

3.13 Tolerance and the Communication of Truth

Aim

- To enable students reflect on tolerance and its urgency in a pluralistic society.
- To understand the various meanings given to truth and tolerance.

Materials Required

- A video clip that depicts the tolerance against which Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Ghandhi fought for.

Procedure

- Discuss the following questions in groups:
 1. Identify the two individuals/groups that have differing ideologies.
 2. Elaborate briefly the 'truth' that each of the opposing parties holds dearly.
 3. What are the methods used by any one or either of the groups to establish a tolerant relationship? Or if tolerance does not exist, what methods would you have suggested were you a part of the situation?
 4. Whose side are you on and why?

Input

In the examples above we have seen that 'truth' for each party is different. This difference is strong enough to bring about acute tension that can even lead to aggression and ideologies to co-exist in tolerance and peace.

- We shall now delve deeper into the two questions: What is truth? What is tolerance?

A) What is Truth?

- There are many theories that answer this question:
 - The correspondence theory of truth: Truth as consonance between the mind and reality (Thomas Aquinas).
 - The coherence theory of truth: Truth as coherence in thinking or in judging. (Idealist philosophers, e.g. Hegal)
 - The pragmatic theory of truth. Truth as what works, what functions. (John Dewey)
 - The historicist theory of truth: Truth as time-bound: what was true in one period may not be true in another.
- Regarding the ability to reason to attain the truth:
 - Nihilism: The search is an end itself, without any hope or possibility of ever attaining the goals of truth. Life is a conglomeration of ephemeral sensations and experiences.
 - Subjectivism or Relativism: There is no objective truth, only "subjective certainty."
 - Democratic consensus: Truth is what is decided by a consensus of opinions. Truth is the democratic interaction in the consideration of matters of ultimate import and concern.

What is the Christian Answer to the Question?

- Human beings are able to attain the truth. They are historically conditioned: they always function within some context which is for the most part inherited or taken over from others, through processes such as socialisation, education, and acculturation.
- Human beings move towards truth not despite such historical "conditionness", but rather in and through it.
- The dynamism of the movement towards truth is constituted by questions: we spontaneously seek understanding and truth and reality.
- It is a common human experience that this dynamism, which is our questioning, spontaneously comes to rest on particular issues: as long as questions keep arising, it is clear that we are still searching; when questions come to rest, it may be that we have found what we have been searching.
- However, questions may come to rest also because we are bored, or because we are tired or because we are distracted. Again, it may be that we have asked the wrong questions or formulated the questions badly, for our questions are themselves a product of our historicity.

- Can we then ever be certain of having reached the truth, or is it that we have at most the feeling of having reached the truth? This is a big question, but we can say this much: attainment of truth is a function of the cessation of further relevant questions as well as of the soundness of the context from which our questions arise.

Is it Possible to Ensure the Soundness of our Context?

- Heidegger and Gadamer, for example, recommend that we become transparent, that we become aware of where we come from, that we bring our context to light. This is sound psychology too: when we are aware of our biases or our feelings, we are much more in control of our actions and reactions.
- Another great help is the encounter with others who are different: someone coming from a different background can help me see what I am unable to see, encounter, dialogue, are an intrinsic part of the human search for truth.
- Where does all this leave us? Well, it leaves us with the human condition: we are able to attain the truth, but this attainment is not always easy and never something automatic. The difficulty of attaining truth in the specifically human realm, or in the religious realm, should not make us conclude that it is impossible to attain truth. In banal matters, in most of the areas of everyday living, human beings are very well able to attain the truth, and without much difficulty. This is a question of familiarity with the situation and normal alertness: in such a context, the absence of further relevant questions is easily attained, and variations in historical conditioning do not really matter (I can easily conclude ‘This is a knife’; my culture and my religion and my personal or other biases and prejudices hardly matter here).
- Further, we must keep in mind the distinction between knowledge of some part of reality, and knowledge of the whole of reality. We are not saying that we can know everything about everything; all we are saying is that we can know something about reality.

B) What is Tolerance?

- The need for tolerance arises because pluralism is a fact of life. It is a fact that people experience the world differently, understand it differently, judge and evaluate it differently, feel differently about it.
- There are several examples in the world today, of instances when tolerance was not exercised and hatred and war/genocide broke out. For instance, in Rwanda, genocide broke out because of the deliberate choice of successive elites to deepen the cleavages between the country’s two main ethnic groups, to dehumanise the group that was out of power and to legitimise the use of violence against that group. Whatmore, the Roman Catholic missionaries concocted a bizarre ideology of ethnic cleavage and racial rankings that attributed superior qualities to the country’s Tutsi minority. It was announced that this minority group were approaching the exalted level of white people in contrast with the declared brutishness and innate inferiority of the ‘Bantu’ (Hutu) majority and because the missionaries ran the colonial-era schools, these pernicious values were systematically transmitted to several generations of Rwandans.
- To further solidify this racial hatred, the Belgians made the King’s complex structures more rigid and ethnically inflexible by institutionalising the split between the two groups, culminating in the issuance to every Rwandan an ethnic identity card. This card system was maintained for over 60 years, until, with tragic irony, during the genocide it became the instrument that enabled Hutu killers in urban areas to identify the Tutsi who were its original beneficiaries. This period in history was characterised by harshness applied to the Hutu majority and soon, many Hutu came to agree that the two ethnic groups were indeed fundamentally dissimilar in nature and irreconcilable in practice. The Tutsi came to be demonised as a foreign invading power with no entitlements in Rwanda.
- Thus, because of intolerance between the two ethnic communities and the influence of the colonial government and Catholic missionaries, a genocide resulted that saw over one million people slain.
- Tolerance is the first step towards peace. It is the ability to adjust and accommodate within the pluralism of society. Peace on the other hand takes us a step further towards an active and loving relationship with those who do not share the same truth. Tolerance is necessary because truth cannot be stifled within human beings. We naturally share the truth we discover. This communication of truth often leads us into conflict with those who differ. This is what happened in Rwanda. The Belgian colonial government as well as the Catholic missionaries fuelled hatred between the two ethnic groups and deepened the cleavages between them and all these because they believed the Tutsi to be superior to the Hutu. Although this was a wrong notion, the natural act would have been to tolerate the Hutu majority but instead, they encouraged more division among the two groups and this eventually led to a genocide that was neither adequately recognised by the rest of the world nor challenged by the international peace keepers. The Rwandan people were at the mercy of their killers.
- Truth is something that demands to be shared. If a truth has been revealed, it is incumbent on the one to whom it has been revealed to “shout it from the rooftops.”
- Claiming to possess the truth is not in itself an act of intolerance. “To believe it possible to know a universally valid truth is in no way to encourage intolerance; on the contrary, it is the essential condition for sincere and authentic dialogue between persons.”
- No one who differs should think that he/she is wrong because the other claims to have the truth. There are different relationships between truths, and there are different types of differences. There are differences that are rooted in data: these differences are resolved when the proper data is adduced and accepted.



There are differences rooted in perspectives: these are inevitable, being the consequence of the richness of reality and of the finiteness of our particular points of view. There are differences rooted in an equivocal use of language: the different parties may understand the same words in different ways. There are differences rooted in attitudes: the different parties may understand the same words in the same way, but may have different attitudes towards the realities concerned. Finally there are differences which are really radical, such that if one is right, the other is wrong. Before we conclude that we differ radically, we must explore the other types of differences.

- Imposing the truth on another through direct or indirect force - this would be intolerance. History shows that those who claimed to possess the truth have sometimes thought it necessary to use force and power to safeguard the truth or to impose it on others. It is unfortunately possible to defend the truth with a zeal that obscures the very truth one is defending.
- Those who impose their truth on others and proudly assert they possess the truth are by virtues of their intolerance and pride doing a disservice to the truth.
- Humility is a virtue that is absolutely necessary in those who think they possess the truth. In fact, it is truer to say that one is possessed by the truth, rather than to speak of possessing the truth, especially when the truth in question is religious truth. It is necessary to consider ourselves as servants of the Truth and not owners of the Truth.
- What we are saying then is that it is possible to speak the truth in love. We need to draw a distinction between our stand on someone's ideas and our attitude towards that person. When I disagree with someone, it does not follow that I love him/her less. And vice versa, when I love someone, it does not follow that I should not disagree with him/her. This is a basic distinction in psychology and counselling: positive empathy does not necessarily involve agreeing with a person. It would not only be rank immaturity but also bad psychology to confuse the two. Tolerance is not only limited to being open to other ideas and letting others express their ideas, but also in accepting people who may be different from us. In countries such as the USA, tolerance levels among citizens is so low that dwarfs and gay people are often beaten up and harassed in the streets. This is not to say that we should legitimise for example gay relationships, but that we should accept them and lead them to Christ and to a better understanding of their situation through our example of love.
- "Now and then we meet persons who have a certain aura. They radiate an atmosphere which leaves us singularly free from pressure. They are glad to express their opinions, but we feel no compulsion to agree. We feel emancipated and refreshed. And these people are not cold or aloof. It is simply that they have such emotional solidity that they want nothing from us but that which we can freely give. A therapeutic atmosphere is set up in which others feel safe, can be themselves, can flourish and grow. These fortunate individuals have the power to convey a most extraordinary gift".

Conflict Styles:

These are predictable ways of handling conflict and may shift as you come into disagreement with specific people. They include competing, compromising, collaborating, giving in and avoiding.

Competing

Competing means working to win. It implies "I win and you lose". When people are competing, you hear such comments such as: "You're wrong," "That's a stupid idea," or "I'm right!" There is only one way". Competitors are not motivated to listen to other ideas because they do not acknowledge points on the other side of a conflict.

Compromising

Compromising is meeting the other person halfway or looking for the middle ground between your opposing positions. When people are compromising, you hear comments such as "So what do you want?" or "Let's split the difference". Each person walks away partially satisfied.

Collaborating

It occurs when people look for a solution that satisfies both people. It is a win/win solution. Collaborating requires "out-of-the-box" or creative thinking. When collaborating, you hear comments such as "Have you ever considered..." Or "Let's rethink this whole thing from another angle". When collaborators think "out of the box," they go beyond the obvious, limited alternatives.

Giving In

This is putting the needs of the other person first and not looking out for oneself. It is characterised by the person being overly cooperative, denying their own needs while trying to make others happy. You can tell that someone is giving in when you hear comments such as "Fine. I can live with that," or "Have it your way," or "I don't care". This style sometimes indicates that you are not taking care of yourself. It's okay to give in sometimes, but choose which battles you are going to walk away from because if you always give in, you may find that people will take advantage of you.

Avoiding

This is whereby you withdraw and do not participate in disagreements by physically leaving or emotionally shutting down and ignoring the other person. It is characterised by being passive and failing to make an effort to resolve the conflict. Some of the comments you might hear when a person is avoiding is "You don't need me" and "Just decide

and tell me later,” or nonverbal cues such as turning away, closing a notebook and capping a pen, or staring into space. This style of conflict is very destructive and can be thought of as a lose/lose situation. It leaves both you and the other person unsatisfied and frustrated.

How Does One Live a Tolerant Life in a Plural World?

Some important attitudes to be cultivated as pre-requisites for tolerance are:

- The ability to listen.
- The ability for self-disclosure.
- The ability to give feedback.
- The ability to suspend judgement until the truth is disclosed from as many angles as possible or until “both sides of the story” have been heard.
- The ability to acknowledge one’s opinion as one among many others.
- The ability to stand by what one holds as true when one is convinced of the stand taken.
- The ability to recognise that others are equally entitled to hold their own opinions.
- The ability to keep searching for newer ways to discover and express the truth.
- Emotional maturity, self-image, self-esteem.
- Humility.

If tolerance is the stepping-stone to **DIALOGUE**, then dialogue is the weapon of **PEACE**.

Review

1. According to the correspondence theory of truth, truth is a consonance between the mind and reality (Thomas Aquinas). It is also the coherence in thinking or in judging according to the coherence theory of truth. According to the pragmatic theory of truth, it is what works, what functions (John Dewey). The historicist theory of truth suggests that truth is time-bound: what was true in one period may not be true in another.
2. There are three ways to reason so as to attain the truth. They include: Nihilism, Democratic consensus and Subjectivism or Relativism.
3. According to Christianity, human beings are historically conditioned: they always function within some context which is for the most part inherited or taken over from others, through processes such as socialisation, education, and acculturation. Thus, they are unable to attain the truth.
4. Someone coming from a different background can help me see what I am unable to see. Encounter and dialogue, are an intrinsic part of the human search for truth.
5. Tolerance arises because pluralism is a fact of life. It is a fact that people experience the world differently, understand it differently, judge and evaluate it differently, feel differently about it.
6. Conflict styles are predictable ways of handling conflict. They include: competing, compromising, collaborating, giving in, and avoiding.

Reflection

Evaluate your beliefs. Do you believe that some races e.g. the Whites are superior to the others? Examine how you came to hold such beliefs. **NB/:** some of these beliefs get into our system in very subtle ways and so careful examination is required. Take the necessary steps required to change your mindset and resolve to view all human races as equal and important.

Relevant Skills

1. Pair up participants each participant is to have a partner of a different tribe and tell them to evaluate the stereotypes they have of each other’s tribes. After this, ask each participant to explain whether the stereotype is true or false and to give an explanation as to why they perform some of the practices that others consider unfit or undesirable. Each participant is to give ample time to their partner to talk and it is mandatory that they listen and adopt some of the attitudes that are a pre-requisite for tolerance listed above.

Resources

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References

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