



Interfaith harmony in Bangladesh

Ikhtiar Mohammad¹

On a recent visit to Shyamnagar, one of the most vulnerable coastal subdistricts in Bangladesh, I encountered Father Paggi Luigi. The trip was organized by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh as part of its Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Training Program. I heard about Father Luigi from the locals and decided to meet him, which was a pleasant experience.

Having begun my primary education at a missionary school and having studied subsequently at Notre Dame College, Dhaka, Bangladesh, I grew up with profound respect for Christian priests, especially their sacrifice and dedication to humanity. Father Luigi is no exception. He has been living in this region of Bangladesh for 46 years after coming from Italy at age 30.

We had an excellent discussion on issues related to local agro-ecology, socio-economic vulnerabilities, slow-onset and sudden-onset climatic events, and (of course) interfaith cohesion from global and local perspectives. I shared with him my experiences of participating in and contributing to weekly Bible discussions and universal worship services during my stay in the United States. Also, we discussed spirituality, which is essentially the ultimate purpose of all overt religious practices and beliefs.

We reached the conclusion that sensitizing adolescents and youths to inter-religious cohesiveness and coexistence should be an effective means to promote social harmony. In this way, we could perhaps prevent unfortunate incidents such as the last March attack on the Ahmadiyya community in Panchagarh or the attack on 14 Hindu temples in Thakurgaon last February. Such violence is completely contradictory to the teachings of every religion, and it also hurts Bangladesh's pluralistic religious heritage and long tradition of communal harmony.

While seeing me off, Father Luigi advised me to continue my effort to study the scriptures, preachers, literature, and scholars of multiple religious traditions, and he suggested that I take up some social work in context to Bangladesh. He also shared with me the contact details of some of his peers working on interfaith communal solidarity. The final compliments that Father Luigi paid to me, "Ikhtiar

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tiar, over the past 46 years in Bangladesh, I have not met anyone like you,” will remain a life-long inspiration for me.

I hypothesize that in Bangladesh the periodic communal violence, racial discrimination, and growing intolerance in recent decades can be traced back to the introduction of Wahhabism, a rigid version of Islam exported globally by Saudi Arabia over the last couple of centuries. This relatively newfound religious zeal is taught in madrassas (religious schools) and preached in mosques. There are a few exceptions to Wahhabi encroachment (e.g., High Court Memorial Mosque and Shahjahanpur Gausul Azam Railway Mosque in Dhaka), though they are very limited in numbers.

Being a follower of Islam (of course not the rigid version), in my day-to-day life the most common complaint I receive from my multireligious acquaintances and friends is that they have been labeled as “Kaaafir” (people who deny God) by the so-called imams (religious leaders) of the mosques. To my dismay, I also heard the imams convey this kind of hate speech during Friday sermons. However, according to Dr. Muhammad Raushan Ali, a retired professor and former chairman of the department of psychology at the University of Dhaka, “Islam does not give permission to call anyone Kaaafir.” He added, “It is not in the authority of any human being to do so.” Dr. Ali undertook 15 years of research on the Quran and published several books including a translation. I have been honored to interact with him regularly over the past several years to discuss the philosophy of religion.

As a grassroots development worker, I can tell that this problem is acute in rural areas of Bangladesh. And it is exacerbated by the local imams of the mosques. Unfortunately, these insincere religious leaders are contributing to communal conflicts and societal dysfunction. However, they could have served the higher purpose of uniting diverse religious followers by encouraging altruistic values such as compassion, kindness, and mercy.

To address the problem of growing social intolerance, educating diverse religious leaders (e.g., through consultation workshops) could be instrumental in constructing a cohesive social environment. Also, bringing together various faith leaders and promoting interfaith dialogues at the ward, union, subdistrict, district, divisional, and national levels could help to eradicate social incoherence related to faith.

In addition, school, college, and university students can be mobilized to organize interfaith dialogues in their respective institutions and communities. Besides, formation of youth organizations at academic institutions or the community level could provide a local coalition to promote interreligious social coherence as well as a local platform for social activism in civic life. Furthermore, youth organizations can offer opportunities for youth leadership, innovation, entrepreneurship, social inclusion, community service, political pluralism, and climate advocacy.

To conclude with a verse from the Quran (109:6), “Lakum deenukum wa liya deen,” which means, “For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.” It suggests that people are free to choose what they follow and that religion cannot be forced upon anyone. The early preachers of all major religions, including Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, and Gautama Buddha, left the same nonviolent lesson for their followers. That teaching is still relevant today on the issue of tolerance in society.

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