

Theological Foundations for Interfaith Dialogue in Islam

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Abstract:

According to Qur'an, the difference of opinion among peoples of the world is natural and something that will always be there. However, in order to stop the difference from becoming a conflict, people should hold dialogue. The significance of dialogue in Islam is well understood by the fact that God chose to hold dialogue with angels concerning the creation of man. Furthermore, the Qur'an declares dialogue the greater jihad and arrangement of a successful dialogue is considered as a manifest victory. In order to arrange a successful dialogue, Qur'an lays out a number of principles:

- 1- Dialogue should be held in such a nice way that it may lead the opponent to get a close friend. For this it is necessary to speak mildly and the dialogue must be based on wisdom and sincerity.*
- 2- Dialogue should rest on the principle of mutual respect and should not contain any kind of abusive and taunting language.*
- 3- Dialogue must not override the principle of justice and equality and must not be affected by the past experiences or personal grievances towards the opponent.*
- 4- Dialogue should not address the issue of pulling everyone together, e.g. the opponent (for example a nation) should not be blamed for the evil deeds of few.*
- 5- Dialogue should be held with an attitude that is characterized by patience and tolerance and efforts must be made to keep the vicious elements out from harming the process.*
- 6- Both parties should openly acknowledge and recognize the mutually positive attributes.*
- 7- Imposing one's opinions upon the opponent must not be the objective of dialogue.*
- 8- Both parties should, despite the inherent difference of opinion, pursue to find practical solutions by striving towards finding a common ground.*

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Difference of opinion among human beings is natural and will remain inherent among them¹. The Quran refers to this fact more than once and states that if God wanted, He would have created the whole human kind as the followers of the same religion² but He did not.

Scholars from the early ages of Islam considered the difference of opinion as a mercy (of God).³ Their mindset and general stance on the difference of opinion is well clear in these words:

“my opinion is right with the possibility of being wrong and yours is wrong with the possibility of being right”.⁴

However, the difference of opinion is a mercy as long as it does not turn into a conflict, which Islam strictly and categorically forbids. The question is then how to deal with difference of opinion in a manner, which does not lead to a conflict. The answer is quite simple: dialogue.

Dialogue is a form of discussion, which makes it possible for different people to express their views and convince the other party to be able to live together despite disagreements.

Islam sees dialogue as something very crucial and there are instances of it over a dozen occasions in the Qur’an. For example, the dialogue between God and His angels about the creation of human being⁵, the dialogue between God and Satan⁶, the dialogue between different prophets and their people⁷, Satan’s dialogue with the inhabitants of Hell⁸ and the dialogue between the inhabitants of Heaven and Hell⁹, etc.

Furthermore, all intellectual dialogues through the Qur’an (the ideological book of Islam) has been described as the greater jihad: “and strive against them with it (the Qur’an), in utmost endeavor¹⁰. Similarly, the Qur’an does not consider the greater victory, a victory in a war, but a dialogue held in a peaceful and positive atmosphere:

“Surely, We have granted you an open victory”¹¹

Islam does not only give importance to dialogue, but it also helps us lay out a number of general principles for holding a successful dialogue, they are as follow:

- 1- The first principle of holding dialogue in Islam is to make it happen in a positive and friendly atmosphere. This principle can be further elaborated in sub-points:
 - i- Qur’an guides Muslims to treat the opponents well despite their bad behavior. Such attitude will certainly have a positive effect upon them:
Repel (evil) with what is best, and you will see that the one you had mutual enmity with him will turn as if he were a close friend. And no one is blessed with this (attitude) but those who observe patience, and no one is blessed

with this (attitude) but a man of great luck. And should a stroke from Shaitan (Satan) strike you, seek refuge with Allah. Surely, He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.¹²

In other words, the Qur'an advises its followers to look at the opposite party as a potential friend since as a Hadith explains all men are created good, but the circumstances have made people one another's opponents.¹³

ii- In a reference to Moses, the Quran guides man to treat even a cursed man, in this case Pharaoh, humbly:

“So speak to him in soft words. May be, he accepts the advice or fears (Allah)”¹⁴

iii- Similarly, the Qur'an addresses Prophet Mohammad and through him makes an inference that while bad behavior will have a repelling effect on people, the good behavior will keep people gathered around you. Qur'an states:

“So, (O Prophet) it is through mercy from Allah that you are gentle to them. Had you been rough and hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around you”.¹⁵

The verse means that the behavior of people participating in the dialogue must not hurt others' feelings; they should conduct themselves in a respectful way and in a manner, which will prevent people from turning their back to peace and dialogue.

iv- Instead the dialogue should be conducted with uttermost seriousness, sincerity and politeness. In the words of the Qur'an:

“Invite (people) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel. And argue with them in the best of manners. Surely, your Lord knows best the one who deviates from His way, and He knows best the ones who are on the right path”.¹⁶

Two of the striking examples of the above mentioned principle from the life of the Prophet are The Charter of Medina¹⁷ and the dialogue which was held in the al-Masjid al-Nabawi between the Prophet and the Christians of Najran¹⁸.

2- The second principle of dialogue in Islam is the principle of maintaining mutual respect. The Qur'an guides the believers that they should take the first step in this matter. By showing respect to the opponent's set of beliefs, a similar response from the opposite side is made more likely:

“Do not revile those whom they invoke other than Allah, lest they should revile Allah in transgression without having knowledge”.¹⁹

A great number of similar examples are not hard to find from the life of the Prophet where he demonstrates respect to the followers of other religions; for example, when you stood up to show respect when a Jew's funeral procession was passing by²⁰, also turning to the Jews' qibla²¹ and fasting on their sacred days are other examples²².

3- The third principle that becomes clear from the Qur'an is about ignoring the experiences with regards to the opponent's past and focusing instead on the

present and remaining fair. The Qur'an gives many examples in this regard: and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just: that is nearer to piety, and fear Allâh. Verily, Allâh is Well-Acquainted with what you do.²³

- 4- The fourth principle is that no community or group of people are collectively wrongdoers nor are all of them good, in the words of the Qur'an:

Not all of them are alike; a party of the people of the Scripture stand for the right, they recite the Verses of Allâh during the hours of the night, prostrating themselves in prayer²⁴

According to a hadith, one who blames a whole community for the wrongdoing of a single person, is indeed the biggest liar²⁵

- 5- The fifth principle of a constructive dialogue is to make efforts in order to keep the vicious elements from disturbing the dialogue process and keep calm at times of provocation:

(O Prophet,) take forgiveness (as your habit), enjoin virtue, and ignore the ignorant. Should a stroke from the Satan strike you, seek refuge with Allah. Surely, He is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.²⁶

“Stroke from the Satan” in the above verse means that the believer should not be carried away by the Satan and should adapt to the principle of forgiving and good deed in case the process of dialogue is disturbed by something unpleasant.

The Treaty of Hudaibiyyah between the Prophet and his opponents is a very good example of how the Prophet chose to ignore the clear provocations by his opponents and kept patience. Furthermore, the majority of the Prophet's companions took a stand against the conditions of the treaty, which they clearly found unfair, but the Prophet agreed to the terms. Later years showed that the treaty bore huge successes for the believers and was blessed by God.

- 6- The sixth principle of dialogue is that both parties should openly acknowledge each other's positive attributes. Islam therefore recognizes many of the Christian and Jewish traditions despite the differences that exist between these faiths. Concerning the Christians, the Qur'an states:

and you will find the nearest in love to the believers (Muslims) those who say: "We are Christians." That is because amongst them are priests and monks, and they are not proud. (82) And when they (who call themselves Christians) listen to what has been sent down to the Messenger (Muhammad SAW), you see their eyes overflowing with tears because of the truth they have recognized. They say: "Our Lord! We believe; so write us down among the witnesses."²⁷

Regarding the Jews, the Qur'an says:

Among the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians) is he who, if entrusted with a Qintar (a great amount of wealth, etc.),

will readily pay it back;²⁸

- 7- The seventh principle of dialogue in Islam is to avoid imposing your opinions on the opponent, instead everybody's right to have different faith should be protected. In this regard, the Qur'an says:

There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path²⁹

The purpose of Mohammad's prophecy is described in the Qur'an in these words:

So remind them (O Muhammad (SAW)) — you are only a one who reminds. You are not a dictator over them³⁰

- 8- The purpose of dialogue should be to find a common ground in order to make life practically easy to follow. The Qur'an says:

Say (O Muhammad SAW): "O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians): Come to a word that is just between us and you"³¹

This principle is best manifested in the Charter of Medina, according to which Jews of Medina were accepted as a part of the community in the city, despite the inherent and well-known disagreements and differences that existed between the Muslims and the Jews of Medina³². The other example is as we mentioned above, the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah which was made possible through dialogue and which led to one-sided victory for Muslims³³.

The Prophet said once:

“Dissension (sedition) is dormant (asleep). May God (Allah), damn/curse he (the one) that awakens (activates) it”.³⁴

The above hadith tells us that violence and violence based literature as well as elements who believe in violence exist in all societies. However, these elements usually do not find the opportunities to act and carry out their ill-will in societies where normal conditions prevail, in the words of the hadith above, they are dormant. But when a society or a country is made subject to internal or external chaos, these elements become active and succeed in spreading violence and hate throughout the society. In light of the hadith above, these elements pose threat to the whole human kind but they are not alone in this; those powers who help create those environments in which these elements find it easy to gain ground and spread their ill-will, has a hand in it and are just as much responsible.

After the recently published Chilcot Report and the ex-deputy prime minister of UK John Prescott's confession regarding Britain's war in Iraq, it wouldn't be wrong to claim that ISIS, the most brutal terror organization ever witnessed, is partly an indirect product of the West's illegitimate policies which gives rise to chaos and leads to dysfunctional countries and societies. In the past two centuries such interferences in Muslim countries have damaged relations between the nations of the world and have made dialogue impossible.

Another contributing factor of the violence that we are witnessing throughout the

Islamic world is the misguided interpretation of religion. For example, the false interpretation of the Qur'anic verses and hadith concerning jihad, crime and punishment, according to which non-state actors have the right to wage war on their own. However, such false interpretations mostly gain ground in societies which find themselves in chaos caused by a number of internal and external factors.

Violence is an atrocity while dialogue is a noble exercise. Violence means you are using force to achieve what you want, while dialogue means you are ready to find a solution through talking and listening. While violence begets war and chaos, dialogue yields long lasting peace. While violence causes fear and oppression, dialogue means delight and freedom.

Unlike violence, dialogue is a highly constructive action and it is a fact that constructive actions can in the long run bring about a needed change. In fact, dialogue is always in the work, even when violence is taking its toll on human lives.

Notes and References:

¹ al-Qur'an 118:11

² al-Qur'an 93:16, 48:5.

³ Jami' al-'Usul fi 'Ahadith al-Rasul, Ibn Athir Maktabah al-Halwani, Beirut, 1969-72, 1/182.

⁴ Al-Ashbah wa Al-Nazaer ala Mazhab Abi Hanifah, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, Beirut, 1999, 1/330.

⁵ al-Quran 2:30-34.

⁶ al-Qur'an 38:77-88.

⁷ 26:34-191; 11:25-95.

⁸ al-Quran 14: 22.

⁹ al-Quran 44:51.

¹⁰ Al-Qur'an 5:52.

¹¹ Al-Qur'an 48.

¹² al-Qur'an 41: 34-36.

¹³ Sahih al-Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari, Dar Tauq al-Najah, Damascus, No. 1385

¹⁴ al-Qur'an 20:44.

¹⁵ Al-Quran 3: 159.

¹⁶ Al-Qur'an 16 : 125.

¹⁷ Al-Seerah Al-Nabawiyah, Ibn Hisham, Maktabah Mustafa al-Halbi, Cairo, 1955, 1/501-504

¹⁸ Ibn Hisham, 1/575-584.

¹⁹ al-Qur'an 6:108.

²⁰ Bukhari, 1312

²¹ Bukhari, 40

²² Bukhari, 3942

²³ Al-Qur'an 5 : 2.

²⁴ Al-Qur'an 3 : 113

²⁵ Al-Sunan, Ibn Majah, Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-Arabiya, No. 3761

²⁶ Al-Qur'an 7 :199-200; 41:33-36.

²⁷ Al-Quran 5 : 82, 83

²⁸ Al-Qur'an 3 : 75.

²⁹ Al-Quran 2 : 256.

³⁰ Al-Qur'an 88 : 21-22.

³¹ Al-Qur'an 3:64.

³² Ibn Hisham, 1/501

³³ Ibn Hisham, 2/317

³⁴ Kanz al-'Ummal fi Sunan al-Aqwal wa al-Afal, Ali bi Husam al-Hindi, Mu'asisa al-Risala, 1981, 11/127, No. 30891