

Religious Broadcasting and Inter-Religious Dialogue

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The concept of inter-religious dialogue has found a respectable place in disciplines like theology, anthropology and the social sciences in general. While academics are proud of this development, some of the media practitioners are beginning to ask themselves whether they could play a role in the process of dialogue with other religions. The following article tries to see whether religious broadcasts can offer any possibility. It also tries to examine the communication, theological and philosophical basis for such broadcasts.

Dear presenter,

Today is the last day that I will ever listen to your broadcasts, because you are preaching the words of the devil and not of God. How can anybody be saved without believing in Christ? How can you call ourselves a Christian...?"

"... I beg you to stop your broadcasts today and stop misleading people by teaching that other religions too contain truths...?"

"... I have been a Hindu all my life, but after discovering the Saviour of the world, The Way, The Truth and The Life I have converted myself to Christianity. And now if you say through your broadcasts that people of other religions can also be saved, then why on earth did I convert from my religion to the Way of Christ..

These are just a few extracts from some of the letters received from the thousands of listeners of the Hindi service of Radio Veritas Asia, Manila. There were, indeed, hundreds of others who went along with the contents of the weekly multi-religious or interreligious dialogue programme called *sarvad-harana sadabhava*, (good-will among all religions). These programmes on dialogue were entirely separate from the programmes focusing exclusively on the Bible, which included biblical reflections on the Sunday liturgical readings and a weekly programme on the Bible in a serialized drama form. In the latter, the whole Bible was virtually rewritten into radio

drama format. All of these programmes still continue to be on air from what is known to be a religious radio station, called 'Radio Veritas', and which is owned by the Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops' Conference.

One would certainly be very curious to know as to what precisely evoked such overtly outrageous reactions from the listeners to the programmes. In order to answer that query, one would have to go into the whole set of arguments in the sphere of inter-religious dialogue. The purpose of this article, however, is not so much to look at the justifications for and against the concept of inter-religious dialogue, as to see if such a dialogue is at all possible through radio broadcasts.

The inter-religious programmes have their roots in personal experiences. I grew up in a town in the North of India and, besides one other Catholic family in this densely populated neighbourhood, the others were largely Hindus, with a good number of Muslims and a small number of Sikhs. Though I always witnessed different kinds of worship and religious celebrations as a growing child, these never sparked any significant questions in my mind.

Later in life, I was invited to speak on a few occasions in simple town gatherings, where religious leaders from different religious groups would also be invited to speak. These gatherings were called *Sarvadharama Sadabhava Sam melan*. *Sarvadharama* could be translated as 'all religions'; *Sadabhava* means 'good-will', 'amity' or 'understanding', and *Sam melan* means 'gathering', or 'assembly.' The goal of these meetings was to create better understanding and harmony among believers of different religions. These gatherings were in response to growing fundamentalism in some religions, giving birth to tensions, and sometimes riots, in many towns of India.

The problems of conflicts between different religions or among different sects within one religion was not a new problem at that time nor has it diminished since. The opportunities at the town gatherings were great, but the realization that the benefits were reaching only those who were able to be physically present at such a meeting also become apparent. The next question which rather spontaneously arose in my mind was: Would it be possible at all to reach a greater number of people with this message of *Sarvadharama Sadabhava*. Then came the opportunity to head a new broadcast service in Hindi from Radio Veritas Asia, Manila.

This programme was indeed, and still continues to be, only an attempt at multi-religious understanding or inter-religious dialogue. As we shall see below, radio broadcasts are basically monological in format. They are not

dialogical. Although in exceptional cases, like ‘phone-ins’, this objective can also be achieved, but it in no way replaces face to face dialogue. And even face to face communication does not guarantee genuine dialogue.

THE PROGRAMME’S RATIONALE

The problems of multi-religious societies are quite obvious. Different theories try to explain the causes behind these conflicts. Nobody denies that this is not a real and growing enigma in many parts of the world, though sometimes it expresses itself in other shades such as ‘ethnic cleansing’, ‘Neo-Nazi propaganda’, claims of the ‘true original Church’, etc.

Many of the problems, misunderstandings and tensions that exist with regard to religious beliefs could be reduced if people just knew more about other religions. Media in general could play a vital role in the dissemination of information about other religions. Underlying this concept is the conviction that all religions are in themselves noble and convey admirable moral precepts; they indicate a certain proven path to reach God, and are based on the solid foundation of centuries’ old religious experiences and traditions, handed down to us through many generations, sometimes despite the terrible onslaught of invaders or well meaning ‘missionaries’. How could these rich experiences of the Divine be discarded as pagan and not comprising of any truth? Does God have a monopoly of one religion, one scripture, one race or one people?

Recent church documents have recognized the richness of other religions and of different Christian churches and include ecumenical dialogue or inter-religious dialogue on their agenda. Another assumption of the programme was that if the adherents of different religions, who desire to coexist in harmony with society and the world around them, would only have the opportunity to discover what other religions really are; what their neighbours believe in; what the other person on the street keeps close to his heart; what the classmate or the teacher in the school reveres; what the meanings of different religious festivals are; what different religious symbols stand for; and how various religions come into existence, then they would begin to regard believers of other religions differently, probably with a much greater spirit of tolerance, respect, understanding and sensitivity rather than with fear, prejudice and, in some cases, hatred.

FORMAT OF THE PROGRAMME

The target audience of the programme consists of both rural and urban listeners in Northern India who understand Hindi. The programmes

are not designed for any specific social, economic or religious group. The purpose of the broadcasts is not to convert but to try to dispel the many prejudices that exist in the minds of people against other religions and their believers. The programme is broadcast on short wave. The radio station itself functions on a very limited budget, which prevents it from having 'phone-in' arrangements. Nor may the producer make long distance telephone calls to solicit reactions. In broadcast terminology these programmes are just 'talk shows'.

They appear in two slots of 5-6 minutes every week. In the first slot, the presenter tries to speak in general about the basic function of any religion, any place of worship, or scripture, or religious founder or leader, about one's relationship with God, or the general moral teachings of religions. This general slot is not on the specific teachings of any one particular religion. This is then followed by an appropriate hymn which tries to link the second slot to the first. These hymns are not always Christian hymns. The selection is made from different religions or from organizations which claim to be nonreligious. Sometimes spiritual songs from films are selected.

In the second slot the presenter tries to give information on a different religion each week. He presents some basic information, such as the origin of a religion, its founder, its different sects, its spread, its world-view, its festivals, its rituals in worship, its understanding of women, its basic teachings, etc. The information is no theological or exegetical discourse but a rather simple talk which any ordinary rural listener can understand.

SARVADHARAMA SADABHAVA — A POSSIBLE MODEL

Paddy Scannell in *Broadcast Talks* (1991:3) elaborates on what Hilda Matheson (1933), had noted: that "within this sphere (radio broadcast), people did not expect to be talked down to, lectured or 'got at'. They expected to be spoken to in a familiar, friendly and informal manner as if they were equals on the same footing as the speaker." Unfortunately, by and large the model of religious broadcasting to our day, has been one of 'sermonizing, 'getting at', and 'talking down to'. When one thinks of elements of dialogue in a radio broadcasts, one has to conceive of a model which is different from the one held hitherto.

The programme from Veritas was called *Sarvadharama Sadabhava*. The meaning of these words does not contain an element of dialogue. It has been said earlier that it is not easy to achieve dialogue through radio broadcasts. Dialogue, however, is a term with many different meanings and

nuances. The concept is discussed in depth in a recent article in *Media Development* (1993:54-61) with the title "Toward a Communication Theory of Dialogue".

During the time when I was toying with the possibility of such a radio programme and had informal discussions with several of my colleagues, they supported the idea of a dialogue programme. They unwittingly got the impression that this was another technique of evangelization, to convert the others by slowly deceiving them through this innovative magical trick called 'dialogue'.

The reason it is to be considered 'a possible model' of dialogue is that it is not/cannot be really dialogical in the strict sense of the word. It is basically monological. In other words, the very nature of this medium poses difficulties for dialogue. Unfortunately, representatives of different religions could not be brought together on one platform or programme to have an appropriate dialogue. This possibility should be considered if this model is to evolve further and get greater currency in broadcast media.

Religious broadcasting must have a theological foundation to justify its functions. In the case in question, it is an activity that is inspired by a Christian view of God, of humanity, the world and people's inter-personal relationships, based on the values of the Gospel.

The New Testament is full of incidents where Jesus enters into a dialogue with other individuals, some of whom do not belong to his own social group, e.g. the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn.4:7-42). One could easily draw a precise communication model of dialogue from this incident. The respect, the equal status in mutual communication accorded to the Samaritan woman despite her protest: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" sets a unique model of communication before the believer.

There are clear moments when Jesus leaves his disciples free, not only to enter into communication with him but even to associate with him, when for example (Jn.6:66ff), many of the disciples leave him and go away, he asks Peter, "Do you wish to go away too?" There is no imposition of himself on his disciples, followers or others. He makes this quite clear each time he pronounces, "Whoever wishes to be my disciple..." He welcomes the children (Lk.9:46), establishing communication on their own level. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, now more popularly known as the Forgiving Father (Lk. 15), he sets up a model where barriers to communication collapse altogether. It is not only an instance of dialogue, but of total acceptance of the other. Again, before the Last Supper, bending down to wash the feet of his disciples- (Jn. 13: 5ff) he establishes a supreme model of

communication to be adopted when one is, by unavoidable circumstances, superior to the other: “So if I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.”

Even before entering into the concept of inter-religious dialogue, one can get into enormous difficulties trying to understand the plain term ‘dialogue’. According to Brenda Dervin et al., “Theorists disagree about conceptual boundaries—where the dialogic begins and the non-dialogic ends”. Religious dialogue can range from the concept of incarnation whereby the Logos, the Word, becomes human thus entering into communication with humans, to the nature and quality of that communication as shown in the Gospel.

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS

There is certainly something unique in the way Jesus communicated. His success, however, was not due to his ‘techniques’ but simply because he was able to establish what Jurgen Habermas would describe as a level of intersubjectivity.

In his two volumes, *Towards a Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) Habermas basically points out that the essential presupposition for the success of the speech act is that the other partner is considered as equal, is given full freedom of expression, and has an equal right of participation. The partner in communication has the full freedom to leave the framework of action and to enter into a discourse for the purpose of reaching an agreement, in case the interaction gets into an argument. He offers a lengthy set of arguments to establish what he calls ‘communicative rationality’.

Habermas in some way elaborates the communicative action of Jesus by articulating it in more philosophical terms. A scrutiny of these two approaches could possibly lead us towards a theory and praxis of multi-religious or inter-religious dialogue. The approaches used by Jesus are practical illustrations for those serious about entering into dialogue. They provide us with a solid theological foundation. The insights offered by Habermas could well form a theoretical and philosophical basis for dialogue.

Radio certainly offers a chance to experiment with a wide variety of ideas, for in radio the limits of imagination can be stretched to their maximum. There are no limits for the presenter to stop him from taking the listeners into a new undiscovered world of other religions.

CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCHES

In the long history of Christianity it has never been easy to adapt the attitude and message of Christ to daily-life situations. It will certainly be

more difficult to adopt it to our attitude towards other religions. There are still many who protest strongly against the very idea of such a dialogue.

People planning to enter the arena of inter-religious dialogue should not expect much support from Christian institutions. Therefore, they will face financial problems in meeting production costs. For enthusiastic producers this can be very frustrating experience. These efforts may end up in a vicious circle: lack of programmes because of lack of funds, because of lack of information, because of lack of a change of attitude towards other religions. It is always comfortable to stroll on the trodden path, but, so far, broadcast media have not even found a path of dialogue to tread upon.

The lack of ready-made programmes or formats for this kind of venture could be another problem that broadcasters may encounter. Hence there is an urgent need to do research in this area so that the broadcasters can have something on hand to make use of. There are certainly scores of media practitioners who hold a tolerant and compassionate attitude towards other religions, but are unable to enter into a regular radio or TV programme, mainly because of the lack of available formats in this area. But a start has to be made at some point.

“Broadcasting is an institution—a power, an authority—and talk on radio and television is ‘public institutional’ talk, an object of intense scrutiny, that gives rise to political, social, cultural and moral concerns,” according to Scannell (199 1:7). It is thus not only a question of checking and possibly changing attitudes towards other religions, but of combining it with the discipline of public communication. A suitable method has to be found to present the other as an equal partner in communication. Religious topics must be handled with extreme care. No one wants to take the responsibility of being wrong or misunderstood. The example of Salman Rushdie is often quoted in such discussions.

Inter-religious dialogue has not yet caught the attention of the media, neither the public service nor the commercial media. Is this because the task is too gigantic? Has it do with costs or with the attitudes of media workers towards other religions? Or do media practitioners lack the imagination to initiate ideas for programmes which can captivate audiences?

Feelings related to the Divine are embedded in the innermost depths of an individual’s heart. Training in print or broadcast journalism cannot easily remove them. Thus even if a media institution decides to take up inter-religious dialogue through communication, can it do it with a total spirit of detachment from its own religious beliefs?

In the last sixty or so years since religious broadcasting began, it has taken several forms depending on the ownership of the station, the mission and vision of the particular institution, and, finally, the creativity and imagination of the broadcaster him/herself.

One of the characteristics of the future is its uncertainty. One thing, however, is certain: both religion and media will play a very significant role in the unfolding of events of the remaining decade and in the 21st. century. Hans Kung (1991:138) in *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, concludes his book with these basic statements: “No human life together without a world ethic for the nations; no peace among the nations without peace among the religions; no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.”

With all the challenges facing the world in the next century, can the churches afford to miss the greatest challenge of all: interreligious dialogue?

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