



Research Guru

Online Journal of Multidisciplinary Subjects (ISSN : 2349-266X)

UGC Approved Journal No. 63726

Impact Factor:3.021

website: www.researchguru.net

Volume-11, Issue-3, December-2017

Understanding Religions to Sustain Accord: A Study

Dr.R.Vasanathan

Department of Humanities

Kristu Jayanti College

Bengaluru, Karnataka.

Email: vasanthleut@gmail.com

Dr.Khriereizhunuo Dzuwichu

Assistant Director

Educational Research and Training Development Unit

RICE-MMS, Hosur, Tamil Nadu

Email: khrienuodzuvichu@gmail.com

Abstract:

In the world of science the role of religion is still afresh as it was since the time we can travel back with the help of historians. Though there prevails huge predicament in the name of religion, it is a general tendency to shrink into one's own when it comes to understanding and validating the concepts of religion. The belief that better knowledge could result in better understanding to appreciate similarity forms the base of this research. This study attempts to reflect how knowledge and understanding with regard to one's religion as well as other religions could evoke a sense of similarity and there by minimise the strong sense of difference. In this study a questionnaire has been prepared to understand the stance of the respondents. At the end the reflections and implications of this study are given in detail.

Key Words: Religion, Science, Knowledge, Practice, Philosophy, Life, Understanding

Introduction

The words of Smith give us a picture of the sense of religion. He describes that the people in, "the world have been able to be religious without the assistance of a special term, without the intellectual analysis that the term implies. In fact, I have come to feel that, in some ways, it is probably easier to be religious without the concept; that the notion of religion can become an enemy to piety. One might almost say that the concern of the religious man is with God; the concern of the observer is with religion.... In any case, it is not altogether foolish to suggest that the rise of the concept 'religion' is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself"(1978).

The ever developing science and technology, which even at the onset questioned the existence of a supreme power, has not changed the spirit and involvement of people in religious activities, traditions and customs much. Apart from this, science itself has been called on by people from all the religions to validate

the relevance of their religious customs and ceremonies and at occasions even to establish historical evidences of significant events in their religious history. It can be said that in the world of the 21st century, studying a religion under the light of science has become a major trend to persuade or dissuade people to follow a religion. As science plays a major role in the religious perception of the 21st century and many of the religious beliefs and practices are justified and defended with the help of science, it becomes essential to be aware of these attributes for two reasons: one, to understand the existing practices of one's own religion and two, to be aware of the religious customs and ceremonies of other religions and develop a sense of similarity leading to amity. The present study analyses the existing trend of analysing religion with science and technology and the standing of general awareness about scientific sanction for the religious practices of their religion and that of others.

Science and Religious Practices

As John D. Caputo (2001) puts it, "Religion in the sense of the love of God cannot contain what it contains. We have defined religion in terms of the love of God, but the love of God cannot be defined – or contained – by religion. The love of God is too important to leave to the religions or the theologians. There is an amazing diversity among the followers of different religions in the world with regard to worship, rites, ceremonies, dietary restrictions, discipline the content of the Holy Books, etc. Living together, of people from different religions with their differences, has always been a difficult task right from the beginning. It is because of the fact that there is an inborn urge to find out the differences and project or walk around with the mind-set that a particular individual's way of worship or reasons behind the rites and ceremonies or dietary restrictions or code of discipline or even the content of the Holy Book is better than anyone else. It has been so right from the beginning and it even continues to be in the world of the 21st century. All the religions that could not stand for this litmus test have either been marginalised or have become non-existent. All the religions that widely exist in the world of the 21st century do have something to call as the best practice or code when compared to other contemporary religions.

The development in science and technology has not played any remarkable role to make people to give up a religion or to choose a religion. On the other hand we could see that so many are willing to link their religion with science and acclaim the significance. This endeavour of going in search of the differences has also been limited to that of developing a sense of satisfaction and a feeling of superiority for the rejuvenation of their existing religious faith. Sometimes, followers of a particular religion do not stop with this and they even go to the extent of pointing out the lacunae in the faith of others, either to boast or with the view of promoting their own faith.

It is our view that there is a huge interest among the people of various religions to find out the attributes in their religious practices that could be supported with science to cherish as their specialty. Sometimes this leads to cherry picking by many, by manipulating the data in such a way to confirm a particular position, while ignoring a significant portion of related cases or data that may contradict that position. Their stand more than often is limited to few attributes and they do not care for the issues addressed by other religions in the same way as theirs or the compensations that they have for the pointed out short comings. It is also our view that this approach of referring to the religious practices and beliefs for the differences is counterproductive. We also try to state that knowing and learning the similarities, diverse approaches and compensations with regard to a target outcome among the religions could be productive and constructive.

Educating about the differences

Scholars always try to explore with spirit as Foucault (1972,) writes, “We must...question those divisions or groupings with which we have become so familiar ... whether our own, or those contemporary with the discourse under discussion ... are always themselves reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalised types; they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analysed beside others”.

There certainly have been several attempts to offer religious programmes and courses as supplements along with the normal education in the lives of the people at different stages and levels. But a close analysis of the syllabi will give us clear information that the content has been designed to promote the relevance or to project the attributes of the religion to the group of the students following the same religion. Naturally the course or the programme could trigger a rejuvenating effect with regard to the bonding that the individual has with his religion. This bonding could become stronger resulting in revitalised following of the religious teachings, practices, codes and ceremonies. But the question is whether this learning will also be able to make the individual to hold a similar perspective over other religions from the point of view of the practitioners of other religions? Is it not required to make all ‘religious’ people to respect one another for what they have been following traditionally?

Religious education itself could be fruitful and be called as complete only if it makes the individual to look upon it with a larger and universal point of view, since it could well help the individual to get free from all biased misconceptions and make one understand that the difference has just happened to be. Presently, when it comes to that of a religious dissuasion or even the very utterance of the name of a particular religion will make one to immediately think of the difference that it has over the others to be considered to be superior. This cannot be considered wrong because of two essential significances. One is that it is essential for an individual to hold a commendable opinion over one’s own religion. Secondly, knowledge about the religious facts and doctrines makes the individual to be righteous and achieve due recognition in the society that expects the individual to be so. But the overarching question that forms the base of this paper is that will there be a possibility of achieving amity with others belonging to other religion? How can it be done with the help educational programs? The following paragraph is intended to give a suggestion for achieving harmony in religion.

Religious Knowledge

This study stands to prove that just like how knowledge about the religion helps a follower to be bonded to the faith he or she has, knowledge of the similarities helps in creating a mind-set that there are also others like them or others are not very different. This similarity that we try to expand can be divided into two categories namely ceremonial and philosophical similarities.

Ceremonial Features	Philosophical Features
Under this we may bring food habits, dress, sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trance, initiations, funerals, marriages, meditation, music, art, dance, public service, or other aspects of human culture	The outlook of the religion with regard to morality, birth, death, ethics, religious laws, or a preferred lifestyle

Every religion has a particular set of endorsements either directly or through tradition. This could very well include food habits, weaving and clothing patterns, offerings to God, art, way of prayer, meditation and all ceremonies from birth to death. All these aspects should certainly have a binding factor as all these have come into practice only for healthy socialisation. However, the point of this present research is to first check the knowledge of one's own religion, the similarity observed and found with other religions and finally whether there is a sense of similarity with others, after drawing parallels with the discussion.

The intended study is to involve 30 participants from different age groups belonging to different religions. They are basically to be involved in a discussion and observed with a questionnaire. Thus the subsequent questionnaire has been prepared for the following purposes:

1. To know about individual's knowledge of their own religion.
2. To know about individual's views and knowledge of similarities with other religions.
3. To know the effect of the knowledge about similarities with other religions on the individuals.

S. No	Questions
1.	What is your opinion about dressing as per religious sanction? Which other religion follows the same?
2.	How many other religious festivals are like yours? Name them?
3.	What is the speciality about funeral practice of your religion? Does anyone else follow the same procedure?
4.	What is your philosophy about birth and rebirth? Name another religion/s with similar attitude and philosophy.
5.	What cannot be eaten and what can be? Who is similar to you in your food habits?
6.	Is music a part of your religious ceremonies? Who else do so?
7.	How do you pray? Which other religion also advocates the same?
8.	Who created the earth? Is your philosophy similar to others?

Discussion and Reflection

Dressing is not a serious issue for most of the religions and they are happy with the trends of the world except for a very few of the participants. They also agree that there are people in their own religion who do not have the same opinion and take. They also agree to a point with regard to the continuing dressing fashion with respect to the origin of a religion from a place with particular geographical conditions. They believe that each should abide by the principles of their own religion though.

All the participants were able to point out at least one festival like that of theirs in another religion. However they were not sure about the purpose and spiritual significance of the same in the mentioned religion. During further discussions about the similarities, they were able to appreciate the similarities without asserting the superiority.

With regard to funeral services, there was a mixed view. Many were able to see the same practice in other religions and they were able to differentiate and ascertain the superiority of their religion. The

participants referred to the scientific significance of their religions. While discussing about the scientific backings of other religions they did not contradict.

About birth and rebirth, there was a divided opinion. Almost half believed in next life and half believed only in heaven and hell. They agree with the fact that some religions are similar to their views and many are not. However, the details of each belief in after life were certainly with differences with regard to afterlife. They were able to find themselves like others.

Discussion on eating habits created in depth discussion with people promoting vegetarianism though they agree to the fact that body needs meat as well scientifically. Many had their own views that some are forbidden by their religion and they brought the support of science to validate their discussion. Even then they could not point any religion to be completely wrong.

Music and entertainment has been a part of religious traditions. Some cannot imagine worshipping without music on the other hand some cannot worship with music. However majority believe that though there are restrictions there is no reason behind not sanctioning it. On the whole they accept that music has been alongside their religion in the past at some time or the other.

On the style of praying one can understand that the followers of religions that came into existence recently are aware of the particulars and procedures. Many do not even have a particular way and are with the opinion that it is up to the individuals or the family members to opt what will suit them. Even within a religion the dissimilarities can be perceived during the discussion.

The question of “who created the world” makes everyone to come out with the agreement on one supreme power. They agree that it is the same power what others in other religions call with different names. Though all agree with the existence, they believe their understanding is better and others are not with the same. They were happy to know about the similarities with the philosophies in other religions.

Implications

Based on the discussion with the participants, a number of attributes are found to be similar among the religions when compared to the dissimilarities. This study revealed that people with particular religious beliefs are happy to find similar attributes in other religions. They have also shown interest to discuss about similarities. It is here by found that

1. Deep Knowledge of one’s religion helps an individual relationally and scientifically analyse other religions.
2. Knowing the similarity in other religions provides a sense of closeness and familiarity with others.
3. Discussions on values upheld in religious traditions could evoke a sense of respect to one another.
4. Above all educating people on the positive attributes of other religions could bring about better understanding and promote harmony.

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