its agenda behind the ideological narrative of the state. The polarised inter-faith

and inter-sect relations prove again that sharing religious content does not always mean effective connectivity. Religious traditions also maintain stark differences particularly in their practices.

Yet we can perhaps tackle the constraints in interfaith relations by dialogue if we can spell them out clearly. First, interfaith dialogue is constrained by doctrines developed over centuries that have made each religious tradition irreconcilable easily with the other, despite the fact that different faith groups have lived side by side in relative peace all this time. So the doctrinal baggage has to be either set aside or cured.

Second, the term 'dialogue between faiths' literally and ostensibly means dialogue of clerics of different religions which inevitably becomes elitist in practice, carrying a symbolic value. Adopting another name or an angle using common social grounds may be necessary.

Third, not the entire clerical class has stakes in dialogue and good relations. There are clerics and outfits that owe their existence to religious differences and active religious intolerance. These elements can derail dialogue tremendously until the state takes steps to

dissipate their negative influence.

Furthermore, dialogue among unequal groups cannot succeed unless their legal, political or social worth is made equal by affirmative action. For instance, by enhancing representation of marginalised groups in dialogue or choosing a neutral meeting place or allowing more time to speak or making special institutions to create balance in public policy and law.

Lastly, interfaith dialogue cannot be alienated from the globalised communication business, but corporate interests do not always regard interfaith relations in the same way. Free thought and expression is exercised sometimes disregarding religious opinions, and they can destabilise peaceful relations unexpectedly. Therefore, a motivational response needs to be offered when the communication business ignores religious sensitivities.

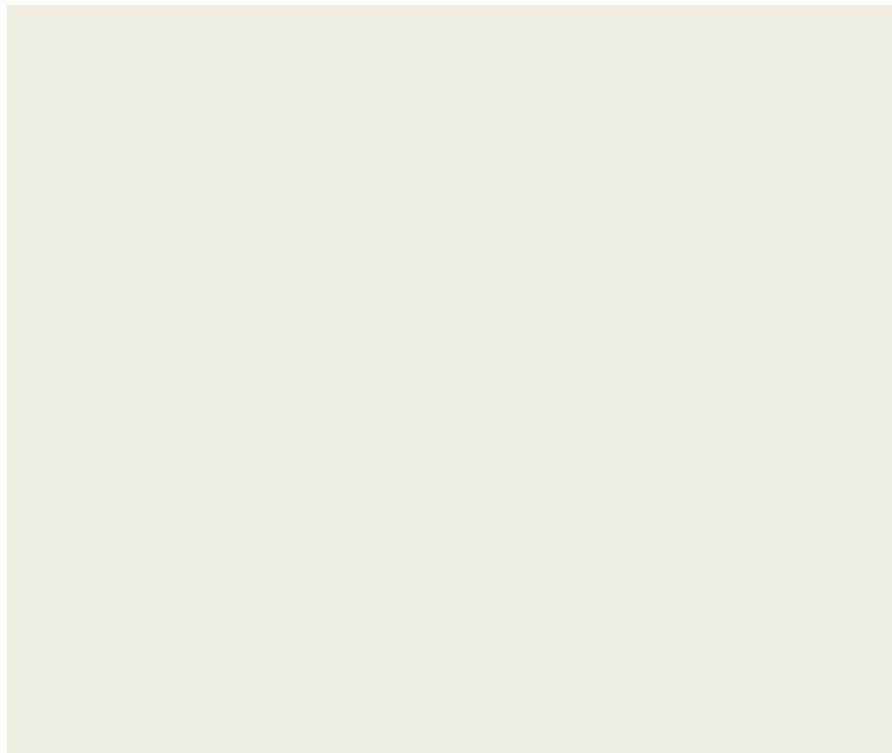
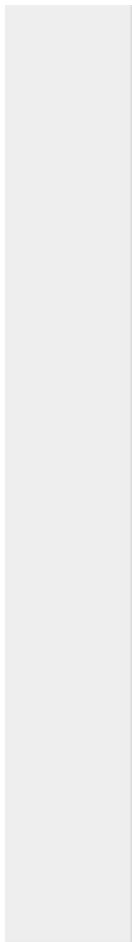
The practitioners of interfaith dialogue expanded it by using a 'dialogue of life' approach rather than merely religious dialogue that addresses constraints attached to doctrinal inflexibility. Thus the exchange of the gifts of life can continue between civilisations, cultures and religions putting dogmatic differences or doctrinal

baggage aside and using common grounds like democratic governance and human rights.

The Ministry for Religious Affairs is reportedly working on what would be called the federal government's 'policy for interfaith harmony'. I wish them every success in this mammoth challenge and recommend that the ministry also map out both the constraints to and enablers of interfaith dialogue.

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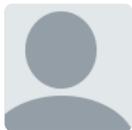
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