

Rev Sw. Purnananda

Dublin City Interfaith Forum – A Necessary Journey

The Dublin City Interfaith Forum has been a shining beacon of hope for harmony, peace and understanding in Dublin over several years. It has influenced and guided other Interfaith movements throughout the country as well other European cities. In order to explore it as a necessary journey, it is important to review the great revolution that has occurred in comparatively recent times, particularly in the western world and the refreshing and optimistic opportunities it has generated.

In September 1893, a Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago Illinois. It was part of the World Columbian exposition celebrations and was an attempt to create a global dialogue of faiths. It became the birth of formal interreligious dialogue worldwide, with representatives of a wide variety of religions and significantly was dominated by the personality and inspiring words of Swami Vivekananda¹. His impact was that he presented a new world vision of harmony that was based on an already existing ancient Vedic (Hindu) structure of pluralism. More significantly for Ireland Margaret Elizabeth Noble, known world-wide as Sister Nivedita, continued to promote the universal and ancient truth of oneness of being in our inherent Divinity.

Inevitably the impact of focusing on shared and easily discernible values must flow through and in 1965, Pope Paul VI issued *Nostrae Aetate*. It was a landmark document that showed a remarkable (dare I say Christian) spirit of generosity. It seemed to stand in stark contrast to the long held “*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*”² as interpreted at its most extreme in various periods over the years by Popes³ and Christianity in general and remains a catechetical doctrine, albeit with inclusive caveats. The significance of highlighting this, is, of, course, that Ireland has been identified as a predominantly Roman Catholic country and along with the Church of Ireland played and plays a significant role in terms of cultural attitudes, social influences and spiritual life. It is therefore relevant that we examine the remnants of old and lingering attitudes along with contemporary ones in order to understand the various interwoven aspects of our journey.

¹ Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda Vol 1

² outside the Church there is no salvation

³ Pope Eugene IV, in his ex-cathedra Bull *Cantate Domino* of 1441 CE proclaimed that pagans, Jews, heretics, and schismatics can never be partakers of eternal life. Pope Boniface VIII in his Papal Bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302): “We declare, say, define, and pronounce that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.” Pope Pius XII (1939 – 1958): *Allocution to the Gregorian*, October 17, 1953

Hindu approach to Other Faiths

Since reference was made to Swami Vivekananda's inputs in the West, it is appropriate to understand Hinduism's role in Interfaith and my role in the Dublin City Interfaith Forum. For the last few years I have been an active member of the Forum as part of my mission in the propagation of Neo-Vedanta as a harmonising and practical philosophy for all. As a representative on the forum of the Hindu Religion, more properly called "Vedanta" (Essence of Truth) or Sanatana Dharma (Eternal Religion), I am always keen to point out our motherly status as the oldest extant religion in the world. I am not saying this in any boastful way, but this status is justified by its very antiquity.

Firstly, this tradition has managed to incorporate every ideal and expression of the inexpressible Supreme Principle that religion calls "God". Its pluralistic approach has allowed the broadest freedom of expression of the deepest Truth. This approach has been summarised as "so many faiths – so many paths". Secondly, by this democracy in religion, the land of Hinduism's origin, India, has given refuge to every persecuted religious adherent, including the Thomist Christians, those of the Jewish Diaspora, and the Zoroastrians, not to mention Muslim traders and invaders. Thirdly, this religion, has seen multiple renaissances throughout its long history and successfully adapted to the inevitable times, absorbing ideas mostly resulting in a progressive enrichment and compatibility with contemporary changes and attitudes without disturbing the underlying current of Eternal Truth. It has been the same enduring river flowing in a solid direction but winding this way and that with the most practical flexibility. Moreover, it has no history of persecution of "heretics", prophets, saints or incarnations of any religion and even accepted the rights of the Charvakas (hedonistic atheists) to ridicule the sacred of the day. The example set is a wonderful model, not just of tolerance but acceptance. It is this spirit of breadth and depth that I have tried to give the Forum

The Need for Religious Harmony and Dialogue

The "Hindu" experience can act as a kind of role model for an Ireland in transformation. In the increasingly diverse city of Dublin and in Ireland as such, with a population of 4.86 million, there is also an increasing necessity to recognise and celebrate unity in diversity. The sharpest percentage growth in non-Irish-born residents were among Romanians, with the population more than doubling from 8,566 to 17,995 (up 110 per cent) following European Union accession in 2007; immigrants from India, grew that community by 91 per cent to 17,856. The largest rise in overall terms was, of course, unsurprisingly, among the Polish-born community which grew from 63,090 to 115,193 (up 83 per cent). Census statistics reflect shifts in Christian, Islamic and Hindu religious adherents.

However, increasingly people describe themselves as "spiritual" rather than religious. With some 10% of the Irish population declaring themselves as "non-religious" in the 2016 Census survey, this sector represents the second largest in

terms of religious identification. The increase was commensurate with a decline in formal Roman Catholic membership that went from 93% in 1991 to 84% in 2011 to 78% in 2016. The number of new Roman Catholic seminarians declined to a mere 15 overall⁴ and this has given rise to a sense of crisis in the largest religious denomination in the country.

The fastest growing religions between 2011 and 2016 in percentage terms were Orthodox, Hindu and Muslim. Presbyterian and Apostolic or Pentecostal all showed declines, but the category Other Christians showed the largest decline compared with 2011 (a fall of 9.1% from 41,161 in 2011 to 37,427 in 2016)⁵.

These statistics bring up two questions: are we duty bound to know our neighbours for a harmonious society and should religions be concerned at those registered as non-religious? Since these questions affect all religions, whether they are formally organised like Christian religions or informally organised like Hinduism and Buddhism, it is rational and necessary that faiths are living examples of the love they espouse and highlight the easily discernible similarities rather than the differences through real solidarity and dialogue. Historically prior to the world wars of the 20th century, more blood was shed in the name of God and Religion than any other cause in the world. Even today there is a felt urge for Christians and Muslims to proselytise based on a kind of exclusivism and inferred superiority that some may say subtly impinges on the human right for freedom of belief under the protective “clause” of freedom of speech. Fanatics and bigots of all religions do not want any form of co-operative dialogue or understanding; then there are the inclusivists, claiming to be pluralists, who wish to dialogue, but not understand and are “drinking tea with the enemy” as it were.

Therefore, there is a dire universal need for genuine religious dialogue, mutual learning and understanding. In Ireland, not only is this need felt, but, because of the relative novelty of multi culturalism and the presence of multi-faiths there is a wonderfully fresh opportunity to address issues from the start and to craft an exemplary model for the rest of the world. There is a need to progressively reform traditional attitudes that habitually exclude non -Abrahamic faiths in national events, such as the inauguration of the Uachtarán na hÉireann. This model would address mutual issues across traditions and show the disillusioned sceptics that religions do indeed adhere to the same lofty human values that lead to the goal of freedom, variously termed salvation, perfection, kingdom of heaven, nirvana etc.

⁴ Irish Catholic Magazine September 2018

⁵ Central Statistics Office <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rrc/>

The Key Ingredient for Interfaith Interaction

I believe this model is present and developing in the Dublin City Interfaith Forum. It was with great delight, therefore that my first experience of the Dublin City Interfaith Forum was a peace march through Dublin City to celebrate the annual United Nations Peace Day. Side by side, shoulder to shoulder, leaders of every main religion in Ireland stood, marched and joked in a remarkable unitive spirit of comradeship.

My real introduction to the Forum was, however at an interfaith retreat held at the Corrymeela Community Centre where I felt free in initial conversations to listen and contribute to the overall constitution and vision of the movement. The Corrymeela Community is a Christian community in Northern Ireland whose objective is the promotion of reconciliation and peace-building through the healing of social, religious, and political divisions. It seemed a perfect venue for the Forum to consolidate its ideas and plans. I found that the most wonderful characteristic of the Forum was our mutual sense of spirituality, prayerfulness and genuine willingness to listen that we share. I quickly became friends with members; we obviously shared an enthusiasm, kindness, goal and vision. I believe this friendship to be the most important ingredient to any Interfaith interaction.

The Rewards of Perseverance, Faith and Adaptability

When a noble idea arises, it gets sustained by sudden and timely events. For a period, the work of the Dublin City Interfaith Forum stalled due to a paucity of funds; but by way of adjustment, we received the support of the Dublin City Council.

They had always granted financial and logistic support, but then, they made us their own. Understanding the great benefit of sponsoring interfaith ideals, the Dublin Lord Mayor and City officials took the initiative in devising and granting an eight - point Charter that gave Faith leaders a commitment to championing the all - inclusive freedom to practice religions, dedicate them to the noblest values for the social benefit of all, promote inter-belief and inter community dialogue and eradicate exclusivism; also to share experiences for mutual benefit, encourage the young to appreciate religious diversity, develop an appreciation of similarities in religions and shared values and finally to create social conditions that promote peace joy and hope.

It was the Forum's Church of Ireland's delegate, Archbishop Michael Jackson, that took these principles to a new and practical level. He translated them into the Five Marks of the Anglican Communion's Mission and distilled them into Five points beginning with the letter "T". These points can be adapted and implemented by every one of the religions represented on the Forum. The following is our Hindu adaptation and adoption:

- **TELL** - To proclaim the Inner Divinity of man
- **TEACH** - To teach and assist the manifestation of this Divinity from within

- **TEND** - To serve the Divinity in man
- **TRANSFORM** - To transform negative situations
- **TREASURE** - To safeguard Sacred Nature and Mother Earth.

This was an initiative aimed to directly promote Interfaith understanding and was officially launched by the Lord Mayor of Dublin and the Archbishop and is illustrative of the necessity and good fortune of civic support for its momentum. By distilling what was termed the “Five Marks of Interfaith Understanding” and putting it into the Church going domain, it offered a practical way for “Irish church goers to reach out to their neighbours of all faiths to dispel the mistrust that sometimes leads to the isolation of minority religious groups.” (quote extracted from Archbishop Jackson’s Initiative address – Feb 2018 Wood Quay Dublin). Respect for other religions, particularly minority religious communities in Ireland through special printed literature in Churches is so progressive that it challenges other major religions to follow suit and demonstrate their genuine commitment to the disbandment of isolationist and elitist attitudes. These attitudes make people feel estranged, probably amidst other difficult circumstances that serve to highlight their differences. So profoundly and beautifully, the great saint Sarada Devi (Holy Mother) prayed “May we not treat others as strangers but learn to make the whole world our own.”

Putting Principles into Practice.

Whenever Dublin Interfaith members are in the public eye, their mutual respect and love is patently obvious as well as the message that Truth transcends apparent differences. Of the many Interfaith projects, one of the most potent and impressive in Dublin, in this regard is a project called “Faith in the City”; this is where people of different religions join our members at their respective places of worship and experience and learn the similarities and differences between religions. The public have the chance to ask questions and socially interact with others. Interfaith aims are accomplished here as the public can witness exemplary interfaith interaction first hand, add to their knowledge, shift any erroneous pre-conceived ideas, broaden their experience and enjoy a greater sense of humanity at depth.

Any worthwhile activity should surely be accompanied by a global vision and valid for millennia to come, but every progressive step will have its creative role in the same way that a building is planned and constructed. Interfaith movements can and should learn from others’ experiences. The Dublin City approach has impressed visiting civic leaders from regions that may have more inherent antagonistic attitudes to deal with. The Dublin City Interfaith Forum model has incorporated feedback and co-ordination with Garda representatives, visiting international Religious Leaders, Interfaith groups from other countries and visiting groups of University students from United States of America. All of this shows a vibrancy of interaction that has an influence beyond the Irish geographic border.

The Potential Minefield

I do not think it is helpful to categorise levels of dialogue as “ecumenical”, “interfaith” and “inter-religious” as some have done. “Ecumenism” referring to Christian sharing, for example joint religious services etc.; “Interfaith”, referring to Abrahamic religious interaction and “inter-religious” being dialogue with non - Abrahamic faiths and traditions. These attitudes tend to nurture and convey the idea of a select chosen people, race or creed and should surely be seen as abhorrently divisive and a violation of the precious notion of a loving and caring Creative Divinity. Furthermore, they are reminiscent of historical colonial dominance, slavery, mass slaughter, invasions and wars, all of which are anathema to the fundamental ethos of loving kindness, empathy and the “Golden rule” that all religions, without exception adhere to. When religions decide that in a modern world it is more politically expedient to dialogue than fight, I believe the motive is wrong. Salesmanship and competitive religion can never be a part of the mutual understanding required for Interfaith activity. Empathy requires astute listening skills and reaching out, emotionally to the other, but more crucially seeing and feeling the Divine Presence in neighbour. Profoundly Lord Jesus defines who one’s neighbour is in the story of the Good Samaritan.⁶ Non-Abrahamic religions are quite frankly baffled at what is considered an impolite intrusion at best and an aggressive assault at worst on the part of proselytisers. Certainly, Abrahamic Faiths can easily find scripturally and theologically derived justifications for evangelical work and conversion, but each must seriously consider the rationale, humanitarian and historical aspects of their actions and the real inner meaning of their founding “Giant Waves” of Divine Messengers that left their impact for millennia.

To avoid the various traps, a great deal of sensitivity is required and that means much ignorance, pre-conceptions and erroneous assumptions have to be identified and replaced with accurate knowledge, openness to new facts and shifting paradigms, but above all, as the title of the little book of Brother Lawrence says “The Practice of the Presence of God”⁷

A wonderful example of the delicate balance is a case in Spain. In 2017, in a spirit of typical Spanish carnival frenzy (and ironically land of the infamous Spanish Inquisition) a Spanish Bishop apologized for an event in his diocese during which a Lord Ganesha (literally Lord of all creatures) a popular Hindu portrayal of God was processed around a Catholic church. The priest who allowed it resigned from his position as Vicar General.⁸ One might easily wonder how a statue of the Virgin Mary can be similarly processed, but not a different form? Father Bede Griffiths OSB Cam, known and revered for his work in Christian/Hindu relations was challenged ⁹ by an orthodox Hindu. The purport of the challenge was “you have taken the sacred robe of Sannyasa (Hindu renunciant) and made yourself a Swami (Hindu Monk)

⁶ Luke 10:25-37

⁷ Herman, Nicholas, The Practice of the Presence of God, The Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

⁸ Magazine Crux August 2017

⁹ Swami Vivekananda and Bede Griffiths on Religious Pluralism: Hindu and Christian Approaches to Truth Cambridge University Press – Paper Bradley Malkovsky Horizons Volume 25 Issue 2

adopting the name of Swami Dayananda and teaching Christianity in a Hindu style Ashram (spiritual hermitage) – but no one initiated you into the ancient monastic order of sannyasa and could we also dress like a Christian Benedictine and preach Hinduism in a Church in Rome? If not, why not? “It is a valid question and contrasts some of the difficulties of transitioning from tolerance to acceptance.

How Much Further?

We have started our journey here in Ireland and it has been a wonderful start, but we have a long way to go. Significant progress would be made when Interfaith involvement is felt throughout the whole of Ireland. Already inclusive legislation will do away with the exclusivist ethos that became the controlling norm in many Irish schools. A new curriculum for Junior Schools has now been formulated to include five faiths instead of three and extending this further would be a great step. The closed traditional mind set would be seen when non-Abrahamic Faiths are acknowledged as part of national life, such as the President’s inauguration, commemoration days, and Dáil Éireann prayers. Currently they are excluded and feel like “second class “citizens; religions need to challenge themselves and learn from each other so that no one religion will feel that they have “the fullness of truth”. The history of religious enrichment has been marked by a syncretism an example of which was early Irish Christianity. A modern example is the popularly used mindfulness programmes derived from Hindu’s Smriti and Buddhism’s Sati. The adoption of Yoga is another example. From a Hindu point of view, it would be wonderful if Hindu phobic statements made wittingly or unwittingly such as “Hinduism is a polytheistic religion”, rather than a pluralistic one, were adjusted to reflect a better accuracy. When an Irish person is asked what the main three world religions are, and they no longer answer Christianity, Islam and Judaism, rather than Christianity, Islam and Hinduism then we will see Ireland meshing with the wider world.

All this requires time for growth, for attitudes are still deeply ingrained in the Irish psyche; growth can be stimulated but never forced and patience, purity and perseverance are required. The next generations will have very different approaches as the new future unfolds. One more thing. Religions must surely be compatible with other branches of knowledge, primarily modern science or they will be met with rational skepticism. In some ways this is where religions could find their greatest common ground and benefit from a new enthused generation of nation builders.

I am optimistic that we will have a truly all-inclusive society, led by the exemplary members of different faiths who sincerely and selflessly live out their religion. We believe that the Lord of the Universe is irresistibly manifesting from within to evolve an Irish community that reflects Irish generosity of spirit that has served as an undercurrent since ancient times.

Swami Vivekananda, during his closing remarks at the Parliament of Religions in 1893 prayed thus: "If anyone here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, "Brother, yours is an impossible hope." Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid.

The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant. It develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant.

Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

Holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written in spite of resistance: "Help and not fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."