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# Interculturality As Reason For Dialogue

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## Abstract

Today is the era of plurality where we talk about plurality of cultures, religion, philosophies, languages etc. But plurality should not be looked at in a derogatory sense. Rather it should be seen in a positive manner as contributing towards betterment of life and society. Plurality should not result in conflict and violence but should pave a way for friendship and mutual respect. That is why plurality must also give room for co-existence, respect for others and mutual sharing. There must be mutual understanding in the midst of differences. Differences can be due to some reasons; but there should be a reason also for sharing together and meeting together for some purpose.

Reason is the most sublime and unique faculties of humans which serves as agency for cultural changes and

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guarantor for bringing about unity of humankind. Surprisingly, despite all these, all over the world there exist different cultures, ethnic groups, religions and lifestyles prevailing, insisting on their right to live and understand themselves in a way they think to be true and right for themselves. Different groups of people live within their respective cultural framework breathing the air that the culture provides them. Different cultures or religions assert their own specificity and identity; but at the same time they do not denounce others. Today we talk of intercultural understanding or convictions which indicate the relationship between cultures in the midst of differences.

Without entering into the complexity of meanings attached to culture, the point we want to make is relating to our immediate understanding of culture as a specific inter – subjective fact of human existence. To be with others, especially with those of his/her own group, to belong to a society, is the nature of humans. And it is also his nature to strive for achieving some goals and ends in life whether individually or collectively. Therefore, what we discover as cultural phenomena like customs and rules of a certain community, the underlying beliefs and values of its interaction with the world, expressing itself in art and religion, judicial and political institutions refer to the inter-subjective dimension of human beings.

As a human is invariably born within a particular cultural milieu, he or she grows breathing the air saturated

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with a particular culture and its *weltanschauung*, learns to speak its language and gets rooted in it. In this way culture is pre-given to man, unintentionally shaping his explicit intentional relations with the world in general. Culture thus becomes a condition for the possibility of existing in a common world; it becomes part of man's being-in-the-world. But on the other side, culture can itself be the intentional object of acting and thinking. The fact is that people live in different cultures, have different languages, and practice different religions as if humanity is designed to be so. Today plurality is a way of life and celebrated everywhere. These cultures meet with each other with whom they coexist and also share with each other. Is there any mechanism which ensures such meeting and sharing? This is the issue that this paper intends to highlight.

Today plurality of cultures is celebrated everywhere, and cultural pluralism is the characteristic of society today. Plurality of cultures presupposes individuality where individuals are clubbed together. Advocating plurality of cultures, Mrinal Miri<sup>1</sup> formulates the framework for individuating culture, and thenceforth for distinguishing one culture from another. But individuating culture is not an easy task especially when certain elements of culture are available cross culturally. It involves proper understanding of the culture in question. Can history give us complete knowledge about culture? The answer is 'No'. The first rule for understanding any bit of culture is that it must be seen in

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its fullest possible context in relation to all other simultaneously present, relevant factors. This, of course, demands time and intellectual effort. Each culture must be known in its own terms; it is best mastered by living in it, which means moving among the people and sharing their lives as much as possible.

Today we talk about the possibility of dialogue between different cultures or different religions. This might be possible when one culture or religion tries to understand the other in addition to self-understanding. Every culture has probably developed typical ways of understanding itself and that which is around it. Knowledge of culture then includes knowledge of my own culture and that of others. Every culture probably has evolved a certain method of philosophizing in the sense that explanations were given about the world, about what man is, and about the right relationship between human beings, and between human beings and nature. Knowledge about other cultures becomes a challenging task, but not impossible.

Since each culture is specific and different from each other, the issue is how can we ever enter into the world of other cultures. How do we know other cultures? But we are not imprisoned in our specificity and culture is not like a closed monad but always dynamic. The dynamic character of culture makes it open to each other and susceptible to changes. Change and dynamism can provide ground for entering into the world of culture. In this manner cultures can

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enter into dialogue with each other through sharing of inputs and culture can synthesize them into its respective conceptual framework. Hence dialogue and specificity, far from being opposites, really go together under certain conditions. D.Z. Phillips, for example while retaining the uniqueness of religious beliefs expressed through religious language advocates for the commensurability or comprehensibility in religious beliefs. This same argument can be applied to culture as well despite their differences for no amount of talk of incomprehensibility can alter the fact of constant interaction, dialogue and communicability between different cultures.

Further we can argue that understanding of a culture can be approached in two different senses – the understanding from within, i.e., an *emic* view, and the understanding from outside, i.e., an *etic* view. Is there a room for the latter sense? Quite obvious, and there have been attempts to substantiate this by many scholars by bringing empathy and other methods. It can be best understood, I suppose, by living in it or sharing the life-world of those cultures which are alien to us by some other discursive methods. This requires gradual and continuous efforts. I would like to suggest that the way to this seems to lie in the interculturally oriented conviction that the general concepts like truth, knowledge, being, meaning, value, practices, etc. depict some sameness or, can we say, different cultures are different manifestations of the same

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truth. Therefore, to establish the route for getting into each other's world one needs to look into such interculturality oriented conviction which is known as interculturality.

In fact there are many things that humankind shares together despite being culturally different. We have a multiplicity of cultures, religions, nations, but we belong to one natural humankind where reason is our common guide. Mankind has a natural history, just as animals do. "People and animals do such things as doubting, becoming certain, getting puzzled, looking for something, questioning, wondering and expecting. Each of them has to do with man's natural desire to know or simply – as somebody puts it – with his 'curiosity' which he shares with the cat and no doubt, with other animals."<sup>2</sup> Humans have the natural tendency to wonder, to question and to puzzle when they come encounter things around them. As a rational being, humans engage in various rational pursuits of acquiring knowledge, making moral judgment, striving for the goals of life and so on. Humans therefore do things only against the background of what is right and wrong, and what is proper and what is improper. Humans are therefore capable of thinking, doing, wishing, puzzling, doubting, becoming certain etc. In this way no culture can be claimed to be devoid of all these whether in a rudimentary form or profound one. Each culture, therefore, has a certain way of philosophizing where it tries to provide a rational account about everything they come across. In *Rationality and Tribal Thought*(2004) an

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attempt has been made to show that tribal thought (of the tribal cultures) does not lack rationality through which they can make sense about themselves and about the world around them. "One could accept in principle that no culture, however 'primitive' it may be, can be found without some good elements in it. Similarly, even in a most advanced culture there can be some imperfect elements."<sup>3</sup> Therefore each culture can adopt means for self- knowledge as well as knowledge of others.

Knowledge of other cultures is not possible only through empathy. "One can have an empathic understanding of the 'inner' life of another culture."<sup>1</sup> But getting access into the inner life of the other culture is possible through intra-cultural understanding where each culture is somehow related to one another. It may be incumbent to bring here the argument of Raimundo Pannikar<sup>4</sup> where he talks about the metaphor of a rainbow in order to argue for the plurality of religions. The different colours of the rainbow are due to the refraction of light when it touches the surfaces of the prism. But at the fringes of every colour there is an overlap and there is no clear demarcation between the colours. We do not know where the red colour ends and where the yellow begins. In other words there is a relation between these colours. In this way he argues that different religions are like different colours which are related to each other. By the same argument even if cultures differ from each other yet there is some commonality between them especially when it

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is seen as a human enterprise. Different cultures designate different ways of being-in-the world, but do not designate different humankinds. Humanity accommodates people from every culture and orientation.

Pederson and Howell (1986) point out that unless persons recognize their own culture-based values, feelings and attitudes, are able to communicate them to others, and experientially learn the logic of other culture systems, practical information about another culture will be of little use. This indicates that despite our specificity and differences, yet we are open to each other. Since cultures co-exist together there is always a possibility of interaction, sharing and learning from each other. The claim, therefore, is that I can always understand other's culture to a certain degree provided that (a) I have a will to do so, (b) I look at others as others without bias and prejudice, and (c) I respect others. Fred L. Casmir<sup>5</sup> offers some methods in cross-cultural understanding. Some of these are intercultural contact, negotiation, accessibility, openness and proper opportunities for learning. Intercultural contact will be possible if there is active co-existence which will result in active participation.

Cross-cultural understanding and mutual exchange of ideas or goods should be done at the cultural level which necessitated dialogue. Dialogue is a conscious attempt of divergent cultural groups to learn from each other and share with each other. Such engagement between cultures cannot



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take place unless there is a room for it. There are various conditions for a meaningful and creative dialogue. One of the reasons for which dialogue can take place is interculturality. Though philosophers very seldom use the term 'interculturality', it would not be out of place to use it in this context if it were to express something new. If new thoughts are expressed in old terms, the newness of the thoughts may not find a proper place or may be lost altogether. Advocates of intercultural philosophy like Francis M Wimmer, Ram Adhar Mall and others provide a theoretical foundation of interculturality in their pioneering work.

According to Ram Adhar Mall "the term interculturality stands for an attitude, for the conviction that no culture is the culture of the whole mankind.....This attitude, this culture of interculturality, accompanies all cultures like a shadow and hinders them from absolutizing themselves; this attitude is the very condition needed for the possibility of a genuine comparative philosophy. This attitude also leads to cooperation and communication among different cultures"<sup>6</sup>. Hence methodologically speaking it prevents any privileged position to a particular culture, religion or philosophy. In this manner the intercultural philosophical conviction is the insight that the one *philosophia perennis* is the exclusive possession of no one particular culture.<sup>7</sup>

However, such an understanding does not, of course, attempt to de-construct culture, religion or

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philosophy. What it nevertheless does is the deconstruction of an extreme relativistic, monolithic and absolutistic use made of them in the past and even in the present in the name of the singularity of truth in culture, philosophy and religion[8]. No culture is perfect and fully integrated and that all cultures need to be purified and perfected through a process of renewal and encounters with other cultures, accepting the good elements in them and also by sharing our values with them. As mentioned earlier there are many things that people belonging to different cultures or religions share in common; and many elements of culture which are shared cross-culturally. For example we cannot talk of science as being exclusive of one culture only because it is a universal term. This indicates that there is some core element which humanity all over the world share. However such elements find expression in the various traditions of the world. Interculturality acknowledges plurality of cultures and as Ram Adhar Mall argues accompanies all cultures like a shadow which helps in bringing cultures together through the process of exchange and contacts. Different cultures have different cultural values and traditions where through the attitude and conviction of interculturality can share with each other or exchange their goods with each other. One culture therefore can incorporate elements from other cultures and enrich each other. One culture can borrow spirituality from another culture, and reciprocally the other can borrow science and technology from another culture. The spirit of

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interculturality is to inculcate the desire to understand and to be understood. In other words, interculturality's agenda is to enable people from different orientations to realize the need for inter-cultural or inter-religious dialogue for enriching each other. If intercultural conviction is generated people will realize that their culture or their religion is far from being perfect and not to be the culture or religion of the whole humankind.

As mentioned earlier, each culture possesses such elements which may be found to be useful by other cultures. As a result there is a process of assimilating such useful elements. Any living culture will be open to new ideas and strive for betterment. Human cultures change along with the perpetual flow of life but never in a radical manner. Such a change, in my opinion, should also take into account the attitude of interculturality even though there is nothing to learn from or share with each other. In this manner interculturality is not merely an attitude but should act as an agency for meaningful cultural change and cultural encounter. The practical implication of interculturality is that plurality of culture, religion and philosophy must be recognized and respected. Hence interculturality tries to inculcate the spirit or attitude of respect for and recognition of otherness. That is why it has a moral dimension.

It may be mentioned that Adhar Mall is of the opinion that much of what is done today in the name of comparative studies is mainly from the Western point of view and shows

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signs of asymmetry and hegemony. He argues that the asymmetry between the East and the West is the result of a historical contingency; and this asymmetry has made European thought as the main paradigm of reference. Furthermore the prejudice which emerged is that philosophy, culture and even religion have Western orientations that they will not be worthy of their names without this orientation. According to him the spirit of interculturality tries to overcome this asymmetry in order to foster the conditions for the possibility of a common global discourse and conversation of humankind beyond the narrow limits of the East-West dichotomy.<sup>9</sup> Interculturality, therefore must prepare a room for a comprehensive and meaningful cultural dialogue by allowing cultures to meet together. Humans belong to different groups or cultures and are nurtured by the values of their respective cultures. But today humans realize the need for being humans together and striving together for some common good. Cultural differences will be accessible in what primarily expresses the foundation of human values. This can be seen in the various human activities. Hence the inquiry into the cultural difference will involve inquiry into the various activities of humans especially those which they value. Here also it should be done with the attitude of interculturality to avoid any bias or prejudice. Interculturality therefore stresses the need to abstain from defining truth or values etc in the context of one's own tradition only.

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In conclusion we would like to argue that while talking about dialogue whether cultural or religious dialogue we come across many conditions given by various scholars which will make dialogue possible. We can say that dialogue is possible where there is room for dialogue. For example no dialogue is possible if there is no meeting between dialogical partners who respect and recognize each other. Furthermore, no dialogue is possible if we try to suppress others point of view and asserting only our own point of view as final. Rather we need to respect others point of view and be ready to listen to others as significant others. In this way interculturality can be a relevant agency for dialogue. Pluralism and interculturality can go hand in hand and prepare a room for cultures to come together and strive together for some common good. Interculturality provides a ground which revolutionizes our way of looking at the world by establishing a kind of transcendental framework where different cultures or philosophies or religions can meet together for achieving some end. It is here that we strive at making mutual understanding in the midst of differences. If interculturality is a way of life it can always clear the way for a creative dialogue between distinctive groups. For culture to be a real culture which is active and guides people towards something better we will not merely have it but it should 'be culture'. In this way cultures should meet with each other. When cultures meet each other with the understanding that the mutual correction is taken back into the service of the self-creation of the perspective way, and that the participation in this event is for uplifting and enriching one another, then such participation enhances a sense of duty

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towards the self and the other. It has become our moral responsibility not only to think about our own culture or nation but also to promote and uplift the whole humankind. It is a good sign to see how different nations come together during the time of crisis caused by covid-19 and climate change. Intercultural approach should therefore be taken as another guiding principle for humankind today.

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