According to David Barrett et al, editors of the "World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions - AD 30 to 2200," there are nineteen major world religions which are subdivided into a total of two hundred and seventy large religious groups and many smaller ones. Thirty four thousand separate Christian groups have been identified worldwide\(^1\). These religions and faith groups teach very different belief systems. This naturally raises a question that where religious truth is to be found. Many people regard their own denomination or faith group within their own religion to possess total religious truth; other denominations are seen to exhibit some error; other religions are often considered to be in serious error and are sometimes viewed as in opposition to the truth.

Thus we find that the contemporary world societies are plagued by numerous inter-religious conflicts and clashes and even fierce war fares with deadly hatred. Sometimes these fierce currents are covert and seething beneath the surface of society in a multi-racial or multi-religious nation. Sometime it is violently manifested as in present day India, Sri Lanka, the Middle East, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Ireland etc., to mention but a few of such centers of conflict where religion apparently forms the basis of such clashes. This is an irony and a blot on the true religious spirit, which are Love, Brotherhood and Unity in the Divine Spirit.

There are three main methods of viewing other denominations and religions:

**Inclusivism**: One's own group possesses the truth; other religious groups contain parts of the truth. The latter's believers are less likely to be saved.

**Exclusivism**: One's own group possesses the truth; other religious groups are in serious error, and are placing the latter's membership in grave peril regarding salvation.

**Pluralism**: All group's beliefs and practices are equally valid, when interpreted within own culture. Salvation is for all.

Unfortunately, the term "religious pluralism" has other unrelated meanings. The main one is as a synonym for religious diversity: the fact that there exists a variety of religious beliefs in a given country or in a definite geographical area. Thus, the countries of the world today are religiously diverse is a fact.

Against this backdrop, we would try to understand what the phrase 'inter-religious understanding' means. The word “understanding” has many different meanings. First, it implies a correct grasp of what someone else is saying, and second, it may include a comprehension of the life circumstances of the speaker. Third, understanding can imply, not only a grasp of what is “out there,” but also a relating of that to one’s own experience of life, both in fortune and misfortune. There is also a fourth meaning of “understanding” that goes further. When we say, “They have reached an understanding,” we mean a practical agreement
between two persons or groups, often bridging an initial difference or disagreement. Some people also use the word “understanding” in a fifth sense, denoting an intellectual agreement. For them inter-religious understanding is a goal, a goal of agreement between those who have previously differed. Here arises a very pertinent question that whether inter-religious understanding is same as inter-religious dialogue? To that, answer would be in negative. Dialogue, like understanding, can be variously conceived and may set itself limited or more ambitious goals. Dialogue involves a face-to-face conversation in which all the participants listen patiently to those with different religious backgrounds and personal convictions and present a picture of their own religious community and their own faith in terms that the other participants might be able to understand and appreciate. Dialogue will obviously be easier if the participants already have some knowledge of the other religious community before they meet, which in practice is not always the case. Ideally, the conversation should lead to a fuller and deeper understanding, but with dialogue as well as with understanding we would do well to be modest and realistic in our expectations. Both may try to overcome previous misunderstandings and disagreements. Both seek in different ways to increase knowledge and understanding, but they do not have to reach agreement on the most important differences.

With about three hundred and sixty five million followers (6% of the world's population) Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world. It is exceeded in numbers only by Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Therefore, we need to know what Buddhism speaks about inter-religious
understanding. As we live in a multicultural and multi-religious society it also become incumbent upon us to study the various aspects and dimensions of inter-religious understanding in Buddhist perspective which in turn will help us to know each others religious beliefs and practices and to live harmoniously.

Survey of Literature

So far as the existing studies on the topic are concerned we find that a good number of scholars have shown keen interest in the recording the different aspects of dialogues among the Buddhists and the Christians and their results have seen the light of the day. Out of them mention may be made of the following.


However, perusals of the contents of these works reveal that while dealing with the subject they usually emphasize on the aspects of Buddhist ethics, history of the contemporary societies of the western countries where Buddhism has made some ground and people are forced to cope with the teachings of the Lord Buddha besides their won faith which obviously non other than the Christianity and so on and make a scant reference to the religious and philosophical ideas enshrined in Buddhist scriptures regarding the reality of multi-religious and multiethnic nature of the present day society. Those who have done their studies on Buddhist perspective on the Inter-Religious Understanding they too have dealt the subject keeping the Christianity in their mind only. However, we do find few organizations, institutions and individuals in European as well as Asian countries who are seriously engaged in inter-religious dialogues in order to diffuse the tensions among the followers of different faith with regard to the their respective religious belief and practices. Thus we find that a systematic research work
covering all aspects of Inter-Religious Understanding in Buddhist perspective is still desideratum. The present study is a humble work done to fill the gap. In this thesis an attempt has been made to elaborately explain the Paradigm of inter-religious relations and Buddhist perspective on Inclusivism, Exclusivism, Pluralism and Inter-religious Dialogue. While doing the study the following words of Ven. K. Sri Dhammanada, one of the celebrated monk of the present time, have been the guiding principle for the researcher:

‘When one studies the history of the various religions of the world and the great influence religions had on the people over a long period of time, one can understand what terrible mistakes have been committed through religious intolerance. Words like persecution, heretics, heathens, pagan and many others of similar connotations have crept into the vocabulary of religious books to describe all the brutality, cruelty, prejudice and discrimination carried in the name of religion due to religious intolerance. These unfortunate occurrences have left a stigma on religion, so much so that many thinking people tend to turn away from organized religion or from the very word ‘religion’ itself. Real religious values are rapidly deteriorating and disappearing from the minds of men, even from amongst those who are designated as religious people. To counter this unfortunate trend, it is necessary for a proper study and research into the practice of

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religious principles to be undertaken by all concerned in order to bring better understanding and awareness of true spiritual values of religion and to avoid the unfortunate mistake of the past.’

The present study done by the research scholar is a humble work done to fill the gap. In this thesis an attempt has been made to elaborately explain the Paradigm of inter-religious relations and Buddhist perspective on Inclusivism, Exclusivism and Pluralism.

**Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the proposed research work is to assist in promoting a better understanding of religion, religious tolerance and its deep underlying meaning from the Buddhist point of view and also to understand how Buddhism regards other religions. The deep underlying meaning of religion is to be able to uphold and respect one’s own religion without in any way being disrespectful or discourteous towards other religions. To his end, we must establish mutual understanding, mutual co-operation and tolerance amongst all co-religionists in order to achieve religious harmony.

Keeping in mind the ongoing movements and efforts made by the different faith groups, organizations and individuals, through out the world, to diffuse the tensions among the co-religionists by means of interfaith dialogues, meetings, symposiums, conferences etc. following objectives would be kept in mind while doing the study:

1. To present a brief historical background of the evolution, implications and connotations of the different Concepts like,
Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Religious Pluralism, Inter-religious Dialogue and Understanding, etc.

2. To discuss elaborately the Buddhist Notion towards the different Concepts like, Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Religious Pluralism, Inter-religious Dialogue and Understanding.

3. To study of the Buddhist contributions in the present day society towards the overcoming the differences among the different faith groups.

4. Finally in the proposed thesis an attempt would be made to elaborately explain Lord Buddha’s teachings on inter-religious understanding in order to address the problems like: How to defuse interfaith conflict? How to overcome differences in theology and belief? How to get religious literalists and liberals to be co-operative? How to distinguish a religion from cult? How to deal with current political and social crises? Etc.

The Scope and Methodology of the Research

In this thesis an attempt has been made to elaborately explain Lord Buddha's teachings on inter-religious understanding in order to address the problems like: How to defuse interfaith conflict? How to overcome differences in theology and belief? How to get religious literalists and liberals to be co-operative? How to distinguish a religion from cult? How to deal with current political and social crises? etc. The present work analyzes and expresses the theme in the fittest way that a modern reader requires to know and comprehend. It is mainly based on the Buddhist literatures along with their respective translation in English. Other available texts on inter-religious understanding in English language have
also been utilized so as to make the work more copious and comprehensive.

In carrying out the work, sincere efforts have been made to follow various methods of Social Science research such as Historical method, Analytical method, and Comparative method. The study is fully documented from the original sources as the humble researcher proposes to derive his ideas from the Buddhist Scripture and other related sources.

The present study is not an empirical study. It is not intended to provide a shortcut solution of all religious conflicts of the world. This is, of course, a humble attempt to analyze and understand what the Buddhists texts say on the question of Inter-religious relations and how a true Buddhists should behave in the pluralistic situation of the modern times. The study presents interpretation and explanation of the Buddha’s sayings uttered twenty six centuries ago. It is obvious that while interpreting and explaining some theories heavily depend upon the person who does it. In more clear terms it means that the interpreter’s upbringing, educational background, the values, philosophical thinking, worldview so on and so forth partly or fully have an influence on his interpretation. The result of this is that two persons give different interpretations to the same issue. They may or may not be conscious of it. It was neither possible to cover all aspects of Buddhist philosophical teachings, nor the complex history of over 2500 years of Buddhist history within the scope of this thesis. Our analysis is therefore necessarily partial, but hopefully accurate and meaningful. In the present work all efforts have been made to avoid the personal prejudices while explaining the various themes. However, it
may be confessed here that being a common man (Pali, Puthujjana) one may find inaccuracy in this work.

The present study has been completed in seven chapters including Introduction and Conclusion. The very first chapter introduces the topic. It also briefly delineates some of the teachings of Lord Buddha which are still relevant and appropriately addresses the modern day problems of religious diversity.

The second chapter titled “Paradigm of Inter-religious Relations” discusses the most common methods of viewing other religious denominations. These are Inclusivism, Exclusivism and Pluralism. All the three paradigm could briefly be explained in the following words:

**Inclusivism:** One's own group possesses the truth; other religious groups contain parts of the truth. The latter's believers are less likely to be saved.

**Exclusivism:** One's own group possesses the truth; other religious groups are in serious error, and are placing the latter's membership in grave peril regarding salvation.

**Pluralism:** All group's beliefs and practices are equally valid, when interpreted within own culture. Salvation is for all.

It is important to note here that all the above methods of viewing other religions are commonly find in almost all the prevalent religious systems,
be it Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, so on and so forth.

The proceeding three chapters, i.e., chapters three, four and five elaborately discuss the Buddhist perspective on Inclusivism, Exclusivism and Pluralism respectively. Here it would be suffice to quote some specific examples from the teachings of the Buddha which appropriately represent the above mentioned paradigm of viewing other religious denominations.

The sixth chapter “Interfaith/Inter-Religious Dialogue in Buddhist Perspective” discusses in detail the Buddhist way of dialogue and its relevance

The last chapter, ‘Conclusion’ delineates Lord Buddha's teachings on inter-religious understanding in order to address the problems like: How to defuse interfaith conflict? How to overcome differences in theology and belief? How to get religious literalists and liberals to co-operative? How to distinguish a religion from cult? How to deal with current political and social crises? Etc.

Sincere efforts have been made to use all the available texts on inter-religious understanding in both English and Chinese languages at the disposal of scholar. While delineating the various paradigms of Inter-religious Understanding, i.e., Inclusivism, Exclusivism and Pluralism in Buddhist perspective all the relevant Buddhist literatures along with their respective translations in English and Chinese have been utilized. While
carrying out the thesis, sincere efforts have been made to follow various methods of Social Science research such as Historical method, Analytical and Comparative method.

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